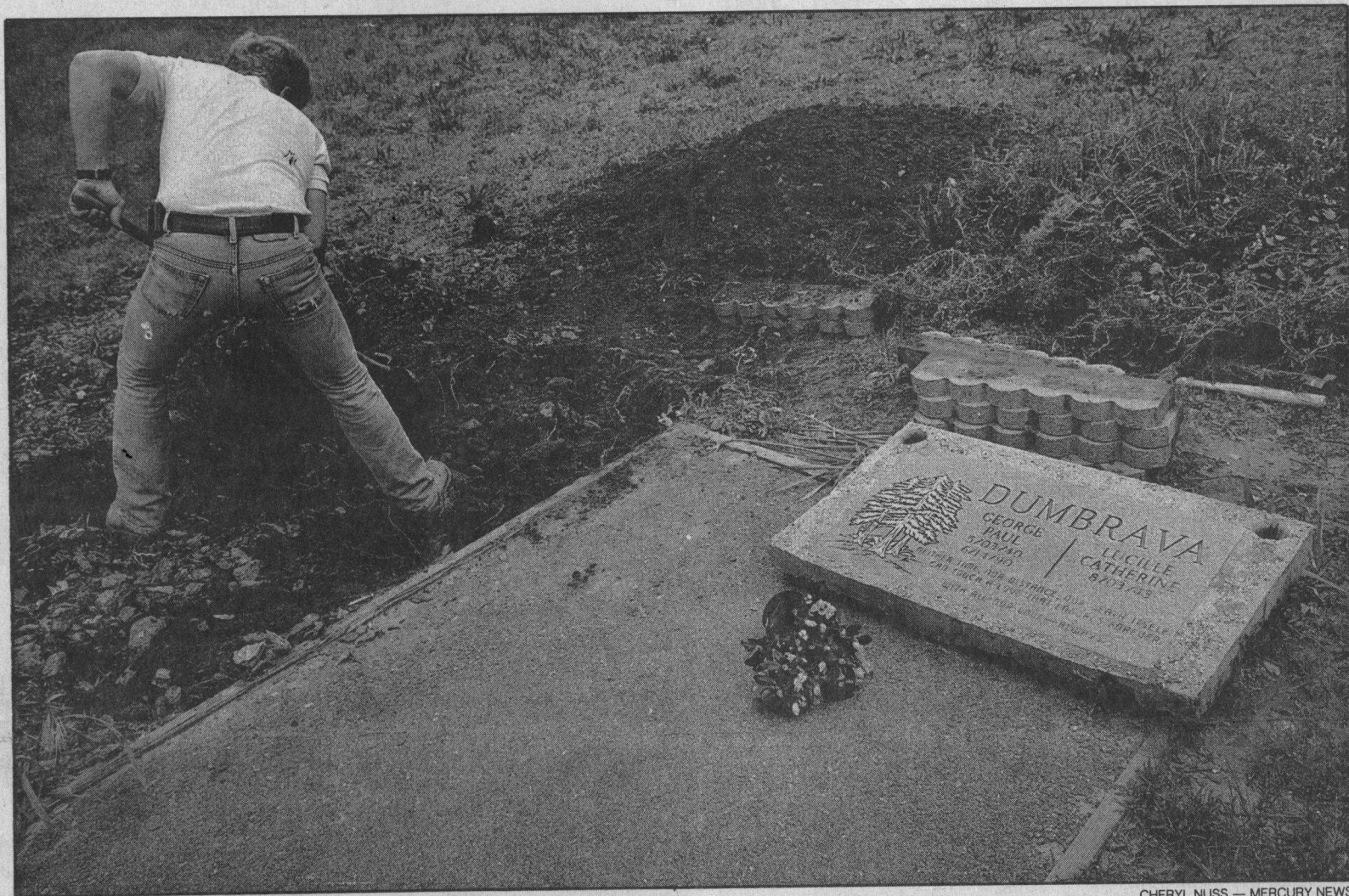


Not-so-final resting place



CHERYL NUSS — MERCURY NEWS

Gravedigger Richard Brasier digs up the remains of George Dumbrava, whose widow, Lucille, is frustrated with cemetery practices.

