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LANDSCAPE PROFILE

HILLCREST/WEST LAWN

The policeman walked into the office and solemnly announced, "You're under arrest."

There must be some mistake, Hans Bross thought. But he looked out his door and saw his foreman with a camera. He knew it wasn't a mistake, just a practical joke.

His crime? Showing too many pictures of his grandchildren.

It was all to raise money for the American Cancer Society.



Park super Hans Bross.

You have to have a sense of humor to work in a cemetery, Bross says.

Bross had visited his father's grave at Hillcrest Cemetery in Omaha, Neb., for years. As the owner of a landscape business, which he had inherited from his father, he always noticed the poor quality turf and the trees in desperate need of pruning.

When he tired of his business, he answered a blind ad in the local paper, and soon became park superintendent at Hillcrest and West Lawn.

"He (the general manager) asked me if I had any qualms about working in a cemetery," Bross says. "I never had given it any thought. I had a bit of a misgiving that it would be a boring job. But I've been here 11 years and I haven't been bored yet."

The two cemeteries total 185 acres and are divided only in that flat markers are used at Hillcrest, while upright monuments mark graves at West Lawn. A crew of 10 full-time and about five part-time in

the summer maintains both sites.

The biggest challenge? Trees. About 1,500 by Bross's estimate. At one time his crew removed about 40 Austrian pines. A recent wind storm ripped down five trees, including several rare American elms.

Just as a golf course superintendent essentially has every member as boss, a cemetery manager has to answer to every plot owner. And some do complain.

Buffalograss sparks many of the complaints. "It greens up late and turns brown early," he explains, his Paul Newman-blue eyes sparkling. "They think it's a weed. It's scattered. If it were all in one place I could explain it."

The other problem with buffalograss is that the sod can't be saved and replaced after the crew digs a grave. Most of the cemetery is a fungus-resistant blend including Baron, Georgetown, Fylking, and Benson A-34 Kentucky Bluegrass with some fine Manhattan rye. Bross is even growing a small sod field to save on costs of replacements.

When saving the sod, it's easy to pinpoint grub and sod webworm problems. A dose of diazinon or Oftanol usually takes care of it.

Although he's experimented with PGRs around headstones, his crew uses Weedeaters.

Another major concern is staining the stones with fertilizers. After trying several, he settled on slow-release Nitroform-Blue Chip from BFC Chemical or Par-Ex brand.

Only the new sections of the cemetery are irrigated. About 30 acres remain undeveloped, although Bross develops and seeds a new section about every two years, based on plot sales.

Besides his landscape duties, Bross takes care of cremations.

Bross, a member of the Board of Directors of the Nebraska Turfgrass Foundation, says the cemetery industry has a long way to go. "Until this industry starts to recognize that there are professionals out there and will pay accordingly, they're going to have problems," he says.

He'll work for the cause now, but he talks frequently of retiring, taking off in a motor home, and spending winters traveling through the South with his wife Eleanor. Of course they'll always return to Omaha to be near the grandchildren.

Want to see their pictures?—

Heide Aungst