Improvements spark increased interest in cemetery

St. John Cemetery's new ornamental gate to be dedicated in ceremony.

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LAFAYETTE — Improved maintenance along with restoration of ancient tombs are evidence of increased interest and wider support for historic St. John Cemetery, the oldest Catholic cemetery in Lafayette.

One of the latest improvements is to be dedicated Nov. 1 when a new entrance gate on University Avenue is scheduled to be completed. A circulate drive with ornamental gate will enable funeral processions to enter more easily.

Dedication and blessing is scheduled for 10 a.m. Nov. 1 with reception on the Cathedral Plaza afterward.

It is a long-established custom in south Louisiana, a tradition brought from France, to clean the cemetery and freshen up the tombs in anticipation of the twin November feasts of All Saints and All Souls. The two days are closely related in south Louisiana because for many years, All Saints' Day was a state holiday since it was also a holy day when Catholics went to church. It was natural to combine attending Mass and making a visit to the cemetery to clean and freshen the graves.

When life was simpler and there were fewer distractions, the visit to the cemetery became a family outing. They brought a picnic lunch as the graves were cleaned, the children learned about grandparents and other relatives buried in the family plot. They could also learn about the church's custom of asking God's blessings on the living and the dead.

To facilitate upkeep today, the Cathedral cemetery commission had made available some heavy concrete planters, sturdy containers for flowers or plants, which are not likely to be blown over in heavy winds. These are at the Cathedral Center.

"Everything has a price and so does a nice-looking cemetery," it was pointed out by John Simon, cemetery manager. "There is always something needing fixing up."

As part of the ongoing renewal and restoration, two 19th century tombs have been restored. The long inscriptions, written in French, are now legible and accessible. As money is available, other 19th century monuments will be restored.

With the word spreading about the improvement projects in the cemetery, support has been received from families throughout the area and from as far away as Florida and California.

The search to identify unmarked tombs is a continuing project. Each year a few more are identified. Some identifications are accidental. A family member comes to pay dues or make arrangements for a known tomb and remembers who was in the neighboring unmarked tomb.

The cemetery commission has made the reluctant decision to declare some tombs abandoned. The sites are listed in the cemetery bulletin and appropriate legal steps are taken to reclaim them.

Future projects include a walking tour of the historic tombs in the cemetery. These would include Civil War generals, pioneer settlers and merchants.

One of the recent accomplishments was completion of the cemetery fence with the ornamental gates on the Cathedral plaza. The gate is topped by a scripture text in French, "I will wipe away every tear." A plaque, containing names of donors to the fence, was installed on a wall near the church.