

Give grave diggers life

Written by Judge Greg Mathis
Saturday, 18 July 2009 00:00

When family members lay a loved one to rest, they expect that the final resting place for their body will be the same as the one they envision for their soul: peaceful. So it's no surprise that relatives of those buried in Burr Oak are outraged that the graves of their dearly departed have been desecrated all because of greed. Those who are responsible should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law; life in prison for such deplorable behavior is not too much to ask.

If you aren't familiar with the story, the manager of Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip, IL, a Chicago suburb, and three grave diggers dug up more than 300 grave sites, reselling the plots. Bodies were found pounded down, buried on top of one other, body parts were scattered around and head stones carelessly tossed to the side. Family members are horrified, and rightly so. So many have no idea of knowing where the remains of their loved ones actually are; they can only wait for authorities to identify the bodies.

For a time, Burr Oak was one of few cemeteries near Chicago that buried Black people. Its early importance to the African American community makes this story all the more outrageous. Over the years, cemeteries began to tear down their color lines, allowing Blacks to be buried among whites. However, African Americans in the area continued to revere Burr Oak. In return, the owners victimized those who have supported it for generations.

Emmett Till, the 14-year Chicago boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling at a white woman, is buried at Burr Oak. The gruesome nature of Till's death, and the public funeral his mother was determined to have, breathed life into the civil rights movement. Till's family reburied him in a new casket in 2004 after his body was exhumed as part of a new investigation into his death. His original casket, viewed by more than 50,000 at his funeral, should be considered an important piece of civil rights and American history and treated as such. Instead, it was found rusting in a shack on the cemetery grounds. That a company which originally showed so much support to the Black community could show so little respect for one of its most memorable figures is shocking. Thankfully, Till's gravesite was intact.

Four people were charged with felonies in connection with the case. Justice will only be served if they are sentenced to life in prison. These individuals not only disturbed the final resting places of the dead to turn a profit, but showed so little respect for how they disposed of the remains after they were unearthed. Their actions have opened old wounds and created new ones for the families of those buried there. Because of the way the bodies were tossed together in piles, it is possible some family members may never recover the remains of their loved ones. The four people charged with this crime abused the trust of those who selected them to handle a very personal and private matter. No sentence is too harsh for them.

Judge Greg Mathis became the youngest judge in Michigan's history and was elected a Superior Court Judge for Michigan's 36th District. He has been called upon as a regular contributor to national television programs, including "Larry King Live," "Politically Incorrect," CNN's "Talk Back Live," "Showbiz Tonight" and "Extra" to discuss his opinions on complex issues of the day, such as national security, unique sentencing, affirmative action and celebrity scandals. He also offers his take on high-profile legal cases.