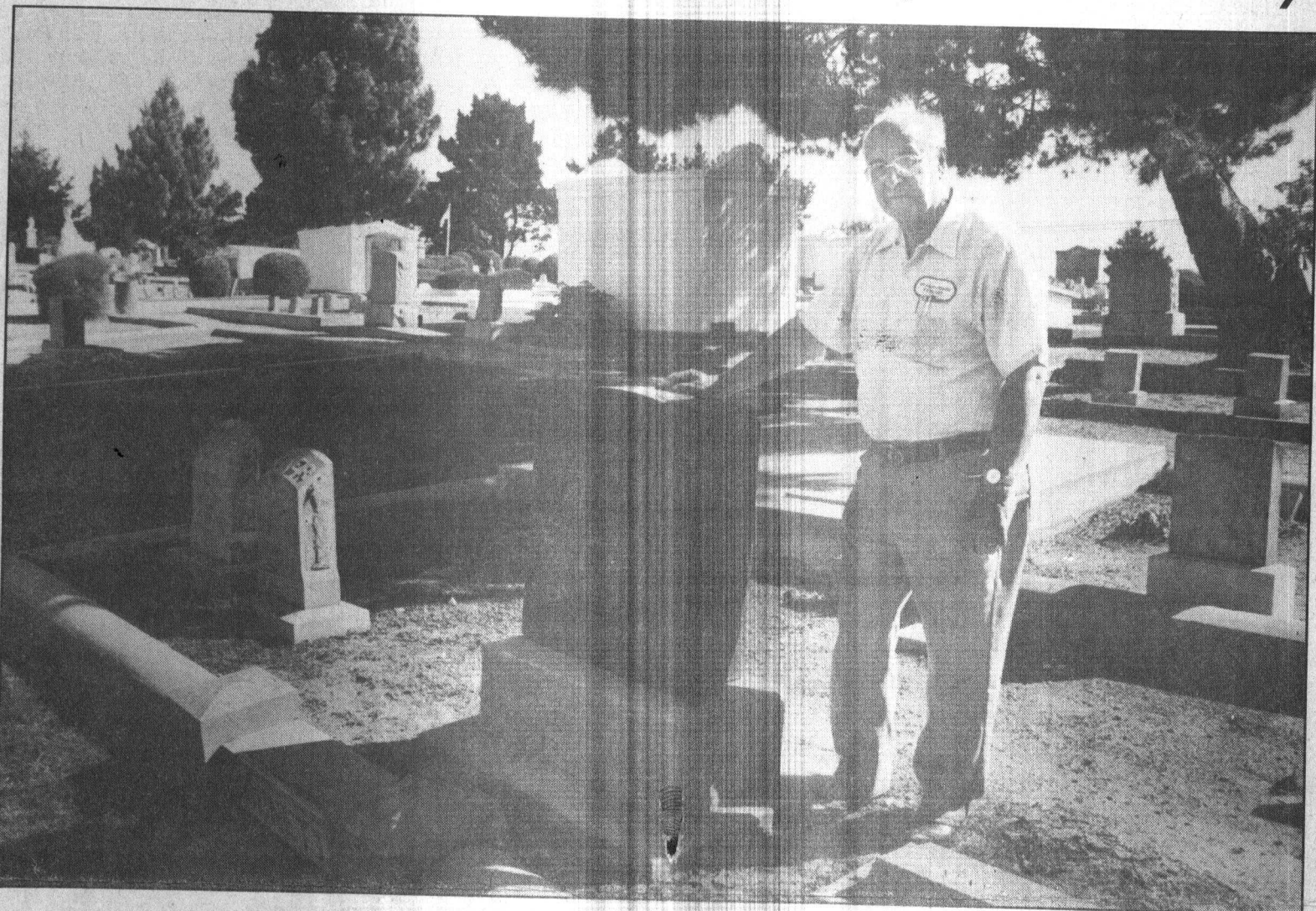


Tombstones tell valley's history



Everett Dias, manger of the Pajaro Valley Cemetery District, shown above at Pioneer Cemetery

off Freedom Boulevard, says local cemeteries will be full in fewer than 30 years.

Mike McCollum

Cemeteries reflect communities' concerns

By JENNIFER BRUNDIN
STAFF WRITER

IT WAS FEB. 22, 1874. Melvin Gilkey was wetting his whistle in one of the local gin mills when he made some disparaging remarks to fellow imbiber Dr. C.C. Cleveland. The doctor took umbrage at the remarks and challenged Gilkey to a duel. The two guzzlers stepped outside ... and promptly shot each other.

