

Loewen Steam-roller

In Ponca City, Oklahoma, Loewen has made a bid to buy a local IOOF Cemetery, currently being run as a nonprofit operation as required by law. The County Commissioners must determine that a sale would not alter the operations before approving such a sale. At a recent meeting, one Loewen attorney was reported as saying: "Let's just talk in the 4th grade vernacular. We are talking about putting dead people in holes in the ground. That's not going to change whether Loewen is doing it or someone else is."

(A survey of a dozen Oklahoma cemeteries, however, shows that prices are, on average, \$1,000 higher at chain-owned cemeteries.)

But there is opposition among the local Ponca City residents—among them, an independent monument dealer, another cemetery operator whose cemetery actually might benefit if Loewen moved in and raised prices, a Hospice social worker, and a woman who reports that Loewen pulled up rose bushes at the Rose Hills Cemetery in California (to reduce maintenance).

One has to wonder how Loewen can promise—as it has in its application—to continue to run the cemetery as a nonprofit operation. Or why anyone would believe such a promise. According to Loewen's Quarterly Report, June 30, 1997: "The Company's cemetery division . . . continued to show strong growth. . . . Profits from cemetery operations rose to \$35.9 million, an increase of 70 per cent. Cemetery operating margins [profit] increased to 33.6 percent, compared to 31.2 per cent for the second quarter of 1996." Does Loewen want to own the IOOF cemetery out of the goodness of its heart?

Such goodness apparently does not extend to obeying the law. In the November 17, 1997 issue of *Funeral Service Insider*: "It's 'pretty much a done deal,' [the Loewen lawyer] predicts, dismissing the opposition. If not, he would advise his client to challenge the law in court or simply pay the \$500 — the only fine for violating the law."

If you don't know who owns the cemeteries in your town, you might want to find out.