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— James M. LeBlanc
Warden of Dixon Correctional Institute

LOUISIANA SPECIAL

No longer forgotten

Markers being installed for thousands buried at mental hospital

By JAMES MINTON
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JACKSON — At first glance, the peaceful hillside looks no different from many others in the rolling East Feliciana Parish countryside.

A closer inspection, however, reveals something unusual: rows after row of odd depressions in the ground. Sunken areas of sod, too many to count, arranged in straight lines, all the way down the hill and into the surrounding woods.

The hillside is Rugged Cross Sanctuary, the final resting place for thousands of men and women who came to the state’s oldest mental hospital and never left it.

A potter’s field for the mentally ill, the cemetery is not a newly discovered secret. It’s well known to current and retired employees of East Louisiana State Hospital in Jackson. It’s just not widely known outside the community.

James M. LeBlanc, warden of nearby Dixon Correctional Institute, came across the cemetery several years ago while riding a four-wheeler in the area to scout the likely routes escapees would take from his prison.

“For awhile, I couldn’t figure out what it was. But when I realized it was a cemetery, I was shocked,” LeBlanc said of the overgrown field.

Vera Ross, an “East” employee for more than 40 years, said the hospital began burying deceased patients on the site in 1916. Before then, indigent patients who died at the hospital were buried in another cemetery closer to town.

A ledger kept at the hospital records the names and patient numbers of people buried in the cemetery — about 4,000, Ross said.

Mental illness once carried a powerful stigma; so powerful that families would abandon contact with their loved ones after their commitment at the Jackson hospital.

Inmates at Dixon Correctional Institute install some of the hundreds of wooden crosses in a graveyard at the East Louisiana State Hospital in Jackson.
A Department of Corrections inmate paints crosses in a recently discovered cemetery on the grounds of the East Louisiana State Hospital at Jackson. Approximately 4,000 graves were discovered.

Forgotten

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"In those days, they brought you here and left you here," said longtime employee Richard King.

While hospital officials know who is buried in the cemetery, they don't know where they're buried.

Except for the graves of a small number of patients whose families provided headstones and more recent burials that are marked with concrete blocks bearing patient numbers, the vast majority of the graves is unmarked.

That's changing now, thanks to the Vets Incarcerated members and other inmates at the Jackson prison.

Earlier this month, a crew of trustees began marking 500 of the graves with small white wood crosses built in the prison's maintenance shop and anchored in a No. 10 can filled with concrete.

The military veterans' group, which periodically sells barbecue dinners to DCI employees and holds other fund-raisers for community service projects, agreed to buy the materials and help build the crosses, LeBlanc said.

"We still don't know who's buried there, but at least it's something," the warden said of the monuments.

LeBlanc and Assistant Warden Larry Ikard said the veterans' group plans to continue making the crosses until all of the known graves are marked.

The crosses are made of treated lumber sealed with a waterproofing product and painted with two coats of high-quality paint.

"They should be around for a few years," Ikard said.

"I like to think I'm helping the people in the grave," inmate Donald Paul said as he and other trustees installed markers in the cemetery recently.

"I think the crosses will keep the spirits away. I feel good about it, and I think people should be more concerned," Paul said.

Inmate Raymore Alexander said he couldn't help thinking about the movie, "Poltergeist," when the DCI trusty crew first began working in the cemetery, which was being reclaimed by the surrounding forest.

"I'm just glad to be giving something back to the community," Alexander said.

King said the number of burials in the cemetery has decreased in recent years, corresponding to the decline in the hospital's census.

Retired employee Sylvester Giroir said the advent of psychotropic drugs allowed the hospital to discharge many of its patients to nursing homes, but many of them come back to East for burial "because that was their home."

Giroir said the burials reached the bottom of the cemetery hill sometime after he came to work at the hospital in September 1957 and eventually moved to a newer section, where the graves are marked with concrete blocks.

"We stopped burying them in this part because we were digging on the top of old graves," he said.

A statue of the Virgin Mary greets visitors to the cemetery, along with several large white concrete crosses. The statue's arms are missing, but King and Giroir said employees rescued it from the trash dump after a Catholic chapel on the hospital grounds was converted to another use.

"We decided to put it out here," Giroir said.

LeBlanc vowed that DCI will maintain the cemetery as long as he's warden, noting that the Department of Health and Hospitals is hard-pressed because of budget constraints to hire a large groundskeeping crew.

Bishop Alfred Hughes, head of the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, has been asked to bless the graves during his annual visit to DCI on Friday, LeBlanc said.

A day or two before the bishop's visit, a flower will be placed on each grave the prisoners have marked with crosses, said Linda Fjeldsoe of the diocese's Office of Prison Ministry.

Fjeldsoe said the cemetery symbolizes society's attitude toward the mentally ill.

"Sometimes those with mental health issues are just pushed aside. Even in their graves, they're forgotten," she said.