

**MEET VERONICA LEISINGER:****An Important Job — She Does It With Pride**

By Dolores Harrington

VERONICA LEISINGER IS A very special person, with a special philosophy about what she does.

For Veronica, one corporal work of mercy has special significance: "...and bury the dead."

She digs graves by hand; she cares for cemeteries.

IN AN UNASSUMING, FORTH-right way, she told me her philosophy about her work: "You figure people NEED that service, and you're doing it, after all, for the honor and glory of God. You're helping people in a time of need. And you like to make things as nice as possible for people at a time that's hard for them. People appreciate it."

And as far as working in a cemetery is concerned, Mrs. Leisinger made these observations:

"A LOT OF PEOPLE, I GUESS, are afraid of a cemetery. They think it's scary. But, actually, it's very peaceful and quiet. You go along with your thoughts and really can enjoy your work."

Veronica, of course, loves to work outdoors, especially with plants and grass and shrubbery. Rose Hill Cemetery, near Wentworth where she lives, shows it. It was early in October the day I stopped to see her at her home. She and I and two of her little grandchildren went out to Rose Hill, where we strolled about among the headstones, many of which date clear back to before South Dakota became a state.

THE AUTUMN SUN FILTERING through carefully trimmed trees cast a peaceful glow on well-groomed lawns. Flowers were still blooming brightly in spite of the lateness of the season. The scene generally reflected this kindly woman's skill, a compassionate green thumb. And the matter-of-fact readiness with which she discussed her work and experiences as we walked along told me there was a depth of honest pride in serving others to the fullest of her ability.

She explained that she truly enjoys "making the grounds look nice for those people from away from here who have relatives buried here. After they've been here to visit, I figure they must feel better after having seen the cemetery mowed and trimmed and cared for. It makes them go away with a lighter heart."



THE UPPER PHOTO, TAKEN by a Madison Daily Leader reporter, shows Mrs. Leisinger at work one cold day last winter. The lower photo shows her on a sunny October day at Rose Hill Cemetery, Wentworth.

BESIDES ROSE HILL, SHE cares for Franklin Cemetery, also near Wentworth. Also, she regularly digs graves in these cemeteries: St. Thomas Aquinas, Madison (her own parish); Prospect, Pleasant Hill and Baptist, all near Chester; Orland, southwest of Madison, and Ramsey Baptist, near Montrose.

She's been at this work about 17 years. But that's not all she's had to do. She has also been looking after the lives, times and well-being of husband, Art, and their 10 sons and one daughter. There's "only" five sons at home now, it's true, but there was the time not long past when EVERYBODY was home.

MRS. LEISINGER'S REMARKABLE career began while the family was living in Madison more than 16 years ago. The Rev. John Reuter, of St. Thomas, unable to find someone to dig a grave one particular day, came to her, knowing she liked outdoor work, and asked if she and her boys would care to assume such a job.

They did, and she has stayed with this work since, in all kinds of weather and varying states of health. She can recall more than once taking a tiny, four or five-day old baby along with her while she prepared a grave. Preparing a grave in the warmer seasons takes her 4 to 5 hours and in the winter when the ground is hard, 6 to 7 hours. (Sometimes the frost line goes down nearly five feet!)

SHE IS PROUD OF THE FACT that "only once did I miss digging because I wasn't feeling good." Then she added, "They got someone else to dig the grave that time,

but I was back on the job the day of the funeral."

There was another time she did not perform this work. That was when the grave had to be prepared for the Leisingers' son, Jim, whose life ended in an auto crash seven years ago. His brothers and the neighbors took over on that occasion.

IN FACT, THE LEISINGER offspring have pitched in to help Mom a good many times over the years, especially during the memorable winter of 1968-69 when snow stood 21 FEET deep on the surface of Rose Hill Cemetery.

As we visited out there at Rose Hill, she pointed to a pine tree, nearly 22 feet high, and said, "Would you believe it, the snow that winter was within six inches of the top of that tree!" She then recounted one episode from that winter. She was notified that a grave would be needed. Where to dig it? The entire cemetery was buried deep in the snow, but she knew there was a vacant lot directly beside this particular pine tree. So she dug steps in the snow up to the top of the barley protruding tree. After which she used the handle of her spade to measure the proper grave width out from the tree. Pulling the spade handle along carefully, she marked lines in the snow to block out the gravesite.

"THEN WE TUNNELED OUT the snow over the space where I was to dig. After school, the family helped me and we were here for hours, moving snow and digging, but the job got done!"

Mrs. Leisinger can tell of many times where she was digging graves all day in sub-zero temperatures (40-below more than once) in one

windswept cemetery or another. And frostbitten fingers and toes are no new experience to her.

SHE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT, indeed, she feels bad when she must dig a grave for a friend or relative. Yet one gets the feeling she considers this vital task all the more important when it's done for someone she loved.

As I pointed out before, cemetery work is what she does BESIDES being a mother and homemaker, and now, frequently, a babysitter for bounding grandchildren. By the way, she's not a bit hesitant to tell you she's 55 years old.

SHE AND HUSBAND, ART, who is maintenance man for Brookings-Lake Telephone Co., have resided in Wentworth 16 years. Their children are: Tom, of Wentworth; Joe, Sioux Falls; Frank, Trent; Richard, Sioux Falls; Shirley (Mrs. Dennis Van Dam), Colman; Kenneth, at home; Robert and Kevin, junior and freshman in Chester Area High School; David and Douglas, sixth and fourth grade in Chester School.

Although she was most gracious in allowing me to interview and photograph her, Veronica Leisinger really doesn't care much for "publicity." After all, she figures she has an important job to do and she's simply doing it the best she can, for people and for God.