

'Their gentle sleep'

Aging pet cemetery sparks a sentimental curiosity



Tina Baine/Sentinel

Many of the animals' graves have fallen victim to neglect and disrepair.

Visitors are few, but the memories remain

✓ Cemeteries

SCOTTS VALLEY

ON A RECENT spring day, the wind moved through high grass and weeds covering Pine Knoll pet cemetery. It ruffled bunches of fake flowers near wood headstones shaped like cats and Scotty dogs.

A rubber monster squeeze toy lay on its side near a dog's grave. The toy's paint was cracking and gray.

The graveyard was quiet and deserted, with very few signs of recent visitors, but it wasn't always this way. Not long ago, area residents often buried everything from Manx cats to budgies and Dobermans here. Pine Hill funerals were somber, complete with bowed heads, appropriate prayers and handfuls of earth. A few pets were even lucky enough to get their own dog and kitty caskets.

But time turned the tide on Pine Knoll, where some of the grass grows six feet high. Many old graves are hidden under grass and mud.

Please see PET—A12



Carolyn Swift collection

Tiny markers dot the graves of dead dogs in earlier days. Few of the markers remain.

STORY BY DAN WHITE

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Pet cemetery

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Funerals still happen now and then. Just last month, a family buried a beloved cat. But the SPCA-owned cemetery is no longer selling plots because Pine Knoll is officially full, and has been for eight years. Many owners of pets buried here in the 58-year-old cemetery are dead or have moved away.

Forgotten pet graves are no great tragedy in the scheme of things, especially considering that countless dogs and cats either lie in mass unknown "graves," end up incinerated or even converted into fertilizer. Still, there's something melancholy about synthetic tulips and unread epitaphs. The only sign of recent visitation was a bundle of real flowers, splayed on top of a marble plaque last Friday.

The cemetery occupies most of a shaggy hill overlooking Sims Road, an unassuming country drive that feeds into Graham Hill, a popular commuting route between Santa Cruz and Felton. From the road, the cemetery looks like nothing much. Travelers are given no incentive to stop and look, especially considering that many cars speed along here, and there is zero street parking.

People intent on seeing Pine Knoll have no choice but pull into the narrow driveway leading through the cemetery, between two brick pillars, one of them bearing the message: "Tread gently, passer-by. Disturb not their gentle sleep."

The graves spark curiosity. Reading one epitaph is not enough. Markers here almost always contain more detailed and telling messages than the ones found on human tombs. The words are sentimental. Many are syrupy. But the messages seem heartfelt.

A heartbroken cat owner painted white lettering on a wooden placard shaped like a headstone: "The same force formed this kitten that fashioned man and king. The God of the whole gave a spark of soul to each furred and feathered thing."

The messages continue.

"Digger P. Kiefer, May 1976 to Oct. 23, 1989. The only dog I ever saw who barked with a ball in his mouth."

"We trespassed together," reads another.

A look at a granite slab hidden beneath mud and ferns reveals the words: "We miss you, Trigger Grisom." Another headstone has a bas relief sculpture of a rodent-faced dog named Sandy, who lived from 1946 to 1960. "Loyal and considerate, he loved all life," the master wrote. "He defended the weak re-



Tina Baine/Sentinel

Susie's grave is one of the few that remain tended.

gardless of species. We lived in the same house. He was one of us."

The funeral of George the cockapoo was typical of Pine Knoll memorial services. George's family, the Pedersens, told the Sentinel in 1986 that just burying him in the back yard wouldn't have been enough. "It gives me a nice feeling to know he is here with other dogs," Sonja Pedersen said at the time.

Someone carved a wooden crucifix with the cockapoo's name. The family planted pansies and placed bright yellow potted chrysanthemums in the dirt. Family members shared a moment of silence as a friend's Doberman sniffed the grave.

Such scenes are rare now, and memories of the pets are fading.

