

VCF CEMETARIES RP 3/2/92 p.1

Castroville turns out for 'reburial ceremony'

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The day the community was invited to participate in a reburial ceremony for 38 people whose remains were unearthed last November in a forgotten Castroville cemetery, Andy Ausonio finished a project close to his heart.

Ausonio, the principal host for the Saturday morning event, remained at the Castroville Community Center long after the more than 100 guests had left.

He paused as he loaded the last of the artifacts found in the graves in the trunk of his Mercedes-Benz.

"It's either worth nothing or its worth a fortune," he cracked before shutting the lid.

During the ceremony at Castroville District Cemetery in Moss Landing, religious leaders and historians made presentations and each person placed a carnation in the communal grave where the scant vestiges of the deceased were put to rest in wooden boxes a foot wide and eight inches high — more than a century after they were first buried.

The site, near the entrance facing Moss Landing Road and Highway 1, was donated by the cemetery district.

At the reception following the ceremony, cookies called Beans of the Dead and Mexican "bread of the dead" were served.

Later, Ausonio, in character, moved abruptly about and with efficient commands saw to the rapid disassembling of the display case containing baby-shoe soles, buttons, coffin nails, pot metal coffin trim, religious medallions, and — the jewel of the collection — round glass earrings perhaps 150 years old.

For a few silent moments he perched on a corner of the sawhorse holding up the exhibit, while gingerly placing the orbs in a small jar.

Castroville historian Denzil Verardo said those earrings, hand blown in Venice during the middle 1850s, are among only a



Kurt Ellison

The Rev. Tom Hudson says a prayer during Saturday's ceremony.

handful recovered in the state. That this set was intact was a lucky break.

The artifacts will be housed in the Merritt Street office of the Castroville Chamber of Commerce. When the Castroville Historical Society, founded nearly a year and a half ago, acquires an office, the display will be moved there.

To Ausonio, whose Castroville Industrial Park land yielded the graveyard authorities pinpoint to 1840-1869, the earrings repre-

sent a clue to the character of the person who wore them.

"Somebody with class was buried there," he said.

The mystery of the identities of the individuals, believed to be working people, was buried with them: No one has found any records of a cemetery at the site, just off Blackie Road.

During California's early days, the road, then called Blackie Trail, was the main thorough-

See BURIAL page 9 ►

VCF CEMETARIES RP 3/2/92 p.9

BURIAL

► From Page 1
It was between Monterey and San Juan Bautista, the only two towns in the area — and the only places with graveyards, supposedly.

Cattle, the hides of which were called "California banknotes," were the primary industry in the area from the late 1820s to the 1850s, the period when the deceased lived, Verardo said.

It wasn't until 1869 that a cemetery was established in Moss Landing, with land donated by Juan B. Castro, founder of Castroville. He, too, is buried next to the road, north of the communal grave.

Ausonio's crews were digging ground for an annex to Hillside Coffee on Industrial Parkway when a skull rolled down a dirt mound, startling a construction worker. For the next two weeks, two of Ausonio's workers devoted full time to the excavation, supervised by the Monterey County coroner.

Some of the skeletal fragments were in partially intact redwood coffins. Others were loose in the dirt knoll.

Ausonio estimates his out-of-pocket expenses for the project at \$3,800, not counting community contributions of flowers, food and the gravesite.

He even hit up Hillside Coffee for a java donation for Saturday's reception.

The grave matter also made its way to Superior Court, where Ausonio was granted permission to re-inter the remains.

A civic leader and building contractor, whose personal collection of local historical artifacts is probably unmatched in Castroville, Ausonio wasn't about to dismiss this find lightly.

"I couldn't just drop them in a hole and forget about them," he said.

This project brought many of his hobbies together. His interests include archaeology and photography, and he documented every step of the project on film. Photographs, correspondence, maps and other materials are compiled in scrapbooks.

The only soul in sight on the cemetery grounds nearly two hours after the ceremony, Ausonio aimed his camera at the newly covered grave that soon will be bear a plaque marking its contents.

"This will be the last picture in the book," he declared, his finger pushing the button.