



Photo by Derrel Hewitt

Bones of History Atop Graveyard Hill

They used to haul the old pioneers up the side of the hill and bury them with solemn honor and farewell goodbyes.

Today, however, there's little sign of activity in Eugene's Masonic Cemetery except for an occasional dog or human being trotting through. Instead, an eerie sense of history drips from the tall firs and laurel bushes and hides behind every leaf, mound and slab.

The ground in Lane County's oldest cemetery has shifted over time, creating cracked plot foundations, crooked tombstones and toppled monuments. Ivy and weeds have taken hold also, spreading like cancer through the confines of the 12 acre site.

When Elizabeth Parsons died in 1854 at the age of 22, she became the first person buried on the hill. Parsons was a relative of William McMurtry, who owned the hill as well as farm land to the south and west. Like other settlers of the day, McMurtry used a piece of his land claim as a burial plot.

"My hunch is that particular spot was offered because it was a hill and the old cemeteries were never put where there was productive land," says Alice Adams, unofficial cemetery historian.

By 1857, there was enough interest to make the hill a formal graveyard, and McMurtry sold the land to the Masonic Lodge. The "Standing Graveyard Committee"

of R.W. Underwood, A.A. Smith and town founder Eugene Skinner sold family plots for \$15 but burials were slow at first, perhaps due to the fact the cemetery was three miles from Eugene's city limits.

Preceded in death by daughters Lenora and Mary, Skinner died in December, 1864 and was buried on the top of the hill next to his children, not far from Parsons and McMurtry.

"He got wet while trying to get cattle out of the river and died of pneumonia," Adams says.

When the cemetery was first platted in 1859, eight-foot-wide alleyways were created so that when horse and wagon reached the site after their trip from the city they could proceed up the steep hill with the remains of the deceased. Later a street car system was put in and ran to the vicinity of 25th Avenue and University Street, thereby making the graveyard accessible to more families.

Throughout the 1800s, typhoid fever and diphtheria took a toll on Eugene residents, especially on women and children. Cemetery records show scores of both young and old family members dying within a year or two of each other. There were also a number of drownings, indicating nature was a constant threat to the safety of early pioneers and their families.

The hill served as the site of many prominent burials. When

John Wesley Johnson, first president of the University of Oregon, died in September of 1898, the Eugene Register reported that "the remains were taken in charge by the Masonic Order and the Workmen who escorted the body to the grave where the beautiful burial service of the Masonic ritual finished the sad rites."

Four years later, John Whiteaker, first governor of Oregon, died, and was the subject of "one of the largest and most impressive funerals ever held in Eugene." After the services had concluded, a long procession followed Whiteaker's body to the family vault on the west side of the hill.

According to records, some of the people buried in the cemetery were born during a particularly historic period. Elizabeth Parson's mother was born in 1798, her father in 1791. The oldest bones in the yard appear to be those of Polly Ann Sweet who was born in 1779, three years after the Declaration of Independence was signed and 10 years before George Washington was chosen president.

The inscriptions on the gravestones that remain visible today tell much of past times. A tombstone on the southeast end of the hill marks the spot where America Pearce, born in 1817, is buried. Not far away lie the remains of James Madison Hendricks and down the hill away, those of six-year-old Edgar Poe Miller.

Many of the first names found on tombstones are unusual. There's Creath Harlow, Serenus Nickerson, Pameligia Moore, Zophar Davis and Marrel Mayhew Hulgaard among others.

Inscriptions also offer evidence of the position women held in society. Many are laden with inscriptions bearing the word *missus* without a first name. Others mention the fact that a woman was "the wife of" the man buried nearby.

Not every family opted to bury their dead in McMurtry's hill,



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however. At the base of the west end of the hill stands the crusted form of Hope Abbey Mausoleum. The building was built between 1912-13 by the Portland Mausoleum Company, which was busy promoting similar structures in Portland, Salem, Albany and Roseburg at the time.

A check of the original contract between the Portland company and Masonic Lodge No. 11 A.F. and A.M. shows that tombs were to be sold for "not less than \$200."

"It's one of the few examples of Egyptian motif in Eugene," says Chris Scovill, a graduate student in the School of Architecture and Allied Arts' historic preservation program. The architectural style was likely chosen because of the popularity of King Tut and the association with "Egyptian death and their attempts at preserving afterlife," according to Scovill.

Most of the crypts inside are lined up in rows with the exception of a couple of cubicles guarded by gates. Stained glass windows that

used to let in light from a clerestory above have been filled in, leaving the interior dark except for a glimmer of light that enters through the padlocked front door. There are roughly 300 people interred in the building, including Prince Lucien Campbell who takes up a spot on the south end.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence today of family members returning to pay tribute to descendants in either the graveyard or the mausoleum. Only a few empty coffee cans with dried flowers are visible and Hope Abbey Mausoleum is opened only once a year on Memorial Day. Many of the families who own graveyard plots have died out or moved away from the area.

The dead, in essence, have been left to mingle with the dead. In the quiet of the forested hill, they lie sheltered from the insidious movement of modern life as a monument to the past.

—STEPHEN MAHER



Photo by Stephen Maher



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Many of the family plots at Eugene's Masonic Cemetery (top left) share their confines with trees. According to historians, the trees were not planted by relatives of the deceased but instead grew naturally. Hope Abbey Mausoleum (top right) was designed by Ellis F. Lawrence, a Portland architect who was appointed dean of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts in 1914 and who also designed the University Library and the University Art Museum. The grave of James L. Lombard (above left) lies alone in a patch of dried grass. A majority of the graves in the cemetery are blanketed with weeds with some markers no longer visible. The Masonic Cemetery holds the remains of many children, including those of Seymour Condon (above right). Most fell victim to diseases that swept the area and claimed entire families.

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