

GOLDEN ★ NOTES

Volume 27, No. 1

Spring, 1981

SERMONS IN THE STONES



THE CITY CEMETERY

SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SERMONS IN THE STONES

THE CITY CEMETERY

by

TERRY WILLIS

*Best wishes
and happy holidays!*

*Terry Willis
Dec. 10
1981*



SERMONS IN THE STONES

THE CITY CEMETERY

by
TERRY WILLIS

Walk through the black wrought iron gate on Broadway, just west of Riverside Boulevard. Walk into another world, a world inhabited by squirrels, groundhogs, bluejays and memories of those who once walked the streets of Sacramento. Notice the sense of silence within the park-like acreage, in contrast to the busy cars and strip commercial activity on Broadway.

Today most of the graves are left untended. Weeds and wild grasses grow in the family plots and the walkways. Here and there one might find occasional bits of evidence of human concern, such as an apple juice can holding a wilted bouquet of calla lilies, or a spray of faded plastic flowers. Monuments have been broken or knocked down. Many are missing. The low brick and masonry walls around many family plots have started to crumble. The city of the dead suffers from symptoms of urban decay.

But once — once long ago, the City Cemetery served the living as well as the dead. Once it was a source of civic pride. Once it served as a sacred park; an outdoor church where visitors might wander for spiritual communion with

the departed and social communion with neighbors who were likewise visiting family shrines. The cemetery provided a sense of the continuity of life from generation to generation. Sermons engraved in the tombstones reassured the bereaved that death was only a temporary separation. The monuments and landscaping expressed the individuality and unity of the family. For survivors, the ritual of dressing up, taking flowers, and tending the foliage in the cemetery plot reinforced a bond between the living and the dead.

CIVIC PRIDE

During the 1800's and early 1900's, such contemporary records of the city's progress as the city directories, the county histories and the annual new year's report in the *Sacramento Union* described the cemetery as a civic asset. William Willis, editor of the *History of Sacramento County* (1913) reiterated the laudatory descriptions given in previous volumes and in Sacramento newspapers. The City Cemetery, he wrote, "*is beautifully adorned with trees, flowering shrubs and plants, and many fine monuments are to be seen there.*"

When the next county history was published almost two decades later (Major J. W. Wooldridge, ed., 1931), not a word was mentioned about any cemetery. Customs had changed. Fewer people visited family plots with any regularity, and it was no longer fashionable to stroll about the grounds of the cemetery on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

On the day before Memorial Day, 1981, one plot stood out for its lush green grass and the two bouquets of fresh flowers. Stephen Hopkins, a third generation Sacramentan, paused in his raking to move the water hose to a different corner of the family plot. "*Back in the 1920's,*" he said, "*all of the plots looked as nice as ours. You used to see lots of people walking around. I don't know when things*

started to change. I just started tending our plot about twenty years ago, and it was pretty quiet then."



The Sacramento City Cemetery reflects a trend in the larger society which has been documented by the French social historian Philippe Aries. In his study of social attitudes toward death, Aries noted that in Victorian times, sex was unmentionable but death was romanticized and glorified with sentimental rhetoric. *In modern times, a reversal has occurred: sex has gone public, but death, "the new pornography", has become a taboo subject.* The cemetery, by a logical extension, has become a taboo place. Even though the cemetery is open to the public, a newcomer may experience a sense of trepidation, as a trespasser on unfamiliar ground.

But this may be changing. With the new interest in genealogy, nostalgia, historical roots and restoration, people are becoming interested once again in the cemetery as a record of the past available to us today.

Jose ("Joe") Urioste, supervisor of the 48-acre site, takes a personal interest both in the physical care of the grounds and in making visitors feel welcome. Maintaining

48 acres is not an easy task. *"We can't bring heavy equipment in here," explained Joe, "and since the passage of Proposition 13, we have only two full-time people here."*

Since last fall, Sacramento County Work Project crews have spent two or three weekends each month cleaning, weeding and revitalizing the grounds under the direction of Don Meyer, juvenile court supervising probation officer. Last winter, Work Project crews cleaned, leveled and re-landscaped the Veteran's Plot on the southern portion of the cemetery. On the Sunday before Memorial Day, four crews, each consisting of 12 - 15 boys and girls, arrived in yellow buses. They raked, shoveled and hoed the plots and pathways, sometimes uncovering markers in clearing away the dry grass and debris.

"They clean out the weeds, but they save the California poppies," said Joe. "Their counselors give them discipline, guidance and sensitivity - rough, tough macho combined with genuine affection, and the kids respond. They have done a terrific job, better than many professionals. We are all proud of their work."