Many grave markers were made of wood that has decayed or broken long ago. Dozens of messages are now unreadable. The cemetery is in serious need of weed and grass trimming. Karla Koebernick, director of community relations for the SPCA, said the organization's budget for such work is about \$50 a month. SPCA contracts with a landscaping company to do the work.

"We keep up with it as best we can," she said. The SPCA has major fall and spring cleanups every year, she said. "Since El Nino we haven't had a dry time to clean up but we will be sending someone up to do that."

Sometimes people with pets buried there get motivated to do clean-up work but it soon gets overgrown again, said Ron Graves, a Capitola city councilman who knows the cemetery well.

As a youth, he spent long hours cleaning the grounds. He also cut out little dog and cat shaped grave markers and put them up on the steep Pine Knoll hill. Graves did this work for his grandfather, Charles "Doc" Graves, the cemetery's founder and a veterinarian who served local clients for 42 years.

"Doc" Graves got the cemetery land in exchange for veterinary work.

"It was payment for years of service of handling somebody's cattle, sheep, hogs, horses or whatever it was," Ron Graves said.

Ron Graves remembers burying birds in little cigar boxes at Pine Knoll. He recalls that many other animals had no caskets, and were lowered straight into the ground.

Help with the loss of a pet

By DAN WHITE

Sentinel staff writer

BEREAVED PET owners have all kinds of on-line options when it comes to pet grieving and animal memorials. "If you wish to immortalize your beloved pet in the tombs of cyber-space for eternity, now is your chance," beckons an Internet message.

Pet Loss Resources (<http://www.foreverpets.com/FP-Petloss.html>) offers personal web pages for owners, allowing them to submit such poems as "Thought I Saw My Dog Today."

The Internet also offers a death, dying and grief guide, as well as "The Rainbows Bridge," which allows people to create a virtual memorial for the pet. The service is described as a "gateway for your pet until the day comes when you meet again and cross the Rainbows

Bridge together."

At this web site, someone wrote an ode to a dog: "Here lies Blackie, chased a car. Caught in the muffler. Dragged through the tar."

A virtual pet cemetery (<http://www.lava-mind.com/pet.html>) features realistic-looking headstones on the home page, and assorted portraits of animals that have passed away, including the unfortunate Herry I Sven the hamster.

It also lists a few pet owner confessions, including a bizarre essay about a dead desert tortoise, accidentally buried alive by its owner.

The Internet also offers grief support groups, although local residents who would like a more personal touch can join the support group sponsored by Santa Cruz SPCA.

For more information, call 475-6454.

"Some of the same plots were used over and over," he said.

The cemetery isn't big, but needed constant care, and was too much work for Charles Graves. After retiring as a veterinarian, he donated the land to the SPCA, specifying that it stay a pet cemetery forever or else it would revert back to the Graves family. But Ron Graves said he's never verified this by looking at county records.

Now that "Doc" Graves' former pet project is selling no more plots, options are limited for pet owners. The nearest active animal graveyard is Monterey Bay Memorial Pet Cemetery in Prunedale, which is 20 percent full and is taking in animals from San Francisco all the way down to Big Sur.

"We get referrals from all over," said owner Gary Evans, now in the process of selling it.

Other local options are distinctly unpoetic. Chanticleer Veterinary Hospital in Santa Cruz has a crematorium. Owners can bring animal remains to the SPCA, which has arranged to have a fertilizer manufacturing company pick them up every other week.

But Graves thinks Pine Knoll should be a viable alternative. "There is a lot of room there," he said.

For the time being, however, the world of Major, Fluffy, Chibaba, Elvis, Ringo and Dukey Boy is closed to all newcomers except those who bought in long ago.

Graves said he would put some effort into sprucing up the place if that would help bring new life to the cemetery. "I'm sure people are

as fond of their animals now as they used to be," he said. "It's a better alternative than the dump. I'd certainly donate a day to get it back in shape again."