Istre Cemetery houses folklore of Acadia Parish

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MERMENTAU — Between the communities of Mermentau, Midland and Morse in the southwestern tip of Acadia Parish lie markers of a bygone era.

A half-dozen tiny houses, complete with little doors and windows, remain over the graves in Istre Cemetery. According to local residents, they still draw visitors to the remote graveyard in an ancient "oak grove off La. 92.

"There were more but they took them down," said Huey Stutes of Morse. "They were made with cypress pegs, that's how long they've been there."

Legend surrounds the old cemetery. Even the live oak trees towering over plots bearing solid Cajun names like Truhan, Landry, Fontenot, Levergne and Duhoen are woven into the legends.

Stories are told about men who refused to fight in the Civil War — men of French ancestry who didn't have a stake in which side won.

The dissenters were hung in the oaks and buried beneath them.

"That's where they would hang the men who didn't fight in the Civil War," said 81-year-old Marie Stutes Lejeune of Crowley. "They hung on the trees and buried there. That's how the graveyard was started."

Though Civil War battles were fought far from the Mermentau/Morse/Midland area, the Istre Cemetery services, sentiments and vigilante action were evidently high during those years.

Lejeune's great-grandfather's house was burned because he refused to fight.

"My grandpa hid in a pecan tree in the Natchitoches area," said Virgie Weekley. The lifelong resident of "the Cove" said Dupelie Joseph Istre was one of the lucky ones who escaped impressment into military service.

According to the stories, the graveyard got its start by an offer of English people trying to force the Cajuns to join the Confederate side against the Yankees, Weekley said.

Jayhawkers, however, were anti-slavery guerrillas who operated mainly in Kansas and Missouri.

"The old people wouldn't talk about the past," so Weekley said she isn't sure of the details.

As the legend goes, men of the Cove who weren't fortunate enough to hide in a pecan tree and refused to fight a war foreign to them were lynched from the branches of the oaks over the Istre Cemetery and buried by grieving widows.

According to cemetery secretary-treasurer Lovelace Leger, Adjam Istre officially donated about one-and-a-half acres for the cemetery on Jan. 14, 1889. The cemetery was approximately doubled in size in 1938 because of an adjacent property donation.

The houses started popping up over the graves sometime after 1889.

At the peak in the 1920s and '30s, there were at least a dozen of the houses and many graves with small picket fences around them, Leger said.

"The houses and fences were built to keep people and cows from walking on the graves," said Leger.

It may be the most practical explanation for the structures since the early Mermentau Cove residents were very poor, according to Leger, and couldn't afford a fence around the entire cemetery.

"There were lots of cypress and it kept well," said Leger. Some residents believe the houses were built, at least in part, to mimic the big, expensive tombs common in New Orleans and other south Louisiana cities.

Leger said building houses over the graves began as a practical exercise but was evident enough to be homemade by some.

"One person, 50 years ago, asked not to be left out in the open for even one moment," said Leger.

The man's dying wish was that the general house's tent remain over the grave until his son could build the house, he said.

Henry Cary of Mermentau still remembers those instructions because he was 10 years old when his grandfather, Pierre Henry, gave them to his father before he died in December 1933.

Cary said his dad followed the request and built the house under the tent so his father was "never exposed to the elements." Today, the grave house is the best-kept in the Istre Cemetery.

A devastating flood in 1940 washed away many of the tombs and some of the houses.

"There are a lot of people buried there and we don't know where the graves are now," said Cary.

Two of the houses are beyond repair, with rusting roofs and gray, bare wood siding slowly decaying to nothing.

"The family asked they be allowed to rot naturally, rather than be taken down," said Leger.

Lejeune said her father died on Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1918, and a house was built over the grave which has since been removed. A chain-link fence has surrounded the cemetery since 1968 and livestock no longer freely roam in the area.

One of the houses taken down a dozen years ago is the source of a favorite Istre Cemetery legend — Stutes, Leger and Cary all recounted it.

A man and wife who had spent their final years angry and not speaking to each other were buried side-by-side in the cemetery and their tombs covered by a little house.

The family, agreed Stutes, Leger and Cary, made sure they enjoyed eternal peace by erecting a partition between them.

Adeline Duhon and her brother Henry Cary, both of Mermentau, look at the grave of their grandfather Pierre Henry who died in 1935. The cemetery contains six wooden houses built over graves.