

Weeds, Past Bury Cemetery Clues In McCandless

By MARJORIE IRR

No one promised Dorothy Stern Madey a rose garden. But she expected more than knee-high weeds and fallen trees at her father's grave in a McCandless "potter's field."

Graves of Matthew Stern and hundreds of others at the Duncan Heights Cemetery have fallen into neglect, broken only occasionally when ambitious scouts pick up the beer cans that litter the burying ground on Duncan Avenue.

But mourners who want to place flowers on a loved one's resting place find the mystery of who owns Duncan Heights Cemetery buried as deep as the unknown occupants of its dozens of unmarked plots.

"Father always liked the country," Mrs. Madey sobbed as she surveyed the thicket of underbrush around her.

"We didn't have a lot of money. So we buried him here because it was inexpensive. But now I can't even walk to his grave."

The white-haired grandmother now regrets she let a discredited undertaker persuade her to buy a plot there.

William A. Sirlin, a funeral director who once lost his license for spiriting a body from the county morgue, was widely regarded as owner of the poor man's graveyard called Duncan Heights.

But Sirlin never was owner of record of the six acres, although he once offered to sell it to Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. State law forbids funeral directors from owning any interest in a cemetery.

And now all the other persons associated with Sirlin and the cemetery either are dead or deny any interest in the place.

Richard T. Leonard was Sirlin's partner at the Sirlin and Leonard Funeral Home, 620 East Ohio St., North Side.

When Sirlin died in 1973, he left everything to Leonard and Mrs. Eve-

lyn Schilling, former secretary for both Sirlin and Leonard Funeral Home and Duncan Heights Cemetery.

Her husband, Robert, is listed in state records as president of Duncan Heights Cemetery Corp. until it went out of existence in 1972.

But both Leonard and the Schillings deny they own the tiny overgrown graveyard, although its headquarters shared the same address at 620 East Ohio St.

"Sirlin had other business dealings. But I know nothing about what he did outside these four walls," Leonard told The Press.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Schilling denied any knowledge of Duncan Heights Cemetery, although state records indicate they were its officers for several decades.

Robert Schilling in 1957 used the Duncan Heights corporate name to buy land for Hollywood Cemetery, a Sherdan graveyard which he owns and operates.

But he denied knowing anything about the pauper's burying ground in McCandless, and said he's never been there.

"I wish I owned the place so I could sell it and get the money. But I don't own it," Schilling said.

John Cost was Sirlin's attorney, and still represents Leonard and the Schillings. But he too says he doesn't know who owns Duncan Heights Cemetery.



Stephen, Dorothy Madey stroll in Duncan Avenue cemetery.

Inquiries about the unkempt graveyard invariably return to the mysterious William Sirlin. For example:

✓ Half a dozen North Side funeral directors told The Press they always considered Sirlin owner of Duncan Heights.

✓ James Levandos, business manager for another McCandless cemetery owned by Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, said Sirlin offered to sell him Duncan Heights in the 1960s, and accompanied him on a walking tour of the grounds there.

Levandoss recalled Sirlin was a schemer who always had something going.

✓ Gravemaker John Keil of Troy Hill recalled digging graves for Sirlin at Duncan Heights Cemetery.

✓ Sirlin used a Brighton Road realty office as the cemetery's lot-selling headquarters, according to Mrs. Margaret Winkler, whose late husband, Richard, owned the real estate agency.

Mrs. Winkler, who worked with her husband, also recalled doing cemetery business with Mrs. Schilling.

Duncan Heights Cemetery's last owner of record was the late Joseph Rosenkrantz, who purchased the graveyard for \$4,000 in 1943. His deed also conveyed to Rosenkrantz the ownership of Duncan Heights Cemetery Corp., holding company for the real estate in McCandless.

In 1947, Rosenkrantz filed a quitclaim deed relinquishing for \$1 his title to the six acres. That deed surrendered ownership of the real estate to Duncan Heights Cemetery Corp., 620 East Ohio St.

The following year, records show Robert Schilling notified the Pennsylvania Department of State's Corporation

Bureau that he was president of Duncan Heights Cemetery Corp.

But state records contain no mention then or since as to who became owner of the cemetery corporation's 200 shares of stock.

Corporations are supposed to notify the Commonwealth when they come under new ownership.

Since Sirlin was a mortician, he couldn't legally own a cemetery.

So if he secretly purchased Duncan Heights from Rosenkrantz, he would have been admitting an illegal conflict of interest by listing his ownership in state records or in a deed.

The only clue is a reference in Rosenkrantz' 1945 will to a debt owed Rosenkrantz' estate by William Sirlin.

Amount of the private judgment note executed between the two men was \$4,000, the exact amount Rosenkrantz had paid for Duncan Heights Cemetery in 1943.

Sirlin later paid off the judgment note after deducting \$1,845 for Rosenkrantz' funeral expenses.

But the mystery of who really owns the run-down cemetery apparently is buried as deep as William Sirlin.

The McCandless "potter's field" could be cleaned up and sold if prospective buyers could locate the owner.

Gravemaker Keil said he heard this year that the burying ground is for sale for \$12,000.

But Thomas Sayre, vice president of Stocklein Development Co., can't find anyone who will accept his offer to buy the Duncan Heights graveyard.

Stocklein owns 14 cemeteries in six states, including Allegheny County Memorial Park across Duncan Avenue from Duncan Heights Cemetery.

Sayre says he has the cash, but has found William Sirlin's mysterious legacy as tangled as the weeds that choked off Mrs. Madey's path to her father's grave.