

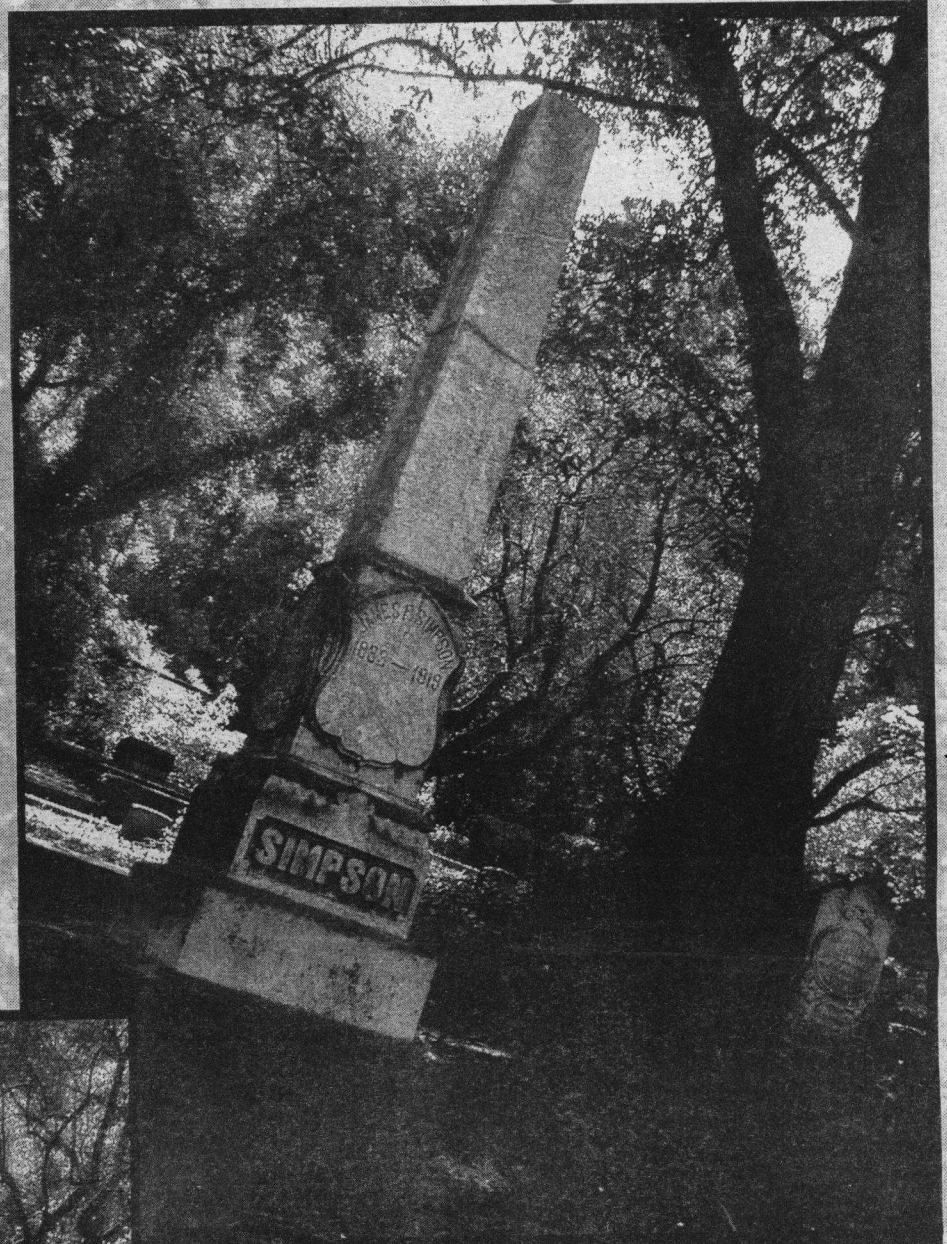
NO REST FOR THE WEARY, ERR, DEAD

THE EVERGREEN CEMETERY IS ALIVE AND KICKING

BY BRUCE WILLEY • PHOTOS BY KIMBERLY WILD

Cemeteries

GT 5-24-01



Evergreen Cemetery docents Dee Kraft and Joan Nelson.

Dressed in a flowing 19th century period costume, Joan Nelson, a docent at the Evergreen Cemetery, arrived early one morning and sat down under a tree amongst the headstones. In less than half an hour, a group of fourth graders circled around her, thoroughly engrossed in the historical stories about the people under their feet. But for now, it was quiet except for a chorus of songbirds, the sun not high enough to penetrate the thick foliage and tall trees. Suddenly, a homeless man — the cemetery having providing a secluded night's rest — emerged from the forest above and caught sight of Nelson. "Oh God!" he yelped, and took off running as fast as he could.

