

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

HOW A LIVELY BUNCH OF POST-MODERN GRAVE-DIGGERS BRING THE DEAD BACK TO LIFE

BY BRUCE WILLEY

Cemeteries

GT 10.30.03

✓ Show me your cemeteries, and I will tell you what kind of people you have. —Benjamin Franklin

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's satirical short story "Bobok," the protagonist, Ivan Ivanovich, sits on a grave after attending a funeral. "I sat down on a tombstone and gave myself up to appropriate reflections," Ivanovich says. Soon, though, he starts to hear the dead talk—they contemplate their own underground fate. The more decomposed characters have little vocabulary. One deceased in particular mutters "bobok, bobok" (bean in Russian) over and over again, "... a spark of life that still glimmers faintly."

It was with this story in mind that I decided to give myself up to "appropriate reflections" in some of Santa Cruz County's oldest and finest cemeteries, and see if I, too, could hear any of the stories they had to tell. But to hear the stories, I needed someone to tell them; people alive and kicking; people who would have a deep grasp of history and a love of old cemeteries, which, I discovered, go hand in hand.

Repose in Pace

There are more than 15 old cemeteries in the county, but perhaps the best known is Evergreen Cemetery. Set up against a hill overlooking Harvey West Park, Evergreen is one of the first Protestant burial grounds in California. Established in 1850, many Santa Cruz notables are buried here: London Nelson, a former slave who left his estate to the Santa Cruz City School District; Mary Case, the county's first school teacher; Judge William Blackburn, a wealthy landowner and judge who made his fortune selling potatoes to '49ers; and many others. In conjunction with the Museum of Art & History, which oversees the historic cemetery, Evergreen offers thematic tours one Saturday morning each month, April through October. One Saturday, I haul myself out of a deep slumber to attend.

The wrought iron entrance of the cemetery is the gathering ground for more than a dozen

"The whole point of the tombstone was to teach, to ponder death and life, and show you that life was always fleeting. The Victorians were obsessed with death because life was dangerous. There was poison in the wallpaper, broilers exploded in the kitchen, you could cut yourself and die from infection. And you were lucky if three out of four of your children survived. So they created these cemeteries to comfort themselves, to make them feel a little more at peace with their own great losses."

—Rachel Torrey, cemetery docent.

people who've arrived here today to hear "Tales from the Tomb: Victorian Mourning Culture and Funerary Art." Docents Rachel Torrey, Renie Leaman and Sandra Fontes are all dressed to the nines, or more perfectly, all-black 19th century mourning garb. They have made their own costumes by hand, costumes that reflect the social customs of bereavement that required women to wear black dresses made of crepe cloth, black buttons and veils for up to 18 months. (Men, however, could don a black hat and arm bands for three months before they could, and were expected to, re-marry and sire children.) It's slightly disconcerting amongst all the modern, frumpy attire we cemetery tourists wear. It's as if they have risen from the grave to tell their tales.

Torrey sports a dash of lavender ribbon on her bonnet and wears clothing that, back in the day, would suggest she is in her second year of mourning a child or husband. She tells us the history of the cemeteries.

Before the 1800s, cemeteries as we know them today did not exist. Mass graves were the *de rigueur*, and were filthy, stench-ridden, disease-propagating places to be avoided. In 1665, the English Parliament, along with many European countries, suspected that these atrocious burial customs played a role in spreading the black plague, which killed, at its peak, untold millions of people. Parliament prohibited relatives from searching out their deceased kin, and required graves to be dug six feet down. Enter Napoleon, a general menace to most, but the funerary father of modern burial practices. In 1804, Napoleon commissioned a famous architect to design a park-like atmosphere to properly bury the dead, a serene

place where the public could pay their respects and not feel threatened by their dead loved ones. The outcome was, and still is, Père Lachaise in the heart of Paris, one of the world's most famous and most visited cemeteries. There you can find the graves of Stravinsky, Proust, Balzac, Apollinaire, Chopin, Edith Piaf, Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, Jim Morrison. The list goes on ...

Torrey says she's been there, and many other cemeteries around the world. Her interest in these homes for the dead began at an early age, fostered by her and her grandmother's frequent visits to cemeteries and a few friends who met an early demise.

"I like to see how other people deal with their outward expression of sorrow, but also an appreciation for life," she says after showing the group how to make grave rubbings, a process

of making an image of the gravestone by rubbing a crayon on paper over the stone.

"The whole point of the tombstone was to teach, to ponder death and life, and show you that life was always fleeting," she continues. "The Victorians were obsessed with death because life was dangerous. There was poison in the wallpaper, broilers exploded in the kitchen, you could cut yourself and die from infection. And you were lucky if three out of four of your children survived. So they created these cemeteries to comfort themselves, to make them feel a little more at peace with their own great losses."

