

# Cemetery garden to honor Chinese workers

By **JAIMIE DING**  
*The Oregonian*

On a Sunday afternoon, the Lone Fir Cemetery in Portland is serene. A handful of people stroll along the black asphalt paths that divide blocks of burial land. A man sitting beneath a towering red cedar leans back against the thick trunk, headphones on. Fresh roses blanket recent gravestones.

But the southwest corner has no trees, nor gravestones or roses. The land was known as the Old Chinese Burial Ground — now Block 14 — and was used to temporarily bury early Chinese immigrant workers until their remains could be sent to their hometowns.

For some, however, it became their final resting place, but a forgotten one devoid of markers, remembrances or respect. At one point, the burial ground was paved over, its history neglected, replaced by a county maintenance building.

But not everyone forgot. Activists have fought for more than a decade to reverse the injustices to those still buried there and remember their history, even as those efforts were pushed to the side.

Now, Metro has dedicated \$4 million to building a cultural heritage garden on Block 14 to honor the dead whose names and stories had been lost.

"Finally, the contributions and the sacrifices of these early Chinese immigrants (and) their story can be told," said Marcus Lee of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, "and hopefully that will bring them peace and the honor and the recognition that they deserve."

## A patchwork history

They were described as "anomalies." In September 2004, tests using ground-penetrating radar found nine anomalies beneath a parking lot that had been built at 2115 S.E. Morrison St. — the southeast corner of Lone Fir Cemetery. They had the depth, shape and arrangement of overlooked graves, The Oregonian then reported.

Community groups were ecstatic. They had always known early Chinese workers were likely buried beneath the building.

The workers arrived in the United States in the late 1800s, leaving their families behind in China to build infrastructure here. The men buried at Block 14 helped build Oregon's railway system and the Willamette River seawall — while being taken advantage of financially for their work. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 struck another blow, preventing laborers from ever becoming U.S. citizens or returning home to their families.

And, of course, stories were told of the winds blowing and grass moving eerily at night, shadows flitting over the pavement.

In 2005, Multnomah County hired Portland-based Archaeological Investiga-



Jaimie Ding/The Oregonian

**Block 14 of the Lone Fir Cemetery in southeast Portland will be the home of a cultural heritage memorial garden dedicated to those buried there who were forgotten.**

tions Northwest to perform some careful excavation. At first, they only unearthed casket handles, shards of Chinese pottery and fragments of grave markers with Chinese writing, said principal archaeologist Jo Reese. The county almost stopped the dig after two days.

But then-Multnomah County Commissioner Maria Rojo de Steffey, a week after the dig began, asked for one more day of excavation.

On that day, crews discovered human remains.

Reese still remembers the moment they unearthed fragments of arm and hand bones likely belonging to an adolescent. Then, they found two coffins with intact remains before reburying them. No more digging needed to be done after that — they had confirmed what the community had suspected all along.

"(The project) has been one that continues to be ... one of the most important projects that we have done," Reese said.

The history of Block 14 is scattered between county and cemetery records, assembled back into one piece over the years from reporting by The Oregonian and organizations like the Lone Fir Cemetery Foundation and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.

The land was originally acquired by the City & Suburban Railway in 1891 to bury Chinese workers. Many workers had made arrangements for their remains to be sent home to China to be buried with their ancestors.

"They had gone abroad in search of making a living, to find jobs, to find work so they could send their wages back home to their families in China," Lee said. "It was always their intention, at some point, to return home."

Asylum patients from the Oregon Hospital for the Insane — the state's first psychiatric hospital — were also buried there. Historians and mental health advocates believe about 200 patients were buried along Lone Fir's Old Chinese Burial Ground, on the eastern border of Block 14.

In the 1940s, the benevolent association worked with

the county to return remains buried in the plot to China. They exhumed what they believed to be the last 265 graves in 1948, The Oregonian reported.

Multnomah County, which owned the land, built the Morrison Building and a parking lot for county vehicles over the former gravesite.

## Activists raise alarm

In 2004, the county was preparing to sell the building and lot. It had closed the building two years before because it was too expensive to upgrade to earthquake codes, and asbestos made demolition costly.

On the other side of the Willamette River, Rebecca Liu ventured into the dusty basement of the benevolent association's historic building in Portland's Old Town Chinatown. She had gone down there plenty of times before, finding old artifacts and calligraphy paper but nothing particularly groundbreaking.

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Rebecca Liu

Brent Walth, now a University of Oregon assistant professor, was reporting on the issue for The Oregonian. He had heard rumors of people still buried at Block 14 and suspected the Chinese benevolent association had the burial records.

He remembers asking Liu to look for the records just one more time. "We will search the place top to bottom together," he said.

