Cemetery caretaker digs into mystery of child's grave

HOUMA - What becomes of someone who dies, but no one is around to remember that they ever lived? Do they simply fade away anonymously?

A grave sits low to the ground — four to five feet lower than its neighbors — at St. Joseph Cemetery in Thibodaux, looking perfectly in place and completely foreign at the same time. The grave marker is clean, simple and small — “Unknown Baby.”

Who exactly lays at rest that tomb in St. Joseph Cemetery in Thibodaux remains a mystery.

“Haunting, haunting,” said George Cooke, who oversees the cemetery for the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. “Welcome to my job!”

Cooke’s job is to keep track of who is in the graveyard along La. 1. Across the highway in Bayou Lafourche, behind the cemetery is a school, where hundreds of children file in and out each day.

Cemeteries, particularly Catholic cemeteries, are known among genealogists as ace record keepers, great for tracking family and area history. No one seems to have tracked the grave marked “Unknown Baby.”

Where are they indigent? Buried illicitly in a popular cemetery before it became crowded?

Someone’s long, lost family member?

Or just an anonymous person no one missed after they died?

Lucy L. McCann, director of the Louisiana Cemetery Board in Metairie, said the state doesn’t track how many graves with unidentified remains are scattered among the 64 parishes. And, an internet search for the answer provides lots of little details, but no exact number of how many other “Unknown Baby” graves exist in Louisiana.

Todd Matthews, a case manager for National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, an arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, said there’s more than 10,000 unidentified persons listed in a federal database.

“I know there’s more,” Matthews said.

Louisiana has 130 such people in the federal database. Those remain include everyone from a girl buried between 10 and 14 who was found in Baton Rouge in 2007 to a man found in 1977 in St. John the Baptist Parish to the skull of an unidentified person recovered in Natchitoches Parish in 2014.

While each of those cases has poignant and evocative details — someone died, in some cases several years before they were found, and no one knows who they are — some quite match the profile of the grave in St. Joseph Cemetery.

The tomb to the right of the “Unknown Baby” and belonging to the Sevin family went into perpetual care in 2005, requiring the cemetery to keep the grave in good condition and clean as long as the family pays for the upkeep. What was next to the Sevin family grave, though, was not good.

“At that time, I saw this abandoned location, a broken pile that had no records, no title,” Cooke said.

And the mystery of who it was started.

The cemetery has a death register these days, but it only dates back to the 1980s, when Cooke came on the job. Any record keeping before that appears to rely on sales records for the plots and names and dates on the tombs. This particular grave had none of that.

Cooke’s best estimate is that the area where the grave is — about one-third of the way back in the cemetery — developed between 1905 and 1914, but that is based on other records and a book about genealogy in the area. Nothing mentions the mystery grave or the name of the occupant.

“The lot was never purchased, no title, no records at all,” Cooke said.

And, few visitors tend to the grave of the “Unknown Baby.” Most days the low-lying tomb shines like a recently buffed marble floor. Very few flowers, plastic angels or other common cemetery mementos are found atop or in front of the headstone, which is overshadowed by neighbors on three sides.

What becomes of someone who dies, but no one is around to remember that they ever lived? For Cooke, the answer is they become a labor of love, respect and recognition.

Cooke and his crew conserved the grave in 2005.

“We placed a marker to honor their existence,” Cooke said.

Continued from Page 7A

Mystery