

# GRAVE CONCERNS

## DIGGING UP THE DIRT ON CEMETERY SCAMS

Grave desecration, double-sold plots, abandoned and poorly maintained cemeteries, and stolen cemetery funds are just a few of the problems that consumers face when they search for their final resting place.

By Catherine Elton

When Robert Scott stood at the edge of each of his parents' graves and watched as their caskets were lowered into the earth, he trusted, as do all Americans who bury their loved ones, that it was the last time that their remains would see the light of day. But now, more than 10 years after his father was buried and nearly 2 years after his mother was buried, Scott is not so sure that that is the case.

Scott is part of a class-action lawsuit that alleges that the managers of Eden Memorial Park in Los Angeles routinely ordered gravediggers to crack open the burial vaults of existing graves to make room for new, adjacent graves. According to legal documents that were obtained by

Consumers Digest, one worker for the cemetery claims that he and other workers were instructed to break the vaults, and were told to hide their activities and not tell anyone about them.

And for good reason. Sometimes, after the vaults were broken into, pieces of bone, clumps of hair and scraps of clothing would tumble into the new, adjacent grave, only to be scooped up by a backhoe bucket and dumped onto a refuse heap, according to the documents. Tightly packing in graves enabled the cemetery to sell hundreds more grave sites and bring in millions in revenues, according to one of the lawyers who represents the plaintiffs, which number 800 families and could grow, lawyers say, to include some 50,000 participants. This maneuver caused incalculable grief and anger for the relatives who had laid their loved ones to rest there.

"As Holocaust survivors, my parents had already seen enough horrors—bodies and bones discarded like garbage in the camps," Scott says. "Who would think they do that in America?"

Lawyers for the plaintiffs estimate that some 1,500 graves might have been desecrated in the past 10 to 15 years at Eden Memorial, and Scott will not know whether his parents' graves were among them until the lawsuit enters its discovery phase in the coming months. Service Corporation International (SCI), which owns Eden Memorial and 362 other U.S. cemeteries, declined to comment because the allegations are a part of an ongoing case.

Sadly, the charges of disturbing human remains to create more grave sites and to increase revenues are not unique to Eden Memorial or the company that owns it. In recent years, there have been several similar cases of grave desecration, and although these are clearly the most harrowing of consumer abuses that occur at cemeteries, they are far from the only ones that do. Thirty-seven interviews with consumers, consumer advocates, lawyers, former industry insiders and state government officials revealed several.

For example, cemetery owners and managers often place too little money into trust funds that are designated for permanent maintenance of cemeteries, or they dip into those supposedly sacred funds to cover other expenses—including even personal spending sprees. This practice leads to substandard maintenance and the outright abandonment of the cemeteries. Consumers who plan ahead and pay for their plot and other products and services at the cemetery (known as a *pre-need* purchase) might be sold a contract that they cannot afford. If they move or change their mind about where they want to be buried before they die, in most states, they are not guaranteed a full refund on services and merchandise that they never received or used. Pushy and oftentimes commission-based cemetery salespeople commonly use misinformation, a lack of transparency and onerous surcharges to get consumers to spend more money with them.

How is it possible that such outrageous abuses take place? Several factors combine to make the cemetery in-

