South Louisianians prepare cemeteries

By MARY FOSTER
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NEW ORLEANS — In southern Louisiana, where the cemeteries resemble marble cities and families share tombs the way they share houses, Wednesday is a day for the annual reunion between the living and the dead.

"I been doing this ever since I can remember," said Carrie Langemark, 91, as she arranged flowers on the family tomb at Lafayette Cemetery No. 1 in uptown New Orleans. "My grandfather bought the tomb. That's him there. The one that says '1901.' That's when he was buried. There's seven of us in here now. I guess I'm next."

Langemark, who was accompanied by her daughter and son-in-law, her grandson and his wife, and her 18-month-old great-granddaughter, was one of hundreds of people who worked at Louisiana cemeteries preparing for All Saints Day on Wednesday.

Families prepare for the Catholic observance by cleaning, whitewashing and repairing their tombs and decorating them with flowers.

Wednesday they return to pray and gossip. "People come and catch up with the news from folks they haven't seen in a while. It kind of gives you a feeling of things going on, year after year. It's a family event. We bring the kids and the old folks, and some people even bring picnic lunches," said June Fusilier, 60.

An almost steady line of cars turned into St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 on Tuesday carrying people armed with brooms and rakes and chrysanthemums in all colors. The gray and white tombs were spotted with red, yellow, pink and green.

"It's really a beautiful sight. It's our version of Memorial Day," said Michael Boudreaux, the assistant director of the New Orleans Archdiocesan Cemeteries. "It's a very much a family day. Some of our cemeteries are 200 years old so you might have 10, 12, 15 members of a family buried in a tomb."

The tombs, which are used because of New Orleans' high water level, resemble windowless houses, churches and monuments. Many are surrounded by wrought iron fences. Built close together, they line the narrow paths and streets that wind through the cemeteries. They are designed to hold many generations.

"See this holds two vaults here on top," Langemark said. "Then down below is a receiving vault. When the next person is buried, they take the oldest bones from above and put them down there and that makes room for the new coffin."

The All Saints Day custom extends throughout southern Louisiana, Boudreaux said, and has become a custom for both Catholics and Protestants.

"Where I come from out in the country you can barely walk through the cemeteries on All Saints Day there are so many flowers," said 81-year-old Aline Legendre. "A lot of these old tombs people don't fix up anymore. I guess some of the families have died off and don't have anyone to come now."

"That's what happens," said her husband, Ronald Legendre. "Used to be we would come out and see people of all ages here. We'd catch up on who got married, and who died, and who had babies. Now a lot of families have died off. Nothing lasts but the ground, they say. But while there are live ones, they take care of the dead."

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day push up daisies in the Garden of Serenity ("Garden of Serenity SOLD OUT!!!" reads a chalkboard in the Greenoaks office).

Is one garden more expensive to reserve space in than any other? That depends on the sales strategy of the day, Tillman says.

"From time to time, we run different promotions..." We may run a promotion in the Garden of Time, we may run a promotion in a different section, we may run a promotion in a mausoleum, with the different styles.

These days, bargain hunters are keen on the Garden of Time, with its huge sundial sporting poetic inscriptions on a granite base. Residents here are stacked one casket atop another, creep to a hole.

We follow the winding road through the gardens until arriving at the pride of Greenoaks: Lakeside Mausoleum, called by Tillman "the most exclusive burial site in Baton Rouge."

The outside of Lakeside Mausoleum is unremarkable, except for the sense of sturdiness and permanence suggested by its straight lines and formidable granite walls.

Step inside, though, into an atmosphere of climate-controlled, sterilized luxury. The tall-ceilinged rooms are as silent and chill as... well, as a crypt. But it's an eerily crypt, with a chapel, carpeted floors, and stained glass windows.

We move into the part of Lakeside Mausoleum where the creme de la creme are interred chic-to-chic behind the walls. A mausoleum is nothing more than a monumental filing cabinet for the dead, where corpses are stored like yesterday's papers. Raised letters affixed to the marble face of each slot identify the occupants.

Sunlight fills the airy chamber here in the posh part of the crypt, warming the flesh-colored marble walls. The 17-foot-high walls are a grid of body receptacles six spaces high. Price varies by heel.

"The most desired level is your head level. That's your second level," Tillman says, his voice sliding into a soft cadence. "It's just easier to put flowers in, and you're closer right there."

If the heart's part of the crypt, the prayer book, the prayer level, logically, is in the lower level. Mourners may kneel to pray at the cubbyhole of their loved one.

"As you go up to the sixth level, it's the least expensive in here, because it's the hardest to get," Tillman says. "The quality is the same."

Not only can you choose your eternal berth, but you can pick your bunkmates and the sleeping arrangements. The options go by creative monikers, such as "lounge crypts," in which caskets are inserted sideways, one behind the other.

"True companies" is an arrangement in which caskets are placed lengthways, "like you're loading a shotgun," Tillman says.

Tillman says the most expensive hole in the wall he offers costs about $19,000. It holds four, but consumers averse to buying their suits off the rack, as it were, can have a family mausoleum tailored to their precise specifications. The price: $35,000 to $200,000.

"Everything in here is like automobiles," Tillman says of the Lakeside Mausoleum, "They get better and better each year. You add something new, something different. You get that from what the public wants.

The automotive metaphor is more apt than one might think. Just as buyers can trade in vehicles, so can they exchange gravestones when they find the old digs cramped their style.

"People may buy traditional graveyards, and in five or 10 years, when their lifestyle changes, or their income changes, they trade up to mausoleums," Tillman says.

The metaphor changes. ("It's like they would buy a house," he says. "You know, you don't live in the same house you lived in when you first got married. You trade up.

As with cars, houses and other status symbols, gravestone acquisition is often a matter of keeping up with the Janeses, Tillman says.

"We'll have people come out here for us to show them mausoleums, and they'll walk around and see people know, and Because their friends or people they know (are interred here), they'll buy mausoleums," he says.

Death might be forever, but not the popularity of cemeteries. Rabbonenho's Moore says that while, in terms of volume, Greenoaks reigns as the city's most popular eternal-night spot, its days are numbered:

Like their parents before them, Baton Rouge yuppies are migrating to a fast-growing residential part of the city. New-estabished doctors, lawyers and bankers are setting up house in south Baton Rouge. So, Moore predicts, Roshaven, situated on Jefferson Highway, will be the hot cemetery when today's up-and-comers have up-and-

"Thirty years from now, Roshaven will be very busy, while Greenoaks will have long since passed," Moore says.

Like savvy members of the generation before, mortified post-moderns who die sometime in the next century will memorialize their tastes with their own little country-club crypts. Death, be not unattractive.