But they weren't rid of each other completely. Now they're lying less than 300 yards apart in Pioneer Cemetery, their

tombstones bearing that same fateful date.

"So which one was vindicated, I don't know," said Everett Dias, manager of the Pajaro Valley Cemetery District, laughing.

Dias, along with five groundskeepers, is in charge of maintaining the district's five cemeteries: Pioneer, Valley Catholic, Watsonville Catholic, Valley and Day cemeteries.

A former employee of Wells Fargo Bank, Dias is a man who knows his numbers: Created in 1954, the district is one of 204 in the state and buries, on aver-

age, 200 people a year. Larger districts bury about 500, while smaller ones number only six to 10 each year.

"The rule of thumb that is used in the industry is that 1 percent of the population dies a year," said Dias, stretching his cowboy boots out in front of him.

He figures that the Pajaro Valley district buries between 36 and 40 percent of local residents, based on names appearing in the obituaries.

But the five cemeteries, which comprise only 45 acres, may one

day run out of space.

"It's an ongoing concern," Dias said. "We've got a safe 25 to 30 years of space left available to us. We're actively seeking additional space."

Still, this month has been slow, so there is more time for repairs.

"People haven't been dying," he said. "We have no control over the amount of work we're going to have."

The district operates on a \$300,000 annual budget, which comes from the county and user See CEMETERY / Back page ▶

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fees from lot and crypt sales. Under the Health and Safety code, it can't sell monuments and markers.

"Monument dealers had a stronger lobby than we did," Dias said.

Even with inflation, he said, prices on lots haven't changed in the 13 years he has been with the district. Single depth lots are still \$200, with a \$60 (\$90 as of July 1) endowment care trust fund for "perpetual maintenance"; double depths run \$225 with a \$75 care charge (\$100 as of July 1).

Riding through the Pioneer Cemetery in Dias's old car is a trip through history. On the right is an 800-pound granite marker, once knocked down by vandals, where members of the Sill family lie. Next to it are local Civil War veterans from the Grand Army of the Repub-

At the far end of the cemetery, where Chinese and Japanese farm laborers from the 1850s are buried, the monuments are slimmer and taller.

"Back in the early days there was distinct segregation," Dias said.

An incense burner adorns the Chinese section, and a large stone with inscriptions marks the entrance to the Japanese sector, where monuments used to be 4-by-4 redwood posts that eventually deteriorated.

Other notable locals buried in the Pajaro Valley include members of the Blackburn, Silliman and McGowan families. Merchants Charles Ford and Otto Stoesser, and rancher Patrick Kelly also lie there, under mausoleums or upright markers.

Now, cost prohibits such grandiose tombstones, so people are opting for flat markers in memorial gardens, which are good for yet another reason — they're not subject to vandalism.

"Vandalism is an ongoing

it's a nationwide problem. We've got a lot of sick people."

Five years ago, vandals knocked over 72 headstones at Pioneer Cemetery. In December 1991, a man in his 30s was caught stealing brass from Valley Catholic Cemetery.

"Although we weren't able to prove he stole the brass, we got him in sale of other stolen merchandise," Dias said.

Sometimes families arrive to find flowers removed from the grave, only to find them on somebody else's.

"We would assume that it's juveniles," Dias said. "In the case of knocking over headstones, it's young adults trying to show how macho, how strong they are."

Just last week, Anthony Kurily Sr. arrived at Pioneer Cemetery to find \$100 worth of silk flowers removed from his son's grave. Floral wreaths and other decorations placed on his mother's and father-in-law's grave were also gone.

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robbed, but to get at the ground where our loved ones are at ..."

Kurily said. "It's real sad."

One night, Kurily chased out some young kids who were turning over garbage cans.

"There's kids out there playing kick ball on top of the graves, there's guys drinking beer, urinating on the crypts," he said.

Police make a run through the cemeteries at night, but Kurily said he'd like to see the entrance patrolled.

Meanwhile, Dias and his staff do the best they can to repair broken monuments. If they can't, Dias has the uncomfortable task of notifying the families that they must replace them.

As for his own mortality, Dias "has that all set already." He has an underground vault at Valley Catholic where one day, he hopes in the distant future, he will join his parents, both sets of grandparents and