He didn't need to. In the basement, she found two thick, leather ledgers filled with columns written in Chinese calligraphy. Each column listed a name, date of death and a Chinese village. In English, the header read: "Record of Chinese Cem-

etery, East Side, Portland, Oregon."

Liu had stumbled upon a meticulous record of the Chinese workers buried and removed from Block 14 from 1917 to 1928.

Over the years, local Chinese leaders had exhumed remains and returned them to China for reburial. But they forbade the removal of at least 15 children, and county records from 1948 show work crews did not remove any children's remains. The Oregonian reported in 2004.

"Chinese leaders made a decision that these children's graves were not to be touched," said Liu, who was a Chinese teacher with the benevolent association at the time and translated the records for The Oregonian. "They would not have approved digging these bodies up — ever."

Liu found 15 entries for children, all including the notation in Chinese, "Never touch." "It means, 'Do not

dig up; do not bring to the surface,'" Liu said. The burial records for two young women were marked the same way.

It's unclear why, but the reason may have been that the tradition of returning remains to China was mostly extended to men, or the family members could not afford to move the remains, she said. "I don't want to blame the county for this," Liu said. "There could have simply been a communication problem back then. But the Chinese looking after the cemetery said 'never touch' these graves. They would have not changed their minds."

In October 2004, Christina Walsh, then-president of Friends of Lone Fir Ceme-

tery, searched Oregon Historical Society records and found entries confirming children had been buried in the Chinese section.

Walth also reviewed Lone Fir logs that showed entries for 51 Chinese children buried there from 1891 to 1928. The records did not say whether their remains were ever exhumed.

Cemetery records show 1,131 people identified as Chinese were buried there during that time period until the county took control of Lone Fir. Rather than including names like the other burials at the cemetery, the log books simply listed a slur. Line after line, thousands of these early Chinese were recorded like this.

The records also showed benevolent association leaders had little say in converting the graveyard to the county's own use in 1947.

The records Walth and the groups helped uncover forced the county to conduct the ground survey and subsequent archaeological analysis that indicated people were likely still buried in Block 14. The Morrison Building was demolished soon after in August 2008. The next year, the county passed the land to Metro, the area's regional government, which owns and manages Lone Fir to this day. "If the county officials had their way ... on that site today would be a condominium and a Starbucks," Walth said.

## A decade of waiting

The Morrison building and parking lot were carefully removed, the work monitored by the archaeological firm to ensure the ground was not disturbed further. But one question remained: What would happen to Block 14?

In 2007, Metro brought together community members from the Chinese benevolent association, the cemetery foundation, neighborhood groups and mental health community. The next year, they announced plans

for a garden — a memorial to the forgotten individuals who had been buried there. Plans were made, and Portland-based Lango Hansen Landscape Architects was hired to create a design. The only thing missing was funding.

No money was dedicated for the project, according to John Laursen, president of the Lone Fir Cemetery Foundation.

The recession hit in 2008. Staff turned over. Fundraising efforts brought in some money but not enough. The project languished for 11 years.

But then, voters approved the 2019 parks and nature bond.

The \$475 million bond would improve existing parks, protect and restore land, and make nature more accessible to all. The memorial garden was included as a "potential project," but community members worried the project would "fall to the back of the line" and miss out on the money, Laursen said.

In January, community groups again began pressing the Metro Council to uphold its commitment to the project. Laursen wrote a letter to the council signed by leaders from the Oregon Chinese Coalition, Portland Business Alliance, Chinese Americans Citizens Alliance, Japanese American Museum of Oregon, Mental Health Association and others.

"Block 14 at Lone Fir Cemetery is a physical manifestation of Oregon's deeply racist history," Laursen wrote.

Hongcheng Zhao, president of the Oregon Chinese Coalition, mobilized local Chinese American youth — many of whom were learning about their own history for the first time.

"We never really learned about (Chinese workers) in school," said Eleanor Song, a Stoller Middle School student in Washington County. "There's a lot I didn't know."

Song, 13, along with dozens of other middle and high school students, wrote letters to the Metro Council.

"Preserving our history is really important because we have to learn from history so we don't make mistakes," Song told The Oregonian.

In March, 16 years after the two intact remains were excavated from Block 14, the Metro Council announced it would dedicate \$4 million to the garden project.

The news was bittersweet for Liu, whose discovery of those burial ledgers in 2004 was the turning point for stopping the sale of Block 14.

"Because we knew when Chinese people were coming here, they endured a lot of setbacks and hardships," Liu, now 72, said in Chinese during a recent interview. "Now it's the same ... and we will finally acknowledge their sacrifice."

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