WALKING TOUR

To introduce visitors to the historic resources of the cemetery, Sacramento City College instructor William Mahan and his students recently developed a walking tour. The City Department of Community Services (formerly the Parks Dept.) has prepared a brochure and map for the self-guided tour, giving a brief history of the cemetery and short biographies of some of the more colorful characters.

Entering the gate from the Broadway side, the visitor will notice on the left the office, a small, white, painted brick building with a shake roof. To the right of the entry

are three large stone markers. A copper plaque mounted on granite designates the cemetery as *Historic Landmark #556*. The polished granite marker in the middle commemorates *Hardin Bigelow*, first mayor of Sacramento, who was injured in the Squatter's Riot in August, 1850, and died of cholera in San Francisco three months later. Next to Bigelow is a monument to *John Sutter, Jr.*, son of the Swiss Captain who built Sutter's Fort. The younger Sutter is credited with founding the city of Sacramento, against the will of his father who had planned to develop the town on higher ground.

One then follows the map to the family plots of *Judge Edwin B. Crocker* (Crocker Art Museum); *Mark Hopkins* (Central Pacific Railroad); *General A. M. Winn*, Founder of the Native Sons of the Golden West; *Col. Wm. Steven Hamilton*, whose chief claim to fame apparently was his filial relationship to the American Revolutionary hero (Alexander H.); and *John Bigler*, Governor from 1852 - 56.

The walking tour also guides the visitor to a simple marker engraved "*Cholera 1852*", which serves as a stark reminder of a once-deadly disease which struck quickly and without warning in periodic epidemics until modern sanitation measures reduced its frequency nearly to extinction. In the same vicinity is the resting place of the *Spanish American War veterans*. Going up the path heading north one finds the *Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.)*, an organization of Union Army veterans of the Civil War. The G.A.R. plot is guarded by a statue of a soldier standing straight and tall. Incidentally, the G.A.R. soldier is the only male represented by statuary in the City Cemetery.



SOCIAL FUNCTION

The walking tour provides a new dimension as a glimpse of the past, for the hard, enduring stone monuments are tangible physical evidence of the people who otherwise might be only words and portraits in a history book.

But the cemetery in its early years was more than simply an outdoor museum or fenced-off display area for a series of artifacts. The cemetery itself served a social function for the living. The gestalt of the city of the dead was both an integral part of the fabric and a reflection of other values in the Victorian society which created it.

Imagine, if you will, a balmy spring Sunday afternoon a hundred years ago – a gentle breeze, a blue sky with scattered white clouds, and a myriad of birds chirping in the trees. People dressed in Sunday best would drive through

the gates in their horse-drawn carriages, kneel at the family plot and stroll around the grounds. Neighbors would nod to each other and exchange quiet pleasantries. A description of such a scene appeared in the *Sacramento Bee*, February 10, 1860:

At this season of the year, before the rough ocean winds of the Summer months have commenced to blow, there is a quiet beauty about our metropolitan Cemetery which attracts many visitors. Now may be seen carriages winding among the circuitous avenues which lead to the last resting places of the dead; and here and there silent groups of relatives and friends of departed loved ones, reviving sad memories, or coming to strew the cherished spot with flowers.

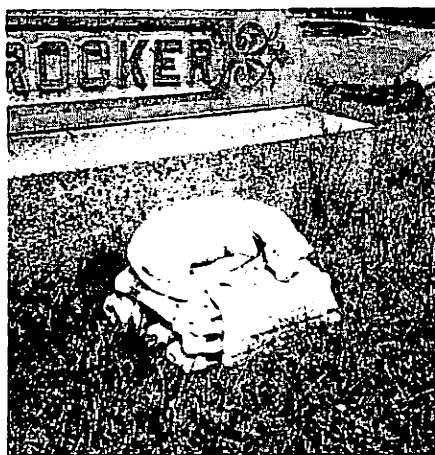
Now let us return to the entryway of the City Cemetery today. Just to the west of the Sutter monument is the family plot of one of the several Crocker families interred there. Note how it resembles, in shadow form as it were, a family abode. The rectangular plot is raised one or two feet above the walkway, bounded by a low granite wall with a short, stubby pillar on each corner and one on each side of the "doorway" or threshold; a granite step inviting the visitor to "enter" and sit or stand on the grass by the tombstones. The name "*Cal. Crocker*" is carved on the riser. Placed squarely on the back of the lot, facing the entryway, is a house-shaped monument about six feet high, of pink granite on a gray granite foundation. A monogrammed "C" graces the pediment. Beneath the monogram on the front of the monument are the names of the patriarch and matriarch:

"Calvin E. Crocker, born May 26, 1834; died Jan. 9, 1916."