I catch up with Renie Leaman as she walks alone down a path in the cemetery. In 1968, Leaman was motivated to save the cemetery after she read a *Santa Cruz Sentinel* op-ed piece about the cemetery titled "Doesn't Anyone Care?" by Santa Cruz historian Margaret Koch. A local history group gave Leaman \$100 and told her to go do something. Do something she did. She formed Help Evergreen Live Permanently (HELP) and rallied the National Guard, Boy, Girl and Cub Scouts, and people who had family at the Evergreen, to clear the brushy years of neglect and reconstruct some of the crumbling tombstones. I ask Leaman to show me her favorite plot and she gets flustered, like a child with too many colors of crayons to choose from. Eventually, we arrive at the plot of Mary Reed whose tombstone reads: "Drowned. February 11, 1898."

"They were living down at the beach," Leaman says, "and she and her mother were getting mussels off the rocks and she said, 'Look what I got mama' ... A wave came in and swept her away. It decimated the family. We don't know what happened to the family after that; we don't know where they went. She's an orphan here."

Leaman and I walk further down the path, the squawking of scrub jays in the trees breaking the otherwise peaceful milieu above us. The strains of AC/DC's "Hells Bells" wafts in from the park below where a baseball game is in full swing.

We come upon the plot of Marie Holms (not her real name), a Santa Cruz prostitute who killed herself when she was only 21 after swallowing carbolic acid on Pacific Avenue. Born in England in 1877, she had a daughter who later searched for her and eventually came to the

pauper's corner of the Evergreen Cemetery where her mother was buried. The daughter wrote to her grandmother: "Today I found where Mama died. It was here in Santa Cruz ... and she must have been so unhappy, for the newspaper said that she died by her own hand ... Oh God ... it was so horrible ... while here she was called Marie Holmes ... they buried her at Evergreen Cemetery and it is such a lovely place, tucked into the bottom of a small mountain ... and it is over for us, Grandmother, it is finally over ..."

Leaman leads me over to another misfortune: Ada Guab. She was a young small pox victim whose father and uncle built a coffin, buried her and performed the last rites because nobody wanted to be exposed to Ada, even in death.

Leaman describes herself as a cemetery nut. Still, sinking into these stories too much could prove emotionally trying. Moments later, she hightails it out of these extremely sad tales and heads toward the warmth of sunlight filtering in between the large stately oaks. I follow her lead.

Moments later, she hightails it out of these extremely sad tales and heads toward the warmth of sunlight filtering in between the large stately oaks. I follow her lead.

*May the one who has peace
take you in his arms
and give you peace*

As its name suggests, the Home of Peace (Beit Shalom), a Jewish cemetery on the West

Side of Santa Cruz, is one of the most beautiful, best-kept, peaceful cemeteries on the tour. A stately palm tree stands smack dab in the middle and the whole graveyard is ringed with towering eucalyptus. Arnie Levine, dressed up in a suit and tie with a black yarmulke nesting on his shiny head, walks the grounds. Levine, along with his wife Estelle, took care of the cemetery for 28 years beginning in 1968.

Levine shows me some of the graves—the Habers', who owned the Haber Furniture store on Front Street; the parents of baseball Hall-of-Famer Sandy Koufax. Then he chants the kaddish in Hebrew, a prayer sung at funerals. It's beautiful, soothing music, and when he is finished Levine translates the last verse: "May the one who has peace take you in his arms and give you peace."

Later, Levine adds: "One of the main tenets of Judaism is remembering the dead; that as

long as you remember, they too shall live." Part of this remembering involves small stones and pebbles that are left on top of the tombstone with each visit.

The cemetery's history is interesting. In 1877, the small Jewish community held a fundraiser to buy the property from Moses A. Meder, a Mormon. Meder sold the property for \$100 with one stipulation: That he and his family be buried there. As the story goes, Meder wanted to be buried in a Jewish cemetery because the devil wouldn't think to look for him there. The Meder plot, with his wife and family members, is in the back of the cemetery. But from the looks of things, Moses didn't make it into the ground. Levine speculates that he may have instead been buried at the Evergreen Cemetery over the hill.

Levine stands by his own future plot, which he and his wife purchased more than 20 years ago. "A place with a view," Levine muses, and winks.

