Cities Of Dead Now Are Slums

AN X FOR LUCK — Seventy-nine year-old Buddy Ansoucher, custodian and tour guide at St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 where he has been guardian and tour guide for 38 years, Ansoucher admits he has his share of X's placed on the tomb to remove a hex or just for luck. (AP Wirephoto)

DECAYING TOMBS — Buddy Ansoucher, custodian and tour guide at St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 where he has been guardian and tour guide for 38 years, Ansoucher admits he has his share of X's placed on the tomb to remove a hex or just for luck. (AP Wirephoto)

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Two old cemeteries, once called Cities of the Dead, are now houses of decay, vandalism and neglect have turned many tombs into shapeless heaps of brick and plaster. Laid out over 150 years ago in the midst of yellow fever epidemics, they are inhabited by some of the most colorful ghosts and ghouls in American history.

Generals, duelist, governors, even woods queues are buried in elaborate mausoleums or narrow vaults where the bones of entire families are mingled.

Burials Forbidden

Recently, however, burials were forbidden in 2,000 oven shaped wall vaults when they showed signs of collapse. And there's talk of demolishing St. Louis Cemetery II, the city's second oldest, where the remains of time have turned the landscape into a desolate mirror.

"Burials are no longer made in the vaults because of their condition," said the Rev. Rev. Rev. Rev. Mag. Raymond Wegmann, diocesan of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans, "The department of health will not permit it."

As a result, vault owners unhappy their ancestral tombs have been closed in have threatened law suits and the church has defensively begun quoting court opinions regarding its cemeteries, not the archdiocese, to maintain the burial places.

Most of the vaults are barely two feet high, less than a yard wide and seven feet deep.

They're often a source of wonder to the tourists who pass by or go inside and see a dozen names carved on the marble plates sealing the openings. By continually pushing the remains to the rear back vault could be used for generations.

Simple Explanation

There is a simple explanation for this marvel of economy: New Orleans is below sea level and before an extensive pumping system was developed to dry out the subsoil coffins occasionally copped to the surface like koh bobbins. Burials were made above ground out of necessity and space being scarce it was reasonably decided one vault could serve for ten.

Rev. Wegmann estimates it would cost $1 million to repair the vaults which, in many cases, have crumpled into one another and an additional $1 million to renovate the entire cemetery.

It's a question of priorities, he says it would be unfair to divert limited resources from the living so a Preservation Fund has been established. So far, $30,000 has been collected.

Cost Heavy

Buddy Ansoucher, 79, a custodian at St. Louis Cemetery I for 48 years, says it would cost $5,000 to repair the average tomb. Vaults, because they are stacked one atop the other, would cost considerably more.

He pointed to a section of wall that slanted over the walkway. The bottom row had partially disappeared beneath the grass.

"Now how is anyone going to fix something like that?" he asked.

"First you'd have to pay the bricklayers, then you'd have to pay the plasterers and painters, then you'd have to replace the marble. It would cost a fortune!"

And who picks up the tab when a family has died out? Rev. Wegmann said the church has spent years anxiously trying to trace relatives. Then there's the problem of size: caskets, like cars, have grown in length and width and the newer ones no longer fit.

"Last year, many crypts are filled. Tourist Attraction"

Despite their decay, the crypts, with their paths of broken shell, remain a top tourist attraction. It's not surprising. Visitors used to rolling expanses of green lawn and white crosses are sure to find the macabre arrangement of bones, many two and three stories high, an unforgettable experience.

Once inside the gates, however, the first reaction is often shock. "People take a look around and say, 'My god, do all the cemeteries down here look like this?"' said Ansoucher.

Except for the more prosperous ones in the suburbs, the answer is yes. The broiling subtropical climate has stripped away the plaster plating covering most of the tombs revealing the red brick underneath.

Vines, in some cases, have taken root in the cracks and in the summer insects and small lizards scurry up the sides seeking entrance.

Caskets, even skeletons, are exposed to the blast of sun and rain or the prying hands of vandals tear at the once brilliantly whitewashed stones.

Plastic Flowers

There are quantities of plastic flowers, clay vases, beautiful wrought iron grillwork and rust stains.

Then, finally, there are the residents, the principal drawing card. The "Who's Who" includes: Dominique You, a private captain under Jean Lafitte who fought in the Battle of New Orleans; Pierre Soulé, a U.S. senator; architect James Freyret and Marie Laveau, one of the city's most notorious voodoo queens.

Marie's remains are reputedly buried in a tomb field marked with red X's chalked there for good luck. She's so popular Ansoucher said the most frequently asked question is, "Where is Marie Laveau?"

His answer: "I don't know. She's dead."