

Waiting for a date of death

**By Tara Roberson
Stillwater NewsPress**

Duane Cornforth's mom died in July 2003 and she was buried at Sunset Memorial Gardens. To this day, her grave marker is not complete.

Cornforth and his wife, Dena, said they contacted the NewsPress in a desperate bid to get some answers as to why the marker — paid for nearly 20 years ago — is not finished.

"We have tried to get answers from management at the cemetery and have even called the corporate headquarters in Houston," Cornforth said. "We have been told different things, put off and treated very poorly."

Cornforth said his father purchased the plot for himself and his wife in the late 1980s, when Cornforth was in high school.

"I didn't pay much attention to the whole process," he said. "I was in high school and didn't want to talk about my parents' deaths."

"But, the point is, he took care of this a long time ago."

The Cornforths' grave marker contains their names and dates of birth. When they purchased the marker, they chose an option that did not include their specific dates of death, only the year.

The item missing from Patricia Cornforth's marker is a 6-inch-by-2-inch metal plate, called a "scroll," with "2003" printed on it.

"I first contacted the management at the cemetery in December," Duane said. "They told me it took four to six months to get the plate. My mom had passed away in July, but I just thought it had not arrived yet."

In March, he and his family visited the cemetery only to see that the plate was still not on the marker.

This time when Cornforth asked about it, he said, he was treated rudely.

"The woman in the office pulled out a binder that was probably 2 inches thick and looked up our order," he said. "She said the scroll had been ordered."

The employee allegedly told Cornforth the orders were forwarded to Houston and that office did the actual ordering.

"When I asked her if she had called to find out why it had not arrived, she told me it wasn't her job to follow up on the orders," he said.

He said she then made a phone call and told the person on the other end the family wanted the "scroll" or their money back.

"I never said that," Cornforth said. "There's no money to get back."

When the NewsPress attempted to contact the management at Sunset, the manager, who did not provide his name, handed the phone to the office manager, who also did not identify herself.

"We can't give this information out," she said. "It is between us and the ones who make the scrolls."

She then said she had no further comment and hung up.

"They have complete indifference to their jobs and no respect for the people here or their families," Dena said.

Mike Graham and Associates of Houston owns Sunset Memorial Gardens.

When contacted Friday, a secretary in the office said everyone was traveling, but she would take a message.

A short time later, Randy Davis, who said he worked for Mike Graham and Associates, returned the call and said he had been appointed district manager for the Stillwater region that "very day" and would look into the issues.

Monday, Davis said he had visited the cemetery over the weekend and that all the paperwork was in order and he did not know why the scroll date markers were not in place. He said he needed to contact the person in Houston who took care of the orders.

Tuesday, he said the person he needed to talk to had been out of the office Monday and Tuesday.

He said in a subsequent conversation that he had spoken with the owner.

"He said if the families who are upset would just contact us directly, we will get this taken care of," he said.

The Cornforths don't want just their problem fixed — they want it fixed for everyone who has loved ones at Sunset.

In the cemetery, there are 2003 plates on several graves that list specific dates of death — many that fall after Patricia Cornforth's. There are others that have the 2003 plates in place.

"There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it," Dena said. "You would think it would take longer to get the ones with specific dates on them."

Sally Banks' mother, Myrtle Randolph, also passed away in 2003. Her grave does not have a date of death.

"I just left a message for (the management last) Monday," she said. "They are rarely there."

Banks said she also ordered a vase for her mother's marker in March and was told it would take several months to arrive.

"It is very sad," she said. "Some of the people out there don't have anyone to speak for them because their relatives don't live in Stillwater. It is very disrespectful."

The Cornforths hope other families who are experiencing the same problems will come forward.

"We don't want people to think they are alone," he said. "We did and, it turns out, we aren't."

For the Cornforths, the unfinished marker makes trips to visit the grave more painful.

"It breaks my heart," Dena said. "It is totally disrespectful to her for her grave to not be taken care of."

Mike Graham and Associates can be reached at (713) 840-8081

Stillwater firm helping families at cemetery

By Tara Roberson
Stillwater NewsPress

Duane and Dena Cornforth's story about an incomplete grave marker at Sunset Memorial Gardens encouraged other families to share their stories and inspired a local company to offer assistance.

Dena Cornforth said she was contacted by Larry Haney Jr., at Stillwater Monument Co., shortly after the story was published Oct. 27 in the NewsPress.

"He called us and said he read about us in the paper and said he wanted to help us," she said.

She said she gave him information on the plot at Sunset and, within an hour, he had called back and said he had put the 2003 date plate on Patricia Cornforth's marker.

"We are so thankful for what he did," she said.

Haney said putting the plate on the marker was easy because, after looking at the marker, he realized he had one in stock that would match.

"We are very appreciative, but we still want the other families' issues to be taken care of as well," Dena said. "The purpose of coming forward was not just to get our complaints taken care of."

In the past two weeks, several people have contacted the NewsPress with similar complaints.

"We've been dealing with them for over a year on our dad's marker," said Donna Stephens, a Stillwater resident. "We have been given the runaround."

Helen Miller, Stillwater, said she also experienced problems with getting grave markers and has a problem with the general upkeep of the cemetery.

"I'm so glad these people told their story," she said. "It's like butting your head against a wall out there."

Carolyn Gray, another resident, said she is also unhappy.

"Whoever mowed it apparently chipped the headstone," she said. "It looks terrible and when you sink all your money into the stone before you are even dead, it's really disheartening."

She said her husband has taken his weed-eater to the cemetery and cleaned the graves of their loved ones and walked around and set up vases on the graves of others.

"It's a disgrace," she said. "It takes just a few minutes to go around and make sure the vases are standing up."

Stephens said when the grave for her father was dug, her grandfather's headstone was run over. She also said the vase on her aunt's grave was apparently hit by a lawn mower and broken; neither item has been restored.

"My aunt has been dead for two years and there is still no date of death on the marker," she said.

Stephens said her sister contacted the Houston offices of Mike Graham and Associates, the company that owns Sunset, and was later contacted by Randy Davis, a district manager for the company.

"He said he had had a death in the family and that he would call us back," Stephens said. "He did call back and listened to our concerns and said it would be taken care of in four to six weeks."

Haney said families with loved ones interred at Sunset should call him and he will see what he can do about getting the markers completed. He said those who need 2003 date plates need to do it soon.

"I can get the date scrolls from either copper company they use, I just need to go make a rubbing of the marker and match it," he said. "Right now, getting 2003 plates may be possible, but if the companies do not have any in stock, they will have to be cast and that increases the cost, but we are going to work with these families to get them what they need."

Haney said Stillwater Monument Co., is a division of SI Memorials and Suhor Industries and is not the supplier Sunset Memorial Gardens uses for granite stones and markers.

"We sell markers that are then installed out there, but we are not the company they use when people buy markers through them," he said.

Haney said he can be reached at (405) 372-8585 from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.