

Casket search goes on

Radar may be used to find body in cemetery

By **TERRI SANGINITI**
Staff reporter

Delaware is considering using ground penetrating radar in the search for the remains of a man whose casket is lost among 36,000 graves in a Wilmington cemetery.

The technique uses radio waves to detect buried objects such as drums, utility lines, storage tanks or caskets, said Paula Turner, a geologist with GeoModel Inc. in Leesburg, Va. Data gathered by the radar can generate an image of a buried object much like ultrasound is used to create a sonogram, she said.

Deputy Attorney General Olha Rybacoff said the radar is an option state officials have for finding the grave of Melvin Allen, a 57-year-old former auto-worker who was buried in Riverview Cemetery two years ago.

State officials still are looking for other options, Rybacoff said.

Riverview failed to record Allen's lot and grave number. The mistake went undetected until Jackie Allen of Wilmington tried to have a headstone placed at her husband's grave several months after the burial.

The state Attorney General's Office on Jan. 31 charged cemetery owners with consumer fraud and asked a Chancery Court

See **RIVERVIEW** - A18



News Journal file

Melvin Allen's tombstone sits as the search for his grave continues. Riverview Cemetery did not record his lot and grave number.

Riverview: Lodge hires investigators

FROM PAGE A1

judge to place the cemetery in receivership. The case stems from dozens of consumer complaints about neglect of the graves and management problems at the 128-year-old cemetery at 3300 N. Market St.

The owners are identified as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Lodges No. 1 and No. 34, the parent Odd Fellows Grand Lodge of Delaware, and the Knights of Pythias Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania.

Jeff V. Martin, who represents the Grand Lodge of Delaware, said the Grand Lodge had no direct responsibility for supervising cemetery operations.

But Martin said the lodge has hired a private investigation firm to try to find Allen's remains.

"We're going to make sure that we follow leads with the witnesses, which include Jackie Allen and everybody who attended the funeral," he said.

Fred L. Graf, president of Geo-Graf, Inc. a ground penetrating radar firm in Kennett Square, Pa., said the equipment will be able to pick up whatever graves are in a specific area.

"It's fairly easy to do," Graf said. "We're not going to guarantee we're going to find [Allen], but we'll find whoever's buried there."

Graf and Turner, of Geo-Model, gave estimates of \$1,600 and \$2,900. Rybacoff said she would seek a court order requiring the cemetery to pay that cost.

Turner said the radar would not be able to distinguish one grave from another unless an individual grave had a significant characteristic.

Any casket without a "headstone could be Allen's, Turner said. "We might find more than one. It's not perfect, but it's better than digging everyone up."

Locating a missing grave often turns up other problems, said consumer activist Carolyn Jacobi, founder of the Mary-



News Journal file

Melvin Allen, 57, died in November 1998 and was buried in Riverview Cemetery. His casket is lost among the 36,000 graves.

land-based cemetery watchdog group Eternal Justice, Inc.

"From experience, I've learned if you have one missing body, you've got 101," Jacobi said.

"It's the worst experience for any family to be subjected to," she said, "but you have to disinter. Beyond that, there is no way to give a consumer proper closure."

Riverview's volunteer executive director Walt Mateja has said groundskeepers had unearthed 12 graves in the search for Allen's remains.

Authorities also will try to talk with the cemetery's former grounds supervisor, who was present at Allen's burial, Rybacoff said.

Attorney Lois Dawson, who represents Jackie Allen, said the situation has been difficult for his client.

"She felt strongly the two of them were soul mates, not only in life but in death," Dawson said, "and she's concerned that she'll be left alone at her own death."

► Reach Terri Sanginiti at 324-2771 or tsanginiti@delawareonline.com.