Cemetery's strict rules distress survivors

BY ANN W. O'NEILL
Mercury News Staff Writer

A disagreement over whether survivors can plant flowers and leave mementos on graves at the town cemetery in Felton has created an uproar loud enough to raise the dead.

Literally.

On Saturday afternoon, two gravediggers unearthed what was meant to be the final resting place of George Paul Dumbrava, an electronics firm manager who was 50 when he died of cancer in June 1990. They were there at the behest of Dumbrava's widow, Lucille.

She said she hired the men to remove and cremate her husband's remains because she was fed up with the way the cemetery's self-appointed board was running things. The final straw came two weeks ago, when his grave sank 18 inches — for the second

“With all those bells and whirligigs and artifacts, it gets junky after a while.”

— Nick Nicholas,
cemetery board member

time.

About 20 families, whose grave sites are on the newer side of the tiny mountain cemetery, accuse the seven-member Felton Cemetery Association of arbitrary rule-making, unprofessional conduct, poor grave-site maintenance and insensitivity. But board members say the families are just trying to bend rules that have been there all

along.

The problem is that on the older side of the cemetery, anything goes. There, graves are decorated with shrubs, standing headstones and an occasional pink flamingo. The individually decorated graves were what convinced some people to buy plots at Felton in the first place.

But on the newer side, the plants must be potted, and the headstones flat. “We’re trying to make that side more nice,” said board member Nick Nicholas, a retired California Highway Patrol officer who watched Saturday’s disinterment from a distance. It’s hard to mow the lawn with shrubs and borders and fences around, he said.

And, “with all those bells and whirligigs and artifacts, it gets junky after a while,” he said.

Apparently one person’s loving grave-site memento — a baseball cap, a wooden mark-

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Frustrated with cemetery, widow has remains dug up

Controversy over grave decorations

■ CEMETERY

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er, a teddy bear and an angel have disappeared recently — is another person's junk.

Nicholas admitted that some items have been removed — but only after several warning letters were sent. The families dispute Nicholas' story. And they allege that weeds, not flowers, make the cemetery look bad.

"It's just a weed hole up there," said one man, who declined to give his name, saying he feared more harassment.

"Two-foot weeds are OK, but six-inch daffodils are not," his wife agreed. "It's like they're discriminating against flowers."

Rules tightened

Lucille Dumbrava, who couldn't bring herself to watch her husband's disinterment, said all she wanted was to grow a few herbs and wildflowers on her husband's grave. Initially there was no problem, but then the board tightened its rules. Eventually, she alleges, some of her plantings mysteriously disappeared.

"This is the only way to get some peace," she said. "I can't describe to you what it has been like. It's been very upsetting. It's hard enough to live without George."

Others may soon follow her lead. Some of the families have

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hired a lawyer.

Ramona Robertson says she also is thinking about moving her husband, Stanley, an ironworker who was buried at Felton after he died of cancer in March 1990 — just two weeks before his 33rd birthday.

'It would be hard'

"It's a big decision," she said. "I haven't sought out another place to put him. It would be hard on the kids. It would be hard for me. To be honest with you, I'm trying to ignore it."

Robertson and her five children used to visit the grave site often. On his birthday, the children placed two plaster cherubs by his headstone. They disappeared, along with a river-rock border and some potted flowers.

"I don't see what harm a cherub does," Robertson said. But the controversy has been devastating

to the children, she said. The family hasn't visited the grave site in more than a month.

When she and others complained at a cemetery board meeting, Robertson said, board members called their decorations "pagan" and discredited the group as "a bunch of crazy people who are trying to turn the cemetery into a circus."

Wooden marker removed

In the meantime, people like Barbara Christianson don't know when their grief will end. Last fall, someone took the wooden marker off the grave of her 2½-year-old son. It wasn't up to standards, but Christianson said she can't afford a stone marker yet.

"It utterly devastated me that they had so little regard for this little guy, or for us," she said.

It's hard enough to explain the death of a child to your other children, Christianson said. But what do you tell them when they ask why they can't plant flowers on the grave anymore?

"I bought two boxes of violas to put on Jonathon's grave. Now what do I do? The flowers were Hallie's idea," Christianson said. "She's Jonathon's twin. She misses him. I don't have an explanation for her."