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In Ventura, the plot thickens



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times

Dogs enjoy their freedom at Cemetery Memorial Park, which riles some Ventura residents, especially those with ancestors among the 3,000 dead still buried there. In the mid-1960s, the city removed all of the grave markers and transformed the space into a park. It has since installed a few new grave markers at families' request.

Residents clash over returning a park to its past life as a cemetery.

By Catherine Saillant
January 26, 2009

On a recent rainy day, dozens of dogs ran, jumped and occasionally relieved themselves on the grassy expanse of Cemetery Memorial Park, one of downtown Ventura's most scenic vistas.

It's a common sort of scene in any city, except that in this seaside town the seven-acre knoll is the final resting place of more than 3,000 of the city's most influential pioneers.



Ventura cemetery



Ventura cemetery

Descendants of the people who ran its newspapers, planned its highways and built its civic institutions are not at all pleased that dogs have free reign over what they see as sacred ground.

William Dewey Hobson, the "father of

Ventura County," who lobbied hard to see the area become its own county in 1873, is buried there. So is Brig. Gen. William Vandever, who commanded troops in the Civil War and was a two-term congressman. The city's first lawyers, doctors, teachers and civic leaders are all buried there.

In the mid-1960s, city leaders unceremoniously removed all of the grave markers and transformed the cemetery into a city park.

That was a terrible mistake, descendants say, and they believe it's past time to make amends.

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"Every city has a cowboy cemetery," said Steve Schleder, one of the most vocal supporters of returning the park to a fenced-off cemetery, complete with headstones. "But in Ventura, they pulled off all the gravestones, threw them away and turned it into a park. How did they get away with that?"

City officials say the 45-year-old decision to transform the cemetery was done legally and that it would be impractical to return it to its former status. Dozens of people use the park every day to exercise their pets or just sit quietly and enjoy a picnic lunch.

Many of the grave markers have gone missing, and the city destroyed others. And officials aren't even sure where, exactly, each coffin lies below the surface of the seven-acre park.

"It's maintained as a park, and we currently treat it as if it's a city park," said Bill Fulton, a deputy mayor and planning expert. "But we have to find ways to acknowledge that it is also a cemetery."

The city's Parks and Recreation Commission is recommending a \$4-million improvement plan that attempts to bridge the divide between purists on both sides of the debate. That vision, which goes before the City Council next month, calls for a memorial to honor those buried in the cemetery, as well as for refurbished landscaping and a veterans memorial walk.

Schleder has no ancestors buried in the park and moved to Ventura only seven years ago. But the city's actions deeply offend him. "A man's grave is something that should be respected. It's holy ground," he said. "And when they turned it into a dog toilet -- that really gets under my skin."

Schleder is one of a growing number -- including dozens whose ancestors lie beneath the grounds -- who say the city's plan does not go far enough. People buried there paid for their plots, and nothing short of complete restoration of the cemetery would right the decades-old wrong done to them, said Schleder, who operates a website, www.restorestmarys.org , dedicated to his cause.

"This is a cemetery," he said, "and it can only be a cemetery unless the city exhumes the 3,000 graves and moves them somewhere else."

City leaders say the laws on converting cemeteries is murky and that the history surrounding the city's acquisition of the land and its subsequent conversion to a park are even murkier.

It opened as St. Mary's Cemetery in 1862 when friars at San Buenaventura Mission were looking for more spacious burial grounds. For years, it was owned and operated by the Catholic Church.

By 1943, the cemetery was nearly full and had fallen into disrepair. Weeds overtook family plots that once had been carefully tended, and vandals carried off old grave markers.

The city banned any more burials there in 1944. By then, the city had assumed control of portions of the cemetery reserved for Presbyterians, Jews and Chinese, and a decade later the city bought 1.12 acres to build a recreation center.

Years of talk about turning the burial ground into a park took shape in 1963, when the city began removing headstones and crypts without any apparent controversy. The hefty markers were stored in a city-owned canyon north of Ventura, and relatives were sent letters requesting that they claim them.

Unclaimed markers stayed in Hall Canyon for seven years. In 1972, about 500 that remained were hauled to Olivas Park Golf Course, where they were broken up and used as rubble for a levee.

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