Gone But Not Forgotten

It's time to face my own mortality firsthand, and there's no better way to do that than lie atop my own plot. Though not set in stone, I would like to be buried at the Soquel Cemetery. My better half has told me there's room for me to squeeze into her family plot, and I've always had an affinity for the dusty, gopher-ridden place. So I lay down in about the location I'd be buried, at the feet of her grandparents, Luke and Helen Noland. From this state of repose, about the only thing you can see is the sky, and after a while the busy traffic on San Jose Road starts to sound like the wind. But it gets boring after awhile and I decide to meet some of my future neighbors. For that I call Carolyn Swift, a local historian and director of the Capitola Museum.

Swift begins with the movers and shakers of Soquel: the Daubenbisses who have large obelisks on their family plot. John Daubenbiss, who died in 1896, gave land for both a school and a cemetery, critical needs for any town. His original house still stands on Soquel Avenue, just before the road dips into downtown.

"Typically, you go away from where you live to have a cemetery, on the outer limits of town, which this is," Swift says.

Swift is elegantly tall. She moves like a detective in between the plots. With her red shoes she pushes away the overgrown weeds and dirt to reveal names, dates and the occasional epitaph. The grave of Joshua Parrish is here. He came to California in 1892 and farmed in the area. There's also Ceedola Duff, Parrish's great-granddaughter. She was 90 when she died.

"She was a high school biology teacher and had the most beautiful garden and she was just



GOT GRAVE? (L to R) Docents Sandra Fontes, Rachel Torrey and Renie Leaman at Evergreen Cemetery.

a lot of fun," says Swift, who knew her personally.

We wander around haphazardly, Swift pointing out the names of ranchers, farmers, merchants, loggers, bakers and a few people she's never heard of. Some are successful, evident by their ostentatious memorials; other memorials point to dashed dreams. The dry grass crinkles under our feet as Swift tells a story about her 20-year-old cat that she had to put to sleep.

"I came to the cemetery and felt so much better," she says. "Because you realize that all these people have managed to do it. It just becomes this really normal thing. Everyone does it."

Lost to Sight to Memory Dear

There's a rule of thumb in the cemetery industry business: For every 500 people in a given population, in a given year, five people die.

"You've got to have a place to put them," says Everett Dias, one of the former caretakers of the Pioneer Cemetery in Watsonville. "That's how this place got started."

Nearly 10,000 people have been buried in Pioneer since 1852, the same year Watsonville was founded. The cemetery used to be out in the country, next to an alfalfa field, next to an old wagon road that turned into Freedom Boulevard. But things have changed. Now there's a strip mall, and suburban homes push ever closer to the perimeter of this historic cemetery. Yet, once on the grounds, the quickening cares of life seem to fade.

Dias, who is 82 but looks 10 years younger, says his legs have worn out. He dons a straw hat and climbs aboard his electric scooter. We head up the hill for the grand tour. There's an ocean breeze blowing through the stone pines and newly planted redwoods, trees that replaced the Monterey pines, which died from disease. The 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake's effects are still visible—some toppled tombstones, some upended concrete. And as in other historic cemeteries throughout the world, the rot-in-hell desecrations of vandals is visible.

"I came to the cemetery and felt so much better," she says. "Because you realize that all these people have managed to do it. It just becomes this really normal thing. Everyone does it."

"It's a sad thing," Dias says, "There's no respect for the dead."

We pass the grave of Robert Rodgers, a dentist who ruptured his appendix. His brother, Floyd, came to visit him in the hospital and had a massive heart attack. They died a day apart and were buried next to each other—their wives are stacked on top of them.

Around the bend is Esther Steinbeck Rodgers, sister of John Steinbeck. She married into the Rodgers' family, which came to California in 1847. Inside the family plot is Jefferson Rodgers, an African-American. Below his name: the word "colored."

And, of course, there is Charley Parkhurst, perhaps the cemetery's most (in)famous resident. The one-eyed "she," who was really a "he," was a stagecoach driver who drove the

Watsonville-San Juan Bautista-San Jose-Santa Cruz route. Parkhurst was said, according to Dias, to be a "sharp shootin', tobacco chewin', cussin', best stage coach driver around."

Dias rolls up to the Melvin Gilkey grave. He stops the scooter and tells me another story: "If you go over there a ways, you'll find Dr. C.C. Cleveland and he'll have the same date on his stone as Gilkey's, February 22, 1874. They were down at the gin mill in the lower part of town one

evening and the doctor challenged Gilkey to a duel. They were sworn enemies and they stepped outside. I don't know which one won the duel and which one lost because they both died. And now they are buried within earshot of each other."

'Good Night, Dear Heart, Good Night'

Bar none, Phil Reader is one of the most learned cemetery devotees you'll come across. You can feel a tail-wagging enthusiasm the minute he steps foot in the Holy Cross Cemetery in Live Oak. Reader grew up a block from this cemetery, has family buried here and has looked after it for the last 25 years. He is working on a history of African-Americans in the county. Before we begin the tour, Reader warns me that he can meander.

