



Elena Green watches the search for her daughter Susie Green's grave Tuesday. At right is her granddaughter, Crystal Green.

Excavation yields only heartache

Family's search for relative's grave at Riverview frustrating

By **TERRI SANGINITI**
Staff reporter

Crystal Green said she had no expectation that her mother's casket would be found when workers excavated a grave Tuesday morning in Riverview Cemetery in Wilmington.

So she wasn't surprised when a white casket was unearthed in grave G-76, instead of the rose-colored casket her 43-year-old mother, Susie Green, was buried in Dec. 19, 1998.

"It shouldn't be up to us to figure out where she's buried, it should be up to the cemetery," Crystal said.

Relatives of those buried in the Wilmington cemetery have filed 85 complaints since 1999 with the state Attorney General's Office, alleging mismanagement and poor upkeep at the graveyard.

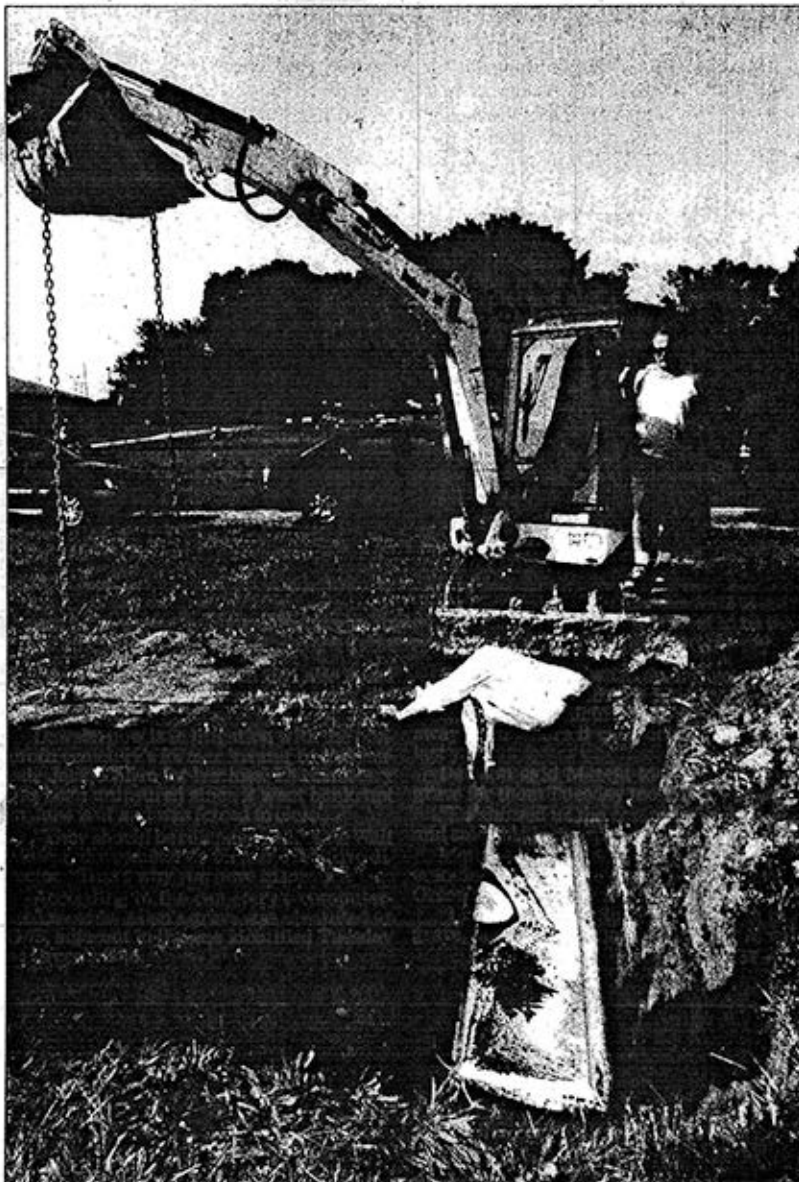
The complaints prompted the state to file suit in Chancery Court against the cemetery owners. The court has ordered mediation, which is continuing.

Attorney Lois Dawson requested the exhumation on behalf of Green's family to confirm what was suspected: that Green was not buried where cemetery records said she was.

Dawson said she plans to file suit against the bankrupt cemetery for negligence in not properly interring Green's remains or keeping accurate records of where she is buried.

Dawson also represents Jackie Allen, another woman who claims she has been victimized by the 130-year-old cemetery at 3300 Market St.

Allen buried her husband Melvin at Riverview in November 1998, one month before Green.



The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS
James Keith of Mealey Funeral Homes on Tuesday examines what turned out not to be the burial plot of Susie Green in Riverview Cemetery. Behind him is excavator Rob Ramsey

An exhumation in March 2001 also failed to find Melvin Allen's remains among the cemetery's 36,000 graves.

Dawson now is in litigation with the non-profit cemetery's former insurer to compensate Jackie Allen for her loss. The cemetery has been uninsured since it went bankrupt in June 2001 and was forced to close.

"They should be compensated," said Walt Mateja, the cemetery's former executive director. "That's why you have insurance."

According to the cemetery's computerized records, Allen's grave was identified as G-75, adjacent to the one identified Tuesday as Green's G-76.

But on Tuesday, when an excavator from Logan & Sons in Elkton, Md., started digging, G-76 was calculated to be five graves away from where it was identified as being last year.

Dawson said Mateja identified Green's grave for them Tuesday morning.

"He showed us the computerized records and said this is the spot," Dawson said.

Mateja said he identified the grave by referencing a grave marker in the row behind Green's plot and moving over one grave.

"I can't say that Susie Green is in that grave, but I can say that that's G-76," Mateja

See CEMETERY — B2

Cemetery: Errors anger relatives

FROM PAGE B1

said after the exhumation. "This is what it says in the computer, and this is where it should be by referencing the surrounding graves."

Mateja said he did not know who was buried in the white casket. He also said he did not have a lot of confidence in the records made by the cemetery's paid grave diggers in late 1998.

That was little comfort to Crystal and her 72-year-old grandmother, Elena Green.

Elena Green said she has five family members buried at Riverview — a husband, brother-in-law, son, daughter Susie and sister Eloise Alls.

The cemetery cannot locate Alls' grave, either. She was buried the same month as Allen.

"I don't come out here like I used to anymore to put flowers on my son's grave because I can't put flowers on my daughter's grave," she said.

Cemetery activist Grace Duffy said she thinks the problem is more widespread than just the two confirmed missing graves.

Funeral director James Keith, who assisted in the planned disinterment, said the problem with cemetery officials using a grave marker is that one mistake throws off the entire grid.

"I'd hate to say it," Keith said, "but there's going to be hundreds of people in the same boat."

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