

Living

Here lies history

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Renie Leaman devotes much of her life getting to know the dead at Evergreen Cemetery.

A BONE-CHILLING RAIN pelts gravestones that huddle against the hill at Evergreen Cemetery. The only escape from the icy wetness is beneath a bay



tree. Under its roots lie unmarked graves.

Only the dead remain dry.

One of the county's oldest cemeteries is a foreboding place on a drizzly morning in mid-October. It's a place where death surrounds you, a place of constant reminders that life can be so short.

Only someone like Renie Leaman could bring life to this deathly-still place. Her eyes dance and her elfin face lights up as she recounts the lives of those who rest under the ivy-covered ground, under the concrete slabs.

Leaman is a cemetery buff and Evergreen, whose restoration she has overseen for the past decade through Help Evergreen Live Permanently, is her favorite. She has helped search through yellowing records and old newspapers preserved on microfilm to reconstruct the lives of 800 of the 2,200

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Text: Denise Franklin/Photos: Bill Lovejoy



Only the dead keep dry on a rainy day.

HENRY H. HUNT

BORN 1874.

DIED 1877.



Pioneer Stephen H. Hunt, native of Illinois, found a new life and eventually death in Santa Cruz.

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souls who rest in peace there.

When she's not planning the appetizers for a wedding from her restaurant and catering service in Felton, she's walking among the gravestones, telling school groups, Boy Scouts, and anyone else who cares to listen, about her "family."

Leaman points downhill to a lonely, leaf-covered patch. "I've got a gal buried over there with no marker. It gets me something fierce that somebody bought that plot for her."

Her imagination reels back to the late 1800s, to a time when young women didn't travel alone unless ...

"It was 1896 when she died. She was 18 years old and a native of England ... She took strychnine. How did she get here? Who paid her way? Life was so horrible for her, she took strychnine."

"She walked down the street, stumbling, until she got to the drug store door and expired."

"Was she a lady of the night, abandoned by her protector? The only other way for her to have come here was if she were a nanny. Did the family abandon her?"

"Every once in a while, I put a flower on her grave and say to her, 'Somebody remembers you.'"

"I believe the death records said 'prostitute,'" she adds, softly.

Leaman stops at a four-sided tombstone, shaded beneath the bay tree, a tombstone that several members of the Hunt family share in their repose.

"Mary Ann Hunt is the person I've done the most research on. She was the original 'now' woman, even though she probably wouldn't have admitted it."

Hunt was one of the first to drive an open carriage cross country when she came west with her two children around 1854 to join her gold-seeking husband, and she spent most of the remainder of her life breaking horses on a ranch between Scotts Valley and Santa Cruz.

During those hard years, she gave birth to several children and lost several children.

One of the tombstone's four sides bears the name of a child — Henry H. Hunt, born 1874, died 1877. "No one knows why they died. Death certificates weren't required until 1905," informs Leaman.

"She moved to town after her husband died in the late 1890s," the storyteller continues from her gravestone perch.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel.

Each marker hides a tale at Evergreen Cemetery.

"Her house still is at the corner of Hubbard and May streets — May used to be Hunt Street. Until her late 70s, she'd ride a horse to Lighthouse Field and back everyday. She also took in foster children."

Leaman has an easy time picturing her "friend," having seen a photograph taken of the woman in her later years. The photograph shows her as stern and somewhat proud of herself. "She has lots of frogs and braids on her dress, numerous rings on one hand and a decorative braid wrapped in her hair. Many of her riding habits were of velvet."

All the stories are not so gay. Leaman constantly reminds those who listen that life in the 1800s in Santa Cruz was nothing like the romantized pioneer days shown on television.

Those who came here came not knowing what they'd find. They didn't have travel brochures with color pictures showing them what their new home would be like, nor did they have well-traveled friends to tell them what to expect, Leaman says. They traveled to the unknown. The journey was unbelievably hard, sometimes taking a year or more.

The short life of Evergreen's first resident tells all too well how hard life was. Julia Arcan was born July 1, 1850, and died 19 days later. Her mother was stranded in Death Valley while pregnant

with Julia, relates Leaman. "She didn't have good food, fresh vegetables or meat. Just brackish water. I'm sure Julia just wasn't that strong. I stress this to the children who come here because I don't want them to think the pioneer days were all glory."

Everybody had it rough. Ruth Palmer Imus came across country when she was 75 with her children and grandchildren, tells Leaman. Grandma, she says, didn't want to get left behind when the family came west.

"It took them a year from Illinois to Los Angeles by covered wagon. And then they came by oxcart to Santa Cruz. That took six weeks. She lived ten years longer."

"She was born in 1776 and died in 1860. I call her my bicentennial lady. I have pictures of them, her and her husband. She looks like a sweet, little, old, dried-up apple doll. The kids, when I show them, say she's ugly. But I say, 'How do you think you'd look after being in a covered wagon for year?'"

"I ask them to imagine their grandmother riding in the back of a hot, damp, smelly covered wagon all day or up in the front in the burning sun, having to help cook the meals at night over a fire even though she's so tired, having to sleep on the hard, cold ground with just a blanket to cover her."

Leaman jumps from one tale to

another as she moves from one gravestone to another. She's an unending book of life stories of the dead and gone. But to her, they're not gone.

"Down near that bunch of rubble is James Harris, born in 1848 and enlisted in the Civil War in 1861 at the age of 13. He died in his 60s in a vets home in Los Angeles."

"He enlisted as a drummer boy. You only could be a musician in the army before you turned 16. He enlisted, writing down his occupation as a carpenter."

"In 1862, he was charged 96 cents for ordnance loss. What was he doing, at the age of 14, with ordnance? Another time, he was charged \$1.06 for camping and equipage — a bedroll, pup tent. Like any teenager, he was always losing things."

"He was hospitalized in '62 for dysentery and a year later for rheumatism at age 16. He served all his time in Las Cruces, New Mexico."

"He was also hospitalized at age 15 for a social disease, which contributed to his death. His first and second wives are buried with him, as well as two young children by his first wife who died within two days of each other."

Evergreen began in 1850 simply because there was no place in town to bury Protestants, being that the only cemetery was at Holy Cross Mission for the Catholics. It stayed a Protestant cemetery, Leaman says, "for about five minutes. I know agnostics, atheists, Jewish, Catholics, some Japanese and Chinese buried there."

Leaman's friendship with those at Evergreen began 10 years ago when she became outraged after reading a news article on the dilapidated state of the cemetery. She and others started Help Evergreen Live Permanently. Now, not only does the cemetery live, but so do those buried there — at least in the mind of Leaman.

Her only wish is for \$8,000-10,000, the interest from which could be used to hire someone to keep Evergreen tidy.

"You can really know a lot about Santa Cruz this way," she says, sweeping her caped arm toward the gravestones. "I've studied Santa Cruz through my people in Evergreen ... my family in Evergreen."

"I probably know more about the ones here than I do about my own family," she adds, smiling toward the gravestones, now glistening wet from the cold rain.