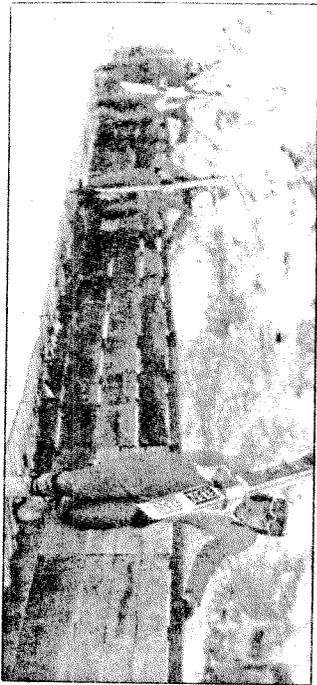


Norwegian ties hill mark in first day of ski jump tourney



LA CROSSE Tribune

NDAY MORNING

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He'll just be a number in Potter's Field

"Taking up the money, the chief priests argued, 'This can not be put into the temple fund; it is blood-money.' So after conferring they used it to buy the Potter's Field, the burial place for strangers." — Matthew 27:6-7

By **RICHARD MIAL**
Of the Tribune staff

After he died at his South Side rooming house on Jan. 28, they buried Ed Decker in Hillview Cemetery, La Crosse's Potter's Field.

Row after row of uniform stone markers line the graveyard. The newer ones are white, the older ones gray. Unless family members or others put up their own marker, there are no names on the graves. Just numbers. That's how they do it if you have no money.

Edwin W. Decker, 54, of 1406 Fifth Ave. S., spent his days and much of his nights wandering around the city looking for money on the streets. He lived

on a government disability check. He hung around coffee shops — particularly Fayze's restaurant and pool hall downtown — smoking Kool menthol filters and keeping to himself, staying out of trouble.

When they get his gravestone up, Decker will be No. 654 at Hillview Cemetery.

That's the part that bothers Terri Mlsna, a 24-year-old waitress at Fayze's. In the two years she has worked at the restaurant, Decker became her favorite customer. She was even planning to buy him his own coffee mug for Valentine's Day, "so he wouldn't have to be like everyone else."

"The number gets me," she said. "Even the veterans that died in the war have a wall with their name on it, even though some of them had to be buried with numbers because they couldn't identify the remains."

"The least you can do is give him his headstone, give him his name. Can feelings be that hard?"

She's written to newspaper columnist and philanthropist Percy Ross, asking him for money to put a headstone on Decker's grave.

"Mr. Ross, you don't know the pain and heartache I go through every time I think of him," she wrote. "He was a loner, but a lovely one at that. He had no one, but yet everyone. I just hope you can help me and all the people that thought greatly of him. All I'm asking for is a small headstone with his name."

Decker was a bulky, lumpy figure as he made his way through the city. In the wintertime he wore a maroon, down jacket that his social worker found for him at the Salvation Army store, and a knit cap on his head.

Even though Mlsna bought him some gloves last year, he walked around with his hands in his pockets. He didn't use the gloves, even though he

See **STREET**, back page



NUMBERED gravestones in Hillview Cemetery's Potter's Field

■ Street person dies

Continued from front page

carried them around in case she asked about them.

"I'd say, 'Ed, where are your gloves? It's cold outside,'" Mlsna said. "He'd pull them out of his pocket and say, 'here they are,' but he never wore them."

The story made her smile. A minute earlier she was crying, dabbing the corner of her eye with a paper napkin from the metal dispenser in the restaurant booth. "How can one person affect you so much?" she said.

His moods varied from day to day.

"Sometimes I felt like I'd have to treat him like a kid," she said. "The next day I'd have to treat him like an uncle. It all depended on his mood. If he was in a good mood, he was goofy."

Whenever she saw him come in the restaurant, she would set up his coffee, silverware and glass of water, and have it waiting for him. He always knew it was his.

"I'd have some coffee set down, and his water, and he'd say, 'I'd like some tea.' I said, 'you're going to drink what I give you

and you're going to like it.' He used to think that was funny."

One of the things that drew her to him was his sobriety. A recovering alcoholic, who had knocked around and even been jailed in his past, he had been sober for some 15 years. That's something Mlsna knows about; she's been sober for two years.

She sees meaning in his cemetery number — 6-5-4 adds up to 15, 15 years without a drink.

"He told me, 'one day I got tired of people getting me drunk and making fun of me. One day I had enough of it.'"

Decker used to say he was sitting in a bar with a half-bottle of Pabst when he quit drinking.

"He was so proud of his sobriety," Mlsna said. "It was the only thing he had. He's been thrown in lots of jails. In Beloit, for being a transient. That's when he was drinking. I tried to get him to call his sister in Beloit, but he wouldn't do it. 'She'd just hang up on me,' he said."

She tried several times to convince him to make the phone call. "I said just let her know how good you're doing. Let her know you're not a nobody. He must have felt he was a nobody."

Mlsna remembered the stories he told, the little jokes. And the songs he sometimes sang — old songs. Obscure songs.

He got a regular government check, but he borrowed money from everyone he knew. Then when his check came, he'd pay it all back. Soon, he'd be short and the borrowing would start all over again.

When it came time to pay his coffee tab at Fayze's, Mlsna said, he would tell her, "My name is crime, and crime don't pay."

But he usually did manage to pay everyone back. "I'm not a bum," he'd say.

Sometimes people would make fun of him, and that made Mlsna angry.

"College kids, mostly," she said. "They'd say, look at the old man. Look at his hat. He had a knit cap and it always stuck up." She smiled.

"It looked funny, but so does purple hair."

Did this happen a lot?

"Not a lot, but enough. It didn't get to the point where I had to start hollering and slapping people and say to get out. Because I would have done that for Ed."

What's the attraction to a man who didn't do anything except wander the streets looking for money?

Rick Harsch, a former Fayze's waiter, said, "What I liked about Ed was that he was just kind of a file of Americana. He'd come up with those songs that nobody'd heard of. He was captivated with Billy the Kid. He had a selective memory, but sometimes it was perfect."

Decker had an elaborate theory about the death of Billy the Kid — not unlike the "Elvis is alive" stories carried in the supermarket tabloids. He believed Sheriff Pat Garrett didn't really shoot Billy, because they were friends. Instead, he shot a Mexican and passed him off for Billy the Kid, while the outlaw went on to seek a new life in anonymity.

Sometimes, when Decker sat down at Fayze's lunch counter, he'd say to Harsch, "Tell the cook Billy the Kid's out here."

Once he told him, "Read the obituaries. You'll find my name there. I'm the living dead. I walk around to save funeral expenses."

Decker had family, in Sparta, Beloit and Mobile, Ala. But no one contacted Hillview about a gravestone.

The county orders the grave markers in bulk. They come pre-numbered.

Asked if it would be that much of an expense to put names on the graves, Lois Walsh of Hillview said, "All that is provided by the county is a numbered stone. That's the way it has always been done."

Mlsna can't afford one herself but she's hoping the newspaper columnist can help.

And she wants people to think more about others.

"Even a nobody is somebody to someone," she said.

LOTTERIES

Here are the winning numbers picked Saturday in the Illinois, Michigan and Iowa lottery games:

Illinois

5-19-21-34-49-50

Estimated Lotto grand prize pool: \$6 million.

Michigan

5-16-22-23-33-39

Iowa

1-5-6-21-22-34

Estimated grand prize pool: \$1.3 million.

Lotto America

3-7-19-35-40-45

Estimated Lotto America grand prize pool: \$13 million.