

Pioneer Cemetery history full of stories, disputes

By John Fleischli
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

The Pioneer Cemetery, which lies just within the south edge of campus, holds a strange curiosity for passers-by. With its somber and gloomy tombstones and ivy-colored trees, one can't help but be drawn into its romantic solitude.

The cemetery is a 16-acre, rectangular plot with several dirt paths and a road that winds its way to a small maintenance building and the trailer where the groundskeeper has his residence. Myriad gravestones lie beneath the shade provided by the verdant firs that tower overhead.

The private cemetery, which is maintained primarily through the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery Association, is a memorial to the pioneers who came west and settled in the area. Roughly 4,500 to 5,000 people are buried on the premises, said association secretary Ruth Holmes.

Most of the birthdates on the aged tombstones go back to the mid-1800s. The caretaker has a list of all the dead and where they can be found for visitors who can't remember a place or are coming to the cemetery for the first time.

According to Lane County Historical Society records, Pioneer Cemetery is one of the three oldest cemeteries in the Eugene area, along with the Masonic Cemetery and the Mulkey Cemetery. The largest of the three in both acreage and number of graves, Pioneer Cemetery was purchased by the Spencer Butte Lodge #9 chapter of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows on June 14, 1873.

The Order originally bought a 10-acre parcel of property that already had some scattered graves on it. The group gradually acquired more land until the cemetery matured to its current size.

Problems arose after a short time. During the early years of the cemetery, its care was left to the relatives of the deceased. However, as families drifted from the area, the cemetery fell into disrepair.

This lack of attention and maintenance was to become an ongoing issue in the many disputes that later arose regarding the future of the cemetery.



LESUE GALLIANO for the Emerald
The most impressive grave in the Pioneer Cemetery is a monument to the Oregonians who fought and died in the Civil War.

Through the first half of the 20th century, many attempts were made to beautify the cemetery, with no success.

According to records at University Archives, people from the University community established the Pioneer Memorial Park Association with hopes of gaining title to the land. The University was expanding at the time, so it was a logical step to take.

There were big plans for the cemetery. But strong opposition from relatives of the deceased and lot owners stopped attempts by the University to build

over the site.

One idea seriously discussed was to remove all of the headstones and markers, build a parking lot over the cemetery and then erect a memorial listing all of those who were buried beneath. Public sentiment did not favor this plan. People wanted the burial grounds preserved.

Today, the Pioneer Memorial Park Association holds the title to the cemetery and, said University Archivist Keith Richard, "the University owns a majority of the land."

Any plans for building over

the cemetery, though, were put to rest in the late 1960s.

"Former UO President Clark killed the issue because he was not willing to put up with the continuation of the hassle and bad public relations" of trying to use the land for University facilities or buildings, Richard said. The issue has not been discussed much since then.

Presently, the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery Association is responsible for the upkeep of the cemetery. This group represents the owners of the plots. It is kept going through donations, annual dues paid by the plot owners and the help of volunteers. The single caretaker of the cemetery is employed by the organization.

Holmes, the secretary of the association, is the person to talk to if one has any questions about the cemetery. She is filled with historical knowledge regarding the graveyard. Talking with her is like taking a trip through Eugene's past.

Holmes said the disputes over control of the cemetery are "all behind us now." She said the cemetery has a stable, complementary relationship with the University.

Students are encouraged to visit or take a walk through the cemetery. Occasionally, people from the University help sustain it by picking up debris after a fierce storm or by making donations to the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery Endowment Fund, a corporation started by people from the University community in 1975.

Regarding complaints about the cemetery being a run-down eyesore, Holmes said the caretaker does a good job. The cemetery is meant to have a natural look because it is a traditional cemetery with curbs around the lots that can make mowing difficult.

The most impressive grave in Pioneer Cemetery is the monu-

ment to the Oregonians who fought and died in the Civil War. Located in the middle of the site, this statue of a soldier surrounded by numerous off-white headstones is imposing.

There is an amusing anecdote behind the veteran's memorial. Because he was a veteran, John S. Covell was given a free plot in which to be buried. Before Covell died, he donated \$20,000 to the Order of Odd Fellows because the group was nice to him. This was used to commission the statue from an Italian sculptor in the East. The statue arrived by train and was so heavy it took a small army of men just to haul it to its resting place. Fortunately, it survived the trip without a scratch, Holmes said.

Covell's relatives protested the donation, claiming that Covell was not in his right mind when he gave the gift. A dispute went on for three years between the family and the Order until eventually the group retained its claim to the money. The remainder from the purchase of the memorial was put into an endowment fund.

It is George Dull's job to look after the memorial and all of the other graves in the cemetery. He has been the person responsible for the upkeep of the place for about four years. As caretaker, Dull gets to keep the trailer on the premises as his home. He works another regular job to help make ends meet, so he is not always around.

Dull said it doesn't get creepy living in a graveyard, and people frequently walk through on their way to or from class and stop to say hello.

Some students take advantage of the peace and quiet of the place and study under a tree. Classes have sometimes been held at the cemetery, and runners often take a few laps around the area.

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