After more than 10 years serving as docents in the cemetery, that's the only ghost story Joan Nelson and her husband Robert, will 'fess up to.

"We have residents here who are very much alive," Joan said with a laugh.

However, the couple, who've been married for 44 years, don't need whoping ghost stories to keep their interest in the cemetery going strong. They know enough about the living lives of the underground inhabitants at the cemetery (more than 2,000) to make PBS historical documentarian Ken Burns go absolutely Pavlov.

Officially incorporated in 1856, the cemetery is one of the oldest in California. Joan and Robert pointed out grave markers, most of them familiar now only as street signs or buildings — some of which have also met their demise. The Coopers, the Bartletts, Isaac Graham, Loudon (or London, if you prefer) Nelson all rest under the droopy trees, untrimmed wildflowers and buoyant weeds.

"It encompasses a lot of Santa Cruz history by telling the stories here," said Joan. "It embodies the community, as far as what the early pioneers did to support each other here, and embodies the diversity of Santa Cruz, which is much like it is today."

Over in the Grand Army of the Republic section of the cemetery Robert, wears a blue Civil War officer's hat that his wife won't let him wear around the house.

"Most of the Union soldiers in here were not high rollers," he said. "These are people much like some veterans of the Vietnam War that we have here, people who found themselves on the streets. They had alcohol and drug dependencies. There are three suicides, a murder and a couple of violent deaths. This place is loaded with stories. You can go on and on."

Walking up the hill, a cool breeze can usually be felt blowing down. In seconds, a cemetery visitor can go from Live Oak scrub to deep redwood forest, which houses the grand Heath Plot. The Heaths started the Santa Cruz Art League, and Joan has poured over their pictures and archives. In fact, Robert and Joan have spent many hours researching the names under most of the graves, twisting reel after reel of microfilm and old newsprint to find their stories.

"They were a beautiful couple. You see them and they were absolutely gorgeous. You can just see a love story," said Joan.

According to the Nelsons, the 7.5 acres of consecrated land was literally rotting away until Rene Leaman and Margaret Koch came out to the cemetery and turned it over to the historical trust. Countless hours of hard work clearing the site later, the land was turned over to the Museum of Art and History in the mid-'80s, and has become an important outdoor component to the museum.

Now, the cemetery is entirely managed by volunteers, including the understaffed crew of four docents. And in a strange twist of constituting history, a fraternity of bearded men in red shirts show up from time to time to paint the fences, repair headstones and work for beer. But the graveyard is in safe hands;

the E Clampus Vitus, or "Clampers" for short, was founded back in the Gold Rush days when most of the stagnant residents of the cemetery were still alive. Its members have been spoofing the lodges, Masons and other secret societies since its inception, although they are collectively soft-hearted when it comes to orphans and widows. One of the "cases" the Clampers took on was an 1890's Santa Cruz prostitute named Marie Holms. They hired a surveyor to locate her grave exactly, rebuilt her headstones and laid some fancy bricks over the site.

"She used to work Pacific Avenue," Joan said. "One day she shared with her fellow 'sisters' that she was terribly unhappy with her profession. She had a child somewhere that she missed. One day, she took out a bottle of carbolic acid and drank it and died in the street. Several years later, her daughter tried to find her and did come to Santa Cruz. She wrote a letter home to her grandmother who had brought her up."

In the shade of an oak tree that likely would have been a seedling when the grieving brought their loved ones to be buried, Joan read the letter.

"My dear grandmother: Today I found where Mama died. It was here in Santa Cruz and she must have been so unhappy for the newspaper said she died by her own hand. Oh, God, it was terrible."

