

This gal really digs her job

By GALE PIFER

To find a woman who makes her living digging with a shovel is almost unheard of. To find one who digs graves is indeed a rarity, but that's exactly what Mrs. Art Leisinger of Wentworth does. She is a female gravedigger.

The soft spoken mother of 11 children has been digging graves around here for over 17 years. Her children were one of the biggest reasons why Mrs. Leisinger turned to the unusual occupation.

While many parents jokingly remark at one time or another that their offspring will drive them to the grave, Mrs. Leisinger picked up a shovel and started digging because of a sincere dedication to make sure all of her children had the opportunity to attend college. Soaring medical bills had plagued the family and Mrs. Leisinger feared that there might not be enough money to assure a college education for her children.

When the Rev. John Rueter, who was then pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church here, found himself minus a caretaker for the St. Thomas Cemetery, he asked Mrs. Leisinger if she wanted to take a crack at it. "I told him I thought I could do it," said Mrs. Leisinger. She tried it, did it and is still at it.

Since then she has dug graves or taken care of the lawns in almost every cemetery in the area. Currently she takes care of the Wentworth, Franklin and Orland cemeteries, plus filling in at St. Thomas and Graceland when needed. She estimated that she has dug over 600 graves in the 17 years she has been in the business.

Mrs. Leisinger admits that some people "just sort of stare" when they find out what she does for a living, "but it's honest work, hard, but honest." Most of the vault men know her, but when a new one happens along occasionally, he might do a doubletake, she smiled.

She admits that it is sometimes hard to dig a grave, especially when it is for a close friend or neighbor. But she likes to work outdoors and doesn't fear working in a cemetery. She often works late in the evening during the summer. "You mow during the day and then dig graves at night when it gets too dark to mow," she said.

Last winter was tough, she admits, because many times she had to shovel into the cemetery by hand because of the high snow. "Here at Graceland I once dug through a drift that was at least 20 feet deep," she said. The high snow also made finding the proper lot a tough task.

She said the digging gets a little tough in the winter, especially when the ground gets frozen. She told the story of how she put a sack of old tires on the ground and burned them to thaw out a grave site one night, only to look up and find flashing red lights bearing down on her. "I guess the police thought there was a big fire out here or something, but when they found out it was just me they left," she laughed.

Being a busy mother, wife and digging graves on a regular basis keeps a woman mighty busy. "But I always managed to make meals for the family. They don't like to cook much." She said she usually dug graves during the day and did her bread baking and housework at night.

When the children were small she bundled them up and took them to the cemetery with her. "I never hired a baby sitter," she said. During the summer the children help her dig graves, but in the winter it is usually a one-gal job because

the children still at home are in school. The children range in age from Tom, who is 31, to Doug who is eight.

Automation is moving in on Mrs. Leisinger, who says it usually takes about four hours to dig a grave. Machines have now been made to dig graves, thus ending the need for hand labor. "But they are very expensive," she said when asked why she hadn't bought one to save her back. But she did lose a job at one cemetery when a man bought a back hoe to dig graves.

Mrs. Leisinger said the toughest job she has had to do is dig up graves, a task which she has done many times as old and sometimes forgotten cemeteries have been moved. When one of her sons died in a traffic accident, neighbors and her other sons dug the grave.

A Catholic, Mrs. Leisinger said she thinks grave digging is honorable and necessary. "It is to the honor and glory of God to bury the dead," she said. And so she does, and the subject of retirement just hasn't come up yet.



MRS. ART LEISINGER, Wentworth, goes about her trade preparing a grave at St. Thomas Aquinas Cemetery here. The mother of 11 children is a grave digger.