Burial ground a reminder of life in Cherie Quarters

By CHRIS FRINK

OSCAR — A barrier of trees and brush, dominated by a handfull of towering pecans, envelops the old cemetery, wailing it off from the surrounding sugar cane fields that sprawl across the land east of False River.

Concrete vaults protect some of the graves. Headstones mark just a few. Many burial sites are betrayed only by coffin-shaped depressions in the ground. The only brick structure, a low-slung vault, crumbled under the weight of more than 70 years, a skull and bits of casket visible through a hole gaping on one corner.

The people buried here worked — and maybe slaved — on River Lake Plantation. They lived in a double line of houses known as Cherie Quarters.

The quiet burial ground holds the remains of people David Biben knew well. He spent the first 20 years of his life in Cherie Quarters. He knows the names and the stories of many people whose bodies lie below unmarked vaults or buried under other dirt. The oldest marked grave dates back to 1924, but Biben is convinced former slaves were buried at the back part of the enclosure in an expanse of grave vaults or vaults.

Biben, 65, and a group of others connected by blood, marriage and friendship to Cherie Quarters and the cemetery, will gather at the cemetery Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. for a “Beautification Day.”

They’ll cut grass, rake leaves, paint vaults and — most important — exchange information about the place buried in those unmarked graves.

Biben is part of the Mount Zion River Lake Cemetery Association that was formed to restore and maintain the gravesite. The cemetery is named for Mount Zion Baptist Church, one of the few structures still standing in the Quarter.

Earlier this year, the estate that owns River Lake and Cherie Quarter donated the cemetery land to the association.

David Biben sits on a vault Tuesday morning at the Mount Zion River Lake Cemetery near Cherie Quarters in Pointe Coupee Parish and points toward the cane fields where he saw quarters residents farm while growing up in the plantation community. Biben and other members of a newly formed cemetery association will gather Saturday to work on maintenance and beautification of the historic gravesite.

Biben visits the plantation and drives the lane that once cut through the heart of the Quarters and sees ghosts.

Reminder

“People planting. People working. People coming in with cane. We used to have the doctor over there where they lifted the cane into boxcars,” he said. Years back, the plantation operated a narrow-gauge railroad to haul off harvested sugar cane.

Only two houses and the deteriorating church remain on the property, but Biben sees Cherie Quarters as he drives by the dusty lane. Vegetable patches, chickens in dusty front yards, hog pens out back. Laundry hanging to dry. Mules heading to the fields.

In the cemetery, he looks at black slabs of concrete of hand painted headstones and sees people he knows growing up. “Doc and Loretta Horbert. They called her Notta. They were one of the first people to have a tractor in the Cemetery. Black people,” he said.

A dig in the ground between two headstones marks the final resting place of Harry Domino, a contemporary of Biben’s who used to help him out on a regular basis. “He was a funny guy.” Domino died in 1961. “Got shot by some guy in Baton Rouge. He got a brother buried here or there. Walter Domino.”

Many of the people buried in the cemetery left Cherie Quarters to live in Baton Rouge, only to return for their final rest.

Biben has plans to be buried there.

Author and Cherie Quarters native Ernest Gaines said Tuesday he and wife will be buried in the cemetery.

“My folks have been buried there for at least the last five generations. I just don’t know how far back it goes,” he said.

“The people who told me stories and gave me information about the Quarters and the fields that I used to write ‘A Gathering of Old Men’ and ‘The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman’ are all buried there. The minister who baptized me is buried there,” Gaines said.

“Reese Spencer, who knew Gaines’ grandparents, is buried under a pecan tree.

Under another pecan, Gaines’ brother Eugene is buried under a concrete vault and marble marker in one of the most recent graves in the cemetery.

Gaines, the cemetery association president, will attend Saturday’s Beautification Day to continue the work. Fifteen years ago, the place was so overgrown, a visitor could hardly squeeze past the entrance, he said.

In recent years, Gaines helped pay someone to mow and clear the cemetery and he also pitched in to help cut back the overgrowth, Biben said.

Before that effort the cemetery was “pitiful,” Biben said. “It was in bad shape. Vine, dogwood trees, brush. The only places that were open were the area around the graves.”

In 1997, when the last person was buried, someone had to hack a path through the high grass from the entrance to the grave site.

In the last four to five years, Biben and others from the cemetery friends cut down trees, pulled up and burned stumps and hauled off discarded tires and other junk.

Now, in what passes for cool fall weather in south Louisiana, the cemetery looks cared for, grass under control, brush cut back to the fence line, only a smattering of fire ant mounds. Someone knows about the big pecan trees. In this bountiful season, only a few nuts remain on the ground.

On a Tuesday morning visit, Biben found a grave he’d never seen in all his visits. A patch of cemented stone whitish-gray amid the encroaching dirt and tendrils of grass.

Gaines scuffled away some of the grass with his shoes, brushed away the dirt and scraped at the cement with his pocket knife. He uncovered the initials “E.W.” drawn in the concrete.

What looked like a date beckoned for more attention, but Biben had neither the time nor the tools to finish the job. He added it to his list of things to do on Saturday.