

There's no mourning after in these cemeteries anymore

By Tracie Reynolds

Peninsula Times Tribune

COLMA — Scattered among the imposing granite mausoleums and neat rows of tombstones, families share peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches, soda and potato chips.

Children play hide-and-seek behind the polished headstones, laughing and darting between the rock-solid reminders of lives long past. Over the hill, couples take a lazy canoe ride on the duck pond that graces one of the city's 13 cemeteries.

It's a pleasant scene that Ted Kirschner, longtime Colma city councilman, remembered with fondness. In this picturesque, northern peninsula city, the dead outnumber the living by a 1,000-to-1 ratio, and residents have learned to live in harmony with their deceased neighbors. Cemetery officials estimate there are more than 1 million people buried in Colma's dark, mineral-rich soil.

But Kirschner, 72, sees this communal — albeit slightly off-beat — lifestyle vanishing as quickly as youth. Nearly gone are the days when families would take a drive to the city of cemeteries for a picnic, a leisurely stroll or even a quiet moment to mourn the dead.

"People used to visit the cemeteries religiously. Now you never see anybody," said Kirschner, maneuvering his 1985 blue Buick Regal along a winding cement pathway that cuts through lush, rolling hills and tombstones.

"The dead are forgotten. People have different ideas these days. They don't revere the dead anymore," he said. "I don't even go (to the cemeteries) anymore, and I live next door to them."

At least, parents still take their children to feed bread to the swans at the Cypress Lawn Cemetery duck pond.

Also, golfers still play a few rounds near grave plots at Olivet Cemetery, and farmers continue to cultivate flowers and vegetables in the shadow of nearby tombstones. But much of the interaction between the dead and the living in Colma has disappeared, he said.

Many of the grassy aisles that separate the rows of tombstones are vacant. Parking lots sit mostly empty. Funeral processions still stop traffic at intersections, but they don't rumble by in solemn veneration as frequently as they used to, Kirschner said.

However, this city of about 400 registered voters remains devoted to its cemeteries. (Kirschner, who has spent the last decade on the City Council, likes to crack the local quip: "Whenever we need to get some votes, we dig 'em up someplace.")

Although cemeteries contribute little to city coffers through sales and property taxes and business license fees, they wield considerable clout in city politics, Kirschner said.

Colma locals agree the loyalty residents feel toward the cemeteries stems as much from tradition as from anything else. Cemeteries first planted roots in Colma — or what was then unincorporated farmland — in 1887, when San Francisco city fathers passed laws forbidding burials and cemeteries within city limits. So cemetery owners simply packed up their belongings and moved south.

"The cemeteries don't ask for much, but what they do ask for, they get," said Kirschner, a retired taxi cab owner. "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them."

Usually, what the cemeteries want is more land on which to expand. Despite sprawling urbanization, there's still considerable open space for the cemeteries to move onto, most of it at the base of the city's scenic foothills. These days, the Chinese cemetery would like to buy three more plots, and they'll probably

get them, Kirschner said.

"There's a dedication between the cemeteries and the city. It's nothing on paper. It's something that comes from the heart," said Jeannene Castagna, family service director for the 160-acre Cypress Lawn Cemetery, which is celebrating its 100th year.

"The city's unique because we're all in the same business here — the business of helping one another," she said.

But burials have slowed in recent years as more and more people opt for cremation, Kirschner said. The Neptune Society, a cremation services business, has made significant inroads into the cemetery business in recent years, industry officials said.

Even Kirschner, who speaks in reverent tones about the cemeteries, said he's decided to be cremated. "I've been around cemeteries too long," he said.

Those who do choose to be buried may not get the luxury of a fancy tombstone. Rising maintenance costs and space limitations have forced many cemetery owners to offer only small, embedded burial plaques instead of elaborate headstones, Castagna said.

"We have to individually weed-eat each one," she said, explaining the disadvantages of tombstones. "By the time our gardening staff is done on one side of the cemetery, it's time to start the other side. It's a constant thing."

Cemetery owners no longer allow mourners to plant flowers in the ground near graves — also too time-consuming to maintain, they said. That's another reason people don't come around much to tend the graves anymore, Kirschner said.

But one place that hasn't lost its popularity in Colma is Coat-tail Malloy's, a historic tavern built in 1877 near a circle of cemeteries. Its current owner, Lanty Malloy, said the old-time bar is a popular hangout for mourners eager to lift their spirits after a funeral.

"If they come in sad, they leave happy," said Malloy, speaking loudly over the chatter of a late-morning drinking crowd.

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William Randolph Hearst
Newspaper tycoon



Earl Warren
Former chief justice

California's rich, famous reside eternally in Colma

Peninsula Times Tribune

COLMA — It sits on a small, grassy knoll — as big and imposing as the man himself.

The imperial-looking mausoleum for the late Earl Warren, the nation's 14th chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, stands majestically against the wind-whipped foothills and eucalyptus trees at Cypress Lawn Cemetery in Colma.

Warren is one of a number of California notables who have sought eternal bliss in one of Colma's 13 cemeteries, which together store more than 1 million of the San Francisco Bay Area's deceased.

Wyatt Earp, marshal of Tombstone, Ariz., is buried in Colma's Jewish cemetery. He wasn't Jewish, but his wife, Josephine, was. She is buried at his side.

William Randolph Hearst, the multimillionaire newspaper tycoon, is entombed in an unmarked vault of Grecian pillars, similar to the opulent surroundings he enjoyed in life. The bodies of denim-kingpin Levi Strauss, banker Charles Crocker and sugar magnate Claus Spreckles also lie in the Colma soil.

A short walk through the tombstones leads to the unique marker of Frances "Lefty" O'Doul, the National League batting champion also known as the "man in the green suit." On O'Doul's marble marker, a large relief of a baseball and bat and a record of his batting averages glimmer in the sunlight.

Perhaps one of Colma's most famous dead residents is Emperor (Joshua) Norton, the self-proclaimed emperor of the United States and protector of Mexico. Every year on Norton's birthday, a group of his loyalists, calling themselves the followers of "E Clampus Vitas," gather and organize a boisterous parade to his grave for a short celebration.

Also buried in Colma is A.P. Giannini, founder of the Bank of America, and Comstock bonanza kings William O'Brien, James C. Flood, John Mackay and James Fair.

The remains of Ishi, the last member of a lost Indian tribe, lie in a pottery urn that he reportedly crafted himself.

And, residents say Colma also contains the bodies of one of the nation's most notorious gangsters and a Hell's Angel who chose to be interred with his motorcycle.