"You've got to stop me because I will go on," he admits.

We begin our "meanderings" at the grave of Justiniano Roxas, an Indian whose out-of-the-way tombstone reads: "He lived to be 123 years of age." This grave has always fascinated me, not only for the man's incredible longevity but its location—it's set off by itself and teeters near the edge of a ivy-covered cliff. But Reader disappoints my expectations. It turns out there are three Roxases, none of whom lived a century-sized life. Reader says the first Roxas died when he was 23, the second at 16 and this Roxas, the one at our feet, at about 60 years of age—a long life at a time when life expectancy was about 45.

Roxas' inflated age was more a promotional gimmick to get people to move here and buy land, Reader contends: "The weather's great, you can live forever and we have an Indian that lived to be 123."

We walk down what he calls "Bartender's Row," a section of Irish bar owners: Ed Brody, Mike Leonard, Patrick Moran and William Spencer, people who obviously did very well for themselves by the size of their imposing mausoleums and tombstones. They are buried next to a type of boot hill section where Sisters of Charity—the group that took care of Roxas in his old age—and the orphans are buried. Sister Mary Rice is here, the brave and intrepid nun who made the journey from Ireland, over the Panama Isthmus where many of the sisters were killed, and up the coast to Santa Cruz, a God-forsaken outpost at the time.

"There's a guy over here that I'd like you to take a look at," Reader says, directing me to a stone that is common in many of the area cemeteries, a rounded, white gravestone erected by the Grand Army of the Republic, a Civil War veterans group. Lt. Murdoch Campell fought in the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War's bloodiest battle.

"On the third day, when the Confederates had penetrated the Union line, one company held it back," Reader says. "The 69 Pennsylvania, led by Campell, was in the first line of fire and everybody retreated except for his company. Had he not stood firm, the story of Gettysburg would have been very different. It saved the Union and was the turning point of the Civil War. He's another Irishman, tougher than hell."

We walk through the dilapidated cemetery, past the graves of the Portuguese, many of which have little pictures of the deceased on the stones. Over in the northeast corner is an unusual wide-open space amidst the crowded graves. Reader explains that this is a mass gravesite brought over from the Santa Cruz Mission parking lot.

"When the mission was founded, the burial site for the Indians and a few Spaniards was right where the church parking lot is now," Reader says. "In 1885 they began work on a



REST IN PEACE Former caretaker for Home of Peace Cemetery Arnie Levine.



new church and they started excavating. When it rained, bodies would be exposed. There was a tremendous stench in the air and so the people in the area said it was time to do something about it. They opened this cemetery the same time as they were excavating for the new church and put all the bones, remains and fragments of cloth, some recent and some ancient, right here. It took six wagonloads of bones, no records, no name, nothing. But you'll notice this place is always green. I don't care if it hasn't rained in months, it's always green."

We drive to the Santa Cruz Memorial Park on Ocean Street, also known in cemetery circles as the Oddfellows Cemetery. The cemetery is endowed with its lush, manicured lawns and paved roads. We tour the immense grounds by car, Reader pointing out the gravestones of interest. We stop by the Myrick family grave and Reader tells another story. In 1819 Henry Myrick fell in love with a much younger girl, who was still in elementary school. He decided that he would wait until she was old enough to marry and, in the meantime, Reader says, Myrick became a little odd and eccentric. Finally the couple did marry. Six months later, Myrick's "true love" died.

"He was despondent and out of his mind," Reader says. "He would come out here and sleep at the foot of her grave. One morning they found him out here curled up on the grave. He had put a bullet in his heart."

On and on we drive: William Waddell who died from a grizzly bear attack; Levi Starbuck, the grandson of the famous character in Moby Dick; Joseph Smallwood, a writer for Abolitionist papers back East; Marie McDermack, a prostitute; Thomas Bunting, a general who was a dictator of a small South American country; Elihu Anthony, merchant and Methodist minister credited with being one of the first to start a business where downtown Santa Cruz now exists; Zasu Pitts' father. The history seeps forth from Reader and we both know that we could spend days here and still not cover it all.

"We all end with an obituary," Reader says when we pull up in the shade. "History has a beginning and an end and a cemetery helps me understand my own mortality better."

I ask him where he wants to be buried should that day come. Without pondering. Reader says the old Holy Cross Cemetery, where we've just come from, a cemetery that isn't taking any newcomers.

"I know the guys out there," Reader says, "and, hopefully, they'll fit me in somehow. Put me between a Civil War vet and a prostitute and I'll be happy."



DAYS OF THE DEAD Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History docent Renie Leaman finds life in death.