

# A walk among the tomb- stones

by Britt Tilton



Photo contributed by Coral Tilton

The Lone Fir Cemetery on SE Stark and 26th is Portland's first official cemetery.

**M**any students are scrambling to buy fake blood, stock up on candy and figure out the best parties to attend this Halloween. Alternatively, if you prefer a more subtle brand of spooky, you're in luck: Robert Keeler, anthropologist and Clackamas Community College professor, is a member of the Association for Gravestone Studies and he was happy to talk about the history of Portland's gravesites.

Imagine busy, bustling Portland in the 1800s, before it was a city: no official government, no fire department and no place to lay the dearly departed.

What were they to do if someone died? When someone did pass in 1846, the townspeople decided to lay the body on the property of Benjamin Stark, an original westside land owner who was conveniently out of town for more than a decade.

People continued to bury bodies there until Stark returned and declared he was going to develop his land. This is where Kell's Irish Pub, Dan and Louis Oyster Bar and Skidmore Fountains lie today.

"Most Portlanders have no idea that was a cemetery area," Keeler said. "This is not a widely known fact. It doesn't show up on any early maps, it's strictly through city government records and newspapers of the time."

Keeler believes that historic cemeteries are vital parts of our community.

"They are important to preserve, important to study, important for people to know about. They are obviously a place to bury the dead and commemorate the dead, commemorate people in the community, but they are also places for spiritual reflection," he said.

In 1851, Portland officially became a city. It had almost everything a city needed, except a cemetery. Keeler said, "It took several years of discussion, sort of bemoaning the fact that this unplanned cemetery was an eye sore, a health threat and somebody else's land that had just been appropriated."

Several people offered to sell land, but Portland just couldn't afford burial ground. Land on a hillside with springs was donated and used temporarily, but it wasn't ideal.

Portland soon decided to put bodies in Lone Fir Cemetery. Access was difficult at the time because townspeople had to cross the river on a ferry, transport everything on a wagon and walk a mile up a dirt road. But it was flat and it drained better than the land with springs. This became Portland's first official cemetery.

Our relationship with gravesites is changing. In the past, cemeteries have been somewhat abandoned. Now cemeteries are becoming community spaces where people picnic, jog and bike ride.

Many cemeteries also offer events on Halloween night, including Lone Fir Cemetery. "Volunteers dress up like different people who are buried at the cemetery. The tour leads guests around and they stop at each headstone, they talk about who they are and how they died," said Noel Seats, Metro Cemeteries coordinator.

#### Looking for last minute Halloween plans?

Tours at Lone Fir depart every eight minutes from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Oct. 31. Tickets are \$15 general, \$5 for youth and seniors. More info at the Friends of Lone Fir Cemetery website.