

Quake funds rescue history

Santa Cruz's premier stone carver in the 1890s, John H. Bilodeau, takes the family for a ride in photo from "Santa Cruz County," a historical book by Margaret Koch. With him, from left, are daughters Edna and Grace, mother-in-law Albertina Labish Blanchard, and his wife. Below, Santa Cruz Historical Trust workers at the Evergreen Cemetery begin task of restoring headstone damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake.



Cemetery tells tales

By Paul Rogers
Mercury News Staff Writer

A historic Santa Cruz cemetery vibrant with legends of mountain explorers, fiery frontier judges and Civil War infantrymen but languishing after years of neglect is being resurrected with the help of federal earthquake relief funds.

Established in 1850 and believed to be among the oldest pioneer grave sites in California, Evergreen Cemetery near Harvey West Park lost 34 ornately carved headstones during the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Many of the damaged marble monuments shifted off their bases or toppled altogether and cracked.

\$75,000 grant

Preservationists from the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust recently received a \$75,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to fix them.

"In our world today, everybody is so transient," said Peggy Coats, executive director of the Trust. "Preserving a sense of history and roots is important."

As she spoke, Watsonville craftsman Alejandro Reyes ran a metal rod through three pieces of broken marble that mark the resting place of Eben Bennett.

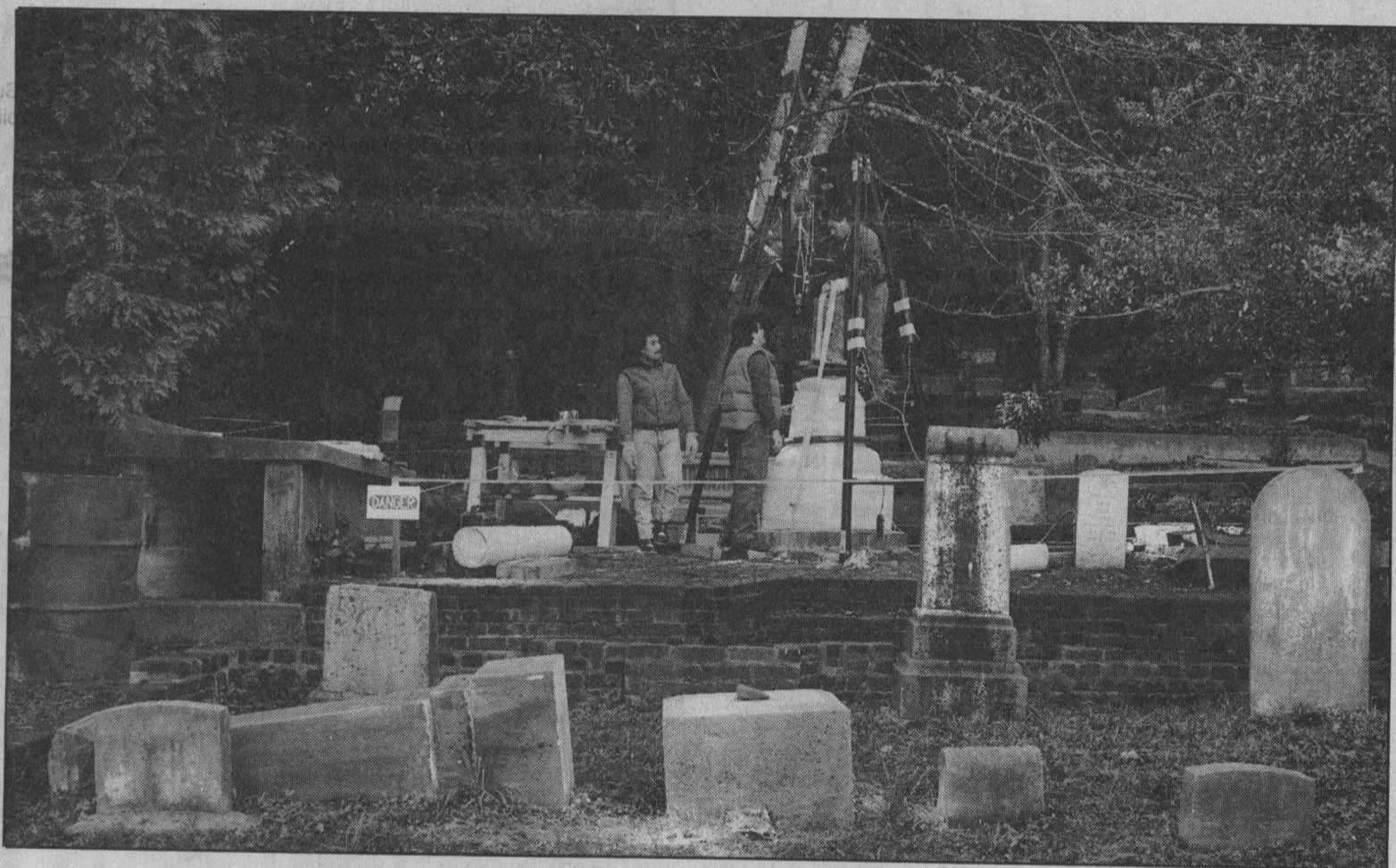
Road builder

Bennett died in 1879. A New York native who arrived in Santa Cruz in 1866, he and his brother operated limekilns above Fall Creek in Felton and later built one of the first roads linking Santa Cruz proper and the mountains.

"Some of the stones have little angels and flowers," said Reyes, who has restored chapels, paintings and statues from Carmel to Ecuador. "What they make now are ugly. Nothing like this."

Reyes designed a four-ton hoist to lift the monuments while his crews retrofit and cement them back together. He spends about two weeks on each one.

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Cheryl Nuss — Mercury News

Quake grant to revive cemetery

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By March, he will supervise volunteers in the more delicate work: peeling off a century of lichens with ultrasonic tools, scrubbing stones and patching hairline cracks. The entire project is expected to take a year to complete.

Other than a handful of caretakers and descendants of prominent founders, no one has been buried in Evergreen since the 1940s. As a result, a thick carpet of English ivy covers much of the grounds and gnarled bay trees grow over broken bricks.

For Coats and other local historians, the 8-acre cemetery provides a fascinating glimpse into California's past. Its worn headstones record early Santa Cruz County citizens whose names have become local landmarks.

There is Isaac Graham, a swaggering mountain adventurer for whom Graham Hill Road is named; Loudon Nelson, a former slave who left in his will money for an early school and whose name now graces the downtown community center; Judge William Blackburn, a former business partner of Capt. Thomas Fallon who was known for sentencing 19th century ruffians to public horse-whippings.

And so on: Cooper of Cooper House, Scott of Scott's Valley, and unheralded coast residents like Abigail Arcan, a frontier Santa Cruzan who traveled across a sweltering southern desert by wagon in 1849 and afterward named it "Death Valley."

"The stories out here really make it what it is," said volunteer Mary Wood. "I don't even think of it as a cemetery — it's a museum."

One of the headstones Reyes is repairing belongs to John Bilodeau, who was renowned as Santa Cruz's premier stone carver in the 1890s.

"They say you can tell the headstones he carved because he squared off the tops of his A's," said Wood.

FEMA's \$75,000 won't begin to fund repairs on hundreds of other burial plots damaged over the years by vandalism and the elements. But historians hope the renovation project will spark renewed community interest and attract volunteers to spruce up landscaping and other gravestones.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Santa Cruz Historical Trust needs volunteers to work on restoration and as docents at Evergreen. Volunteers will be trained. For more information, call (408) 425-3499.