

# A Memorial Day visit to historic Santa Cruz Evergreen Cemetery

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SANTA CRUZ — Avid armchair sports fans will be glued to TV sets over the Memorial Day weekend for traditional holiday viewing of the Indianapolis 500, basketball, golf and other games.

Sun worshippers and beer drinkers will crowd the beaches.

Parties will linger into the morning hours.

Police will stand ready for the usual Memorial Day disturbances.

But, across cemeteries throughout the land, a more quiet and somber spectacle takes place as friends and family pay their respects to past lives and honor memories of days gone by.

In fast-paced America, most don't take the time anymore to visit the graves of relatives, not even on Memorial Day. Many young people don't even know where their ancestors are buried.

However, some tombstones will be graced by flowers over the holiday.

Others will be touched only by the kiss of the wind.

On a visit to any cemetery, it's hard to ignore the spirits of the past.

It's almost impossible at the historic Santa Cruz Evergreen Cemetery, where the huge tombstones rise steeply from the shady ground and beckon the visitor to take a mental, backwards voyage through time.

The inscriptions on the grave markers are from a bygone era — strong phrases like, "A noble man lives here," and syrupy, 19th-Century poems, like:

*"Sweet is the slumber beneath the sod while the pure spirit rests with God."*

Forget-me-nots spread their electric



Pete Amos/Sentinel

## Student Glen Marshall at cemetery.

blue flowers across the graveyard. Ivy creeps to the brick path and crawls up tall redwoods.

Blackberry bushes sing with the hum of bees. The air is alive with the chatter of Stellars jays.

Not everyone comes to pay their respects. The other day, someone left a pair of jeans and empty box of crackers at the gravesites.

Here is buried the remains of the Arcan family, 49ers pioneers who survived a grueling wagon-train trek across Death Valley.

Julia Arcan died in 1850 at the age of 19 days. Hers is the oldest known recorded

burial at Evergreen.

Some of the Death Valley pioneers were living skeletons by the time they reached the other side of the notorious desert — those that did make it.

Some lost 100 pounds on the death-defying journey.

They wrapped their blistered feet in rawhide, and did the same for their starving, bony oxen — at least for the animals that were not eaten along the way.

Charles Arcan was only a toddler, coming across sunscorched Death Valley.

He came down with a fever and almost joined others in the shallow, sandy graves of Death Valley, but survived.

He too is buried at Evergreen, along with his mother and father, Jean Baptiste and Abigail Harriett.

The eight acres of Evergreen Cemetery itself has fallen on some hard times.

Located near Harvey West Park, almost all the 20-by-20-foot plots had been sold by the 1930s for \$8 to \$22.

In 1922, the plot owners formed the Evergreen Cemetery Association, but there was little money then or now for upkeep.

As the cemetery fell on harder times and overgrowth and vandalism threatened it, volunteers in 1974 formed a group called Help Evergreen Live Permanently (HELP).

HELP members are dedicated to maintaining the grounds, researching the histories of the more than 2,000 pioneers buried there and trying to involve the community in weaving together the threads of Santa Cruz's historical tapestry.

La Salle Batchelder, now in her 90s, is president of the Cemetery Association, but has asked for others to take over the job of maintenance and answering questions from the public.

Renie Leaman, the founder and director of HELP, is a busy restaurateur and is pleading for volunteers and contributions to mow the lawns and take flowers.

Adds Leaman, "If you can't put flowers on your own relatives' graves, be a foster family this year."

The cemetery budget needs \$3,000 to \$7,500 per year to pay a groundskeeper, said Leaman.

"I think people feel cemeteries are always taken care of, but they're not," she says.

Recently, the Aptos High School students and the youth group at Twin Lakes Baptist Church spent a clean-up day in Evergreen.

HELP volunteers give historical tours in the cemetery. School children learn about the lives of the pioneers, make gravestone rubbings, and ask many, many questions.

The children invariably want to know if it's all right to step on the graves.

Says Leaman: "I always tell them, it doesn't matter where you walk. These people died a long time ago. Your walking on a memory. Just be gentle with our memories."



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Students Matty Colletta, Adam Caplain and Chris Peterson at cemetery.