



DELGADO FUNERAL SERVICES STUDENTS HELP CLEAN UP HOLT CEMETERY

The following article by staff writer Katy Reckdahl appeared in the Sunday, March 1, 2009, edition of *The Times-Picayune*:

EARTH ANGELS

An unlikely assembly of sailors, mortuary trainees and high school students join to clean up Mid-City cemetery

Seashells and gravel crunched under Linda Lagarde's heels Saturday as she walked into Holt Cemetery, the city-owned potter's field in Mid-City. Stopping at her family's plot, Lagarde's mind wandered as she watched a white hearse carry the body of her cousin, 71-year-old Arthur "Bubbie" Ware Jr., toward its final resting place.

"I can just see us as children here, bustling and running around, while the older people whitewashed tombstones and pulled weeds," she said.

All around Lagarde, a similar scene unfolded Saturday. But unlike her memory of relatives gathered at ancestors' graves, these caretakers comprised a diverse bunch that spent the day caring for the crypts of strangers.

Part of a cleanup sponsored by Save Our Cemeteries, the volunteers armed with rakes, weed whips and trash bags hailed from the Belle Chasse Naval Air Station-Joint Reserve Base, Lusher and Brother Martin high schools, and the funeral service and mortuary science program of Delgado Community College, which abuts the overgrown cemetery.

"It's our calling in life not to just take care of the dead when they die but to give them perpetual care," said Bobbiann Lewis, an instructor in Delgado's program, whose students have been required to do cemetery upkeep since late last year.

On Saturday, Ware's name was added to a long list of engraved names on its plot's formal granite marker. But throughout Holt, wooden and hand-painted markers are more common, and the plots no longer follow geometric lines.

Instead, catawampus rows are only occasionally dotted by well-tended plots covered with white gravel and outlined with freshly painted wooden frames. Most remain unmarked and overgrown with weeds.

"The whole point of this cemetery is budget," said Crystal Sasso, 24, a first-year funeral service student who stopped to examine a human vertebrae that had been unearthed during a recent burial at Holt, where dozens of people can be buried in the same standard-size plot, one atop the other.

During Saturday's cleanup, Sasso and fellow student Lexie Guilbeau found some bones: a femur, a carpal, part of a rib cage, a coccyx and a scapula. They said they found the disinterred bones disrespectful to the dead -- but "very, very interesting."

In Louisiana, tombs can be reopened after one year and one day, said volunteer Bert Lodrig, 51, a Delgado alumnus whose paternal grandparents are buried in Holt. Because it's a below-ground cemetery, the site only allows wooden caskets, which can disintegrate, leaving behind only bones, he said as he walked by a grave marked only with a faded sign hand-painted with the words "I love you, Mom."

Standing near the Ware family plot, gravedigger Terry Gardner saw the hearse carrying Bubbie's body headed in his direction. He spread a weathered green nylon strap across the hole he'd dug about 4 feet into the earth.

When the minister finished the graveside service, Gardner wrapped the ends of the strap around the gray casket and grabbed one end. Longtime cemetery employee Henry "Red" Nelson took the other end and the two swung the casket into the ground.

The sight didn't bother Lagarde, who was always taught that this was natural, she said.

"We always knew that when people in our family died, we had to bury them," Lagarde said. "And we knew where we had to bury them in Holt Cemetery."