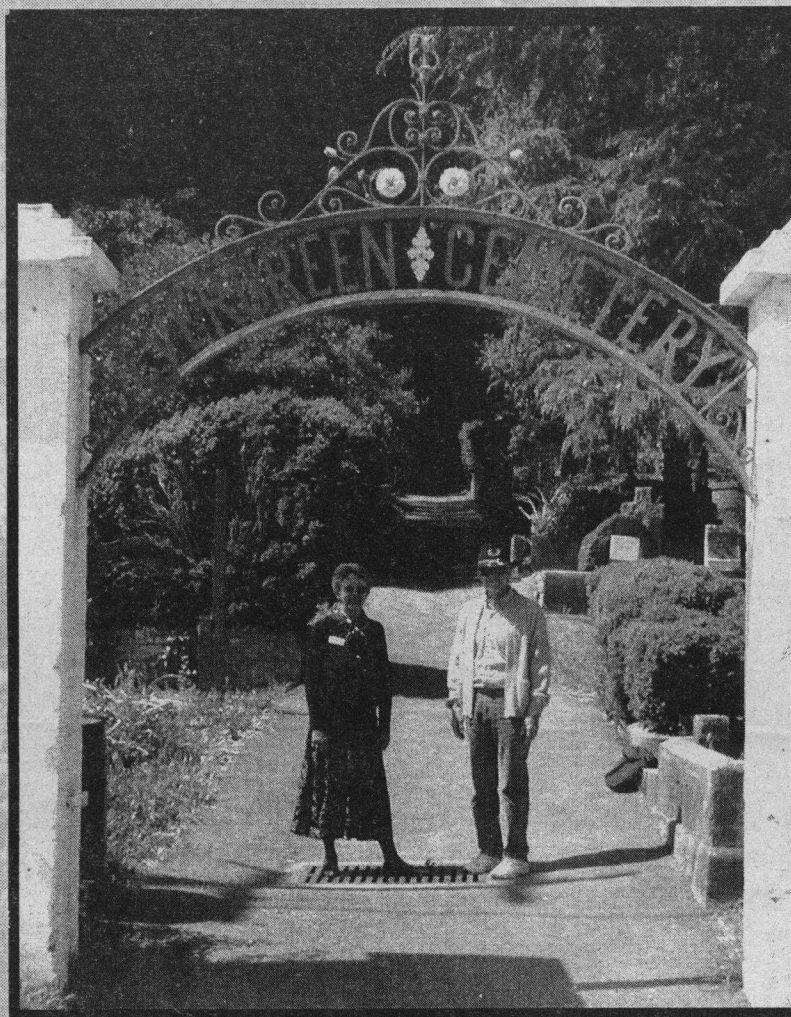
Joan stopped and looked up the hill at gravestone. "I can never do this without crying," she said, and continued with a faltering voice.

"When she was in Santa Cruz, she was called Marie Holms. They buried her at the Evergreen Cemetery, and it is a beautiful place, tucked at the bottom of a small mountain. And so, it is over for us, Grandmother. It is finally over."

But history in the cemetery is never over. It tumbles helter-skelter, growing just like the abundant weeds and cracking stones. Today there is a gaggle of fourth graders carousing through the graveyard.

Dressed in a white bustling school-marm dress, longtime docent Rene Leaman had just finished her lecture and turned the children loose after explaining how to make gravestone rubbings with chalk and paper. Big sheets of paper in hand, the children looked like they were carrying ghosts in their tiny fists. A little girl ran to catch up with friends and accidentally let go of her grave rubbing. It gently floated in the wind before softly touching the ground.

Evergreen Cemetery tours are held once a month. At 10 a.m. Monday, May 28, there will be a "Decoration Day As It Was," a Memorial Day celebration. Senator Bruce McPherson and Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice will dedicate two new headstones, followed by a Civil War tour. The event is free. Wear comfortable shoes. Info: 429-1964.



Longtime docents and history experts, Joan & Robert Nelson, stand at the gates.

Louden Nelson, A Community Hero

Though Evergreen Cemetery holds the graves of many politicians and businessmen, it is also the final resting place of Loudon Nelson, a legendary figure who gave a vital gift to the emerging Santa Cruz community. A former slave from the Carolinas, Nelson emigrated to California with his master and evidently gained his freedom in the gold fields in 1853. He settled in Santa Cruz, making his home where the post office now resides, and became quite well known, selling his home-grown produce and cobbling shoes.

Nelson took his surname from that of his master, but his given name remains a point of contention among Cruzans. Some say it was originally "London," owing to his master's predilection for naming his slaves after English cities, and that he changed it to "Louden" after he gained his

freedom. Some hold that "Louden" is South London dialect for the city's name, and some maintain that it was always "London," and that Nelson's "name change" was a simple handwriting error by an anonymous hand (since Nelson was illiterate, he never signed his own name).

From his home by the river, Nelson could look up the hill and see the newly-formed and impoverished Mission Hill School, and no doubt wished to help the children of pioneers receive the education he never had. So, after his death on May 17, 1860, he left his hard-earned estate to the school district, which then bought much-needed land (still owned by the district). His legacy of generosity and diversity is honored today by the Loudon Nelson Community Center, and his headstone reads, "He was a colored man. He left his entire fortune to Santa Cruz School District Number One."

— Melissa Newt