Family’s grave concern is protecting its roots

By J. TAYLOR RUSHING
Advocate staff writer

When Arthur Lee McGowan died at an Atlanta military base more than 80 years ago, he left his family his name, his red hair and a decades-long disappearing act. McGowan fought in and survived World War II only to die of pneumonia shortly after the war. He married his 3-year-old son, who took his first name, or his grandson, who took his middle name. His red hair skipped two generations — neither his son or grandson had it — until his great-grandson was born with it.

He was buried in one of eight graves in a field near Central High School, which stayed hidden from his descendants for 33 years until this year.

But his family also shares a problem with many other families today: the graves of their ancestors are on land that no longer belongs to them and may one day be sold.

The graves, off Wax Road in Central, are surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and covered with weeds. They are the final resting place of McGowan along with his mother, his brother, brother-in-law and several in-laws. Their living descendants include Mark Lee Shook of Mesquite, Texas; his brother, Jon Arthur Shook of Austin, Texas; and their mother, Sue Shook of Branson, Mo.

The McGowan and Shook families split at one point, scattering family members into surrounding states. The land gradually fell out of the family’s hands, and is now owned by Lloyd Pickering of Baton Rouge.

The Shooks have talked to Pickering, who has maintained the graves. In a brief phone interview, Pickering said he has honored the graves and has no immediate plans to develop the land, although he may one day be sold.

Mark Shook of Mesquite, Texas, stands in a field near Central High School in January at the grave of his great-grandfather, Arthur Lee McGowan. He holds a photo of the grave taken in 1947, which was the last time the family’s descendants were at the gravesite. The Shook family looked for the grave for a year before they found it.

See GRAVE, Page 2B

Grave

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

That has the Shooks concerned.

"If we don’t want to lose them, we don’t want to lose our history," said Barbara Courseux Strickland, a member of the Louisiana chapter of the Association of Professional Genealogists and the Baton Rouge Genealogical and Historical Society.

She said it can sometimes be difficult to find a grave without trespassing.

"It’s not easy to get to, so you want to make sure you get there,“ she said. "If they’re not in a cemetery, it’s harder to find them.""}

Strickland also pointed out that there are sometimes the only record of a person’s death. "If he’s been destroyed, the death registration might be lost," she said. "If they’re not in a cemetery, they might not have been transcribed, but not all of them.""}

Strickland herself has a few graveyards, including her great-grandmother, Amelia Herbert Behan, buried off Highway Road near Majestic Oaks subdivision.

Majestic Oaks subdivision: There are only a few visible graves near the road — Strickland said several of them have already been covered up by houses.

"Every time I drive by, I always look to see if Amelia is still there," she said. "They drove over to the house and they’re covered up by houses and it’s hard to find them."

Debbie Roberts, a regulatory officer at the state Cemetery Board in Moriarty, said the situation is common and that family burial grounds remain popular today, especially in the parishes of St. Tammany, Tangipahoa and Livingston, where there are dozens of them.

"There’s a trend there," she said. "They’re very, very popular. They’re very, very popular. They’re very, very popular.

What I’m hearing is that’s it’s because of the cost, since other cemeteries are more expensive. And a lot of people, especially in rural areas, have property that came down generation in generation and they just have a yearning in their hearts."

Roberts said East Baton Rouge Parish has only three registered family cemeteries. Demopolis Cemetery at 1391 Sullivan Road, Carl Vernon Cemetery on Plant Road in Zachary and the Young Family Cemetery at 1440 Pride-Port Hudson Road in Zachary.

It took the Shooks a year to find the graves on Pickering’s land. Using the Internet and word-of-mouth, they finally found a distant relative who directed them to the field.