

DIGGING IT

Frozen ground and fancy machinery not of grave concern to this family

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WENTWORTH, S.D.— Jerry Leisinger digs rock'n'roll and graves.
The 18-year-old, third-generation gravedigger keeps the radio in his pickup tuned to a rock station as he works in the cemetery west of Wentworth, hacking out a neat hole just 36 inches wide, 8 feet long and a bit short of 6 feet deep.

(Since the advent of concrete vaults, says his father, Tom Leisinger, remains no longer rest 6 feet under.)

For the Leisingers, gravedigging is a family project. Since his grandmother moved away and quit the business, it's been mainly Jerry's. But his father helps out after work; brother Mark, 13, does his part; sister Susan, 9, holds the lantern at night and hands the diggers shovels, and when Jerry is busy with another job, mother Carol puts the dirt back in and levels off the graves once their cargo is in place.

"She doesn't climb down in the grave," Tom Leisinger teases his portly wife. "She can't get back up."

Even the family's pet raccoon, Charliee, participates, climbing the trees that mark off Wentworth's small, square cemetery from the surrounding prairie, and rooting in the bottoms of the freshly-dug graves for tempting insects.

Jerry, a brawny weight lifter who played football in high school, makes digging a 5-foot hole look easy.

If that doesn't fit the gravedigger image — most people seem to imagine grizzled old men who look like candidates for the grave themselves — Jerry does satisfy the imagination in one way. He digs by hand.

Several of the small cemeteries around Wentworth don't allow machinery, the

family says. And some families prefer that their relative's grave not be hollowed out by a machine.

Done by hand, a grave takes four or five hours to finish in summer, and more like 10 in winter, when the frost can go 4 feet down. The ground can be thawed by a propane heater that covers the space for the grave, but propane gets expensive, Tom says.

Jerry charges \$100-\$120 per grave, depending on the location. He confines his work to Wentworth, Chester, and Colman, S.D., though his grandmother traveled as far as 30 miles for a job.

Gravedigging, Tom says, is just one of the family's occupations. It brings in extra money, especially needed for medical bills. Son Mark is diabetic.

Tom's mother Veronica started gravedigging when she was asked to care for the Wentworth cemetery, a request that probably grew out of her work caring for the lawns of the town's older people.

Her husband worked at the telephone company and helped with the gravedigging. Tom and 10 other children helped too.

"It was another source of income — something we needed," he says.

Of the 11, only Tom remains in Wentworth, a town of fewer than 200 people. He is also mayor, secretary of the fire prevention district and a 4-H leader. He works as a federal meat inspector, and his wife works in a 7-Eleven store.

Jerry, besides being chief gravedigger, worked on the railroad this year. The family also raises registered sheep, and Jerry shows them through 4-H.

Whether Jerry remains in gravedigging will depend on whether he stays in Wentworth. His father says he's going to college. He seems less sure.



Gravedigging, in any case, isn't a source of income you can count on. Business seems to go in spurts.

"There's an old proverb that once you've got an open grave, if it rains or snows, there'll be two more," Tom says.

"It is true," Carol says. "If it rains tonight, we'll find out tomorrow," Jerry puts in.

You've got to have a sense of humor about the gravedigging business, his mother says. In a small town like Wentworth, you often know the people whose resting places you're digging.

"The only one I guess that really bothered me was my uncle," Jerry says. "Otherwise, it's just something you have to do."

Jerry's friends occasionally give him a hard time about his job, and girls ask how he can do such a thing. But he says he doesn't think about it.

"This is the type of business, you don't want much business in a small town," Carol says. "If we're gonna take seriously what he does, we're gonna be grieving for all these people all the time. That'd kind of hurt."

Real gravedigging:

Jerry Leisinger, top, doesn't use machinery to dig graves, like many modern gravedigging operations. He uses hand-held tools, right, and muscle.

Argus Leader photos by
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