"Josephine H. wife of C. E. Crocker, born May 26, 1848; died May 5, 1920."

On the side to the south is the name of the child who died as a toddler: "*Bennie C., son of C. E. and J. H. Crocker, died May 23, 1873; aged 1 yr. 8 mo. 8 days.*" On the north side are two more names: "*Dr. J. W. Puch, died Jan. 23, 1896, aged 78 years*"; and "*Harriet Puch, died June 19, 1883, aged 64 years.*" Quite possibly these were Josephine's parents.

Nestled at the foot of the monument and directly in front of it is a small marble lamb in repose, the tombstone of the young child who died some forty years before his parents, little Bennie C.



Now look around at other family plots, neatly bordered with low walls of brick or granite, or concrete curbing or a wrought-iron fence – distinctive boundaries to give the living a feeling of security (certainly not to keep the dead from getting out!). Note how the walkways are laid out, designed for people to walk alone or in two's or three's. The walks circulate around the cemetery in a regular pattern reminiscent of city blocks, but with a rural, pastoral feeling reinforced by trees and shrubs, conducive to a calm and soothing appreciation of nature.

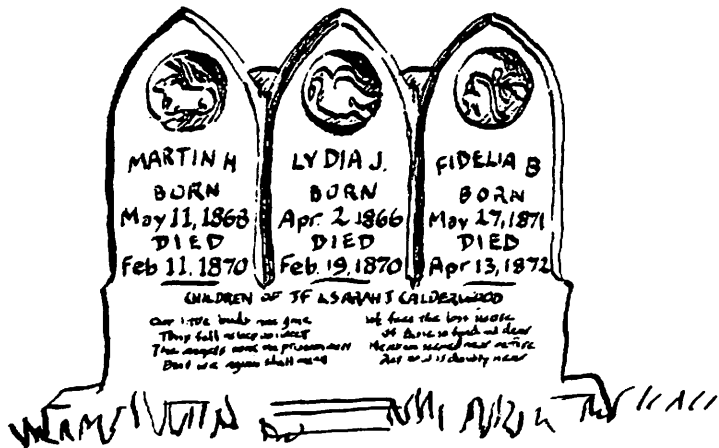
INSCRIPTIONS

Now walk around the cemetery as the spirit moves you. Note how frequently the inscriptions affirm that death was a sad but temporary separation. Members of families and fraternal organizations would be re-united in heaven. Often the deceased's significant role in the family was inscribed prominently: "Mother", "Father", "Brother", or "Our Baby". Men who had served in the military or belonged to fraternal organizations often had their affiliation noted on their markers. Almost universally, the grave marker bore the date of death. Usually it indicated the age of the deceased, sometimes in years, months and days. Sometimes a phrase or religious saying was added as a reminder of immortality and a promise of eventual reunion, such as "Asleep in Jesus". On some of the markers, an inscribed or bas relief handclasp served as a dual symbol of farewell or greeting, with the possibility of being interpreted either as the living saying goodbye to the dead, or the hand of God or an angel reaching out to welcome the spirit of the departed.

When little Callie died at the age of a year and a half in 1856, her parents, T. J. and E. Wilbur, chose a white marble tombstone with a broken rosebud carved above the following inscription:

*She was as sweet a flower
As e'er to earth was given
And mercy in a kindly hour
Transplanted her in Heaven.*

*To those who for her loss are grieved
This consolation's given
She's from of world of woes relieved
And blooms a rose in Heaven.*



The triple headstone of the three Calderwood children who died in 1870 and 1872 still stands in the City Cemetery. Martin, age one year, and Lydia, age three, both died in February, 1870. Fidelia died on April 13, 1872, at the age of ten months. The inscription at the base of the grave marker reflects the parents' grief at being separated from their little ones and the conviction that the family would be reunited in the afterlife:

Our little buds have gone	We feel the loss is sore
They fell asleep so sweet	Of those so fond and dear
The angels took the precious ones	Heaven seemed near to us before
But we again shall meet.	But now is doubly near.

This headstone utilizes three of the most common artistic symbols for children during Victorian times: birds, lambs and flowers. For Martin, the engraving is a lamb in repose. For Lydia, a dove carries a broken rosebud skyward. Little Fidelia is commemorated by a single, broken bud – the rose cut off before it had a chance to bloom.

A few of the tombstones carried rather pessimistic messages. The headstone of Fannie B. Rogers, who died June 4, 1870, at the age of 16, mourned:

*For she, the young, the gay,
Has left us here to weep.
While covered in her parent clay
And wrapt in death's long sleep.*

When Fannie's mother died eight years later, a more optimistic inscription was chosen. The front of the stone said simply, "Mother". The back said, "Mary A., wife of Wm. A. Rogers, d. July 26, 1878, aged 52", followed by this poem:

*The angels have called her, our idolized one,
The earth life has ended the heav'nly begun.
She liveth forever, to suffer no more,
Where joy is triumphant and sorrow is o'er.*

In a similar vein, the tombstone of Prudence, wife of Joshua Fountain (one of several Fountain family plots in the cemetery) informs the visitor that she died December 13, 1872, and gives a message of hope:

*Mother thou hast gone before
Where no grief or sorrow goes
Thou hast reached the Heavenly shore
Where our Father all things knows.*

Perhaps indicative of an increasing optimism around the end of the decade of the 1870's, at least two Sacramento families, the Jerretts and the Gruhlers, chose the following inscription for the tombstones of their respective daughters, Nettie Rosetta Jerrett and Anna Luisa Gruhler, who both died in adolescence:

*Weep not for me my parents dear
I am not dead but sleepeth here
I were not yours but God's alone
He loved me best and called me home.*

Apparently monuments became increasingly large and elaborate as the turn of the century approached. Some families built private mausoleums to contain their caskets. Others built elaborate monuments with the names of family members inscribed on the base and a larger-than-life statue of a woman, an allegorical woman; standing straight, tall and impassively, giving an impression of feminine strength and calm resignation. Of the statues still remaining in the cemetery as of this writing, there was only one male, the Civil War soldier we noted earlier, standing guard over the G.A.R. plot. There were perhaps half a dozen allegorical women — goddess figures — and several smaller statues of women in attitudes of repose or of grief. One might speculate that the female principle; i.e., the role of woman as keeper of the family and molder of culture, became even more important as the century went on.

Sometime around the nineteen-twenties, the monuments, statues, decorative tombstones and even the family plots went out of style. Grave markers became plain rectangular plaques laid flush with the ground and resembling sidewalk utility covers. Instead of being buried with their families, children were buried in clusters or groups informally known among the groundskeepers as babyland. It was more convenient to place the coffins of the same size in the same area. Families no longer bought plots with room for a dozen or more members as they had in the past.

CHILD MORTALITY

Back in the 1800's, expectations were different. Many children died of disease or the complications of accidents, so families had to cope with loss more frequently than they do today. A Sacramento baby born in the 1870's had a 50 - 50 chance of reaching its fifth birthday. Of the 250 babies born in 1872, eight died at birth or within a day. Another 13 died within the first month. One third of the children died before reaching their first birthday and half again as many died between one and five years old. After the age of five, the mortality rate dropped markedly and survivors had a good chance of living well into adulthood.

Children learned early that little brothers and sisters might not be around long. In the spring of 1872, several little schoolgirls hit upon an ingenious pretext to obtain some pretty flowers. One of them would go up to a home with roses and honeysuckle blooming in the yard, knock on the door, and ask the homeowner, ever so politely, "*Might I please have a few flowers for my little sister's coffin?*"

The morning *Union* on April 25, 1872, reported the game under the heading, "*Remarkable Mortality*", suggesting with a "*tch, tch!*" that either the death rate for Sacramento infants had gone up drastically in the past month or the schoolgirls were practicing a deception. The reporter interviewed one of the girls, who admitted that "*she only got the flowers that she might have a nice bouquet to take to school.*"

The *Bee* that evening came to the defense of the girls, urging homeowners to give them flowers willingly so they would not have to resort to fibs, for "*Flowers bloom one day and die the next – like all good things of this world, even life itself – their beauty is but momentary, and while they last all should have the benefit of them.*"

MOURNING CUSTOMS

Social customs provided a framework for the bereaved to express their mourning and for the community at large to respect the mourning. In order for the community to fulfill its role, it had to be informed when death occurred. The bereaved family draped a length of black crepe on the door of their home, attached to the bell knob or door handle with a black ribbon if the deceased was married or advanced in years, or with a white ribbon to signify that the person was young or unmarried. When a well-known citizen died, flags were flown at half mast. Sometimes the bells of a church or fire house were tolled at the time of a death or burial.

Traditionally, the body stayed in the family home until time for burial, often from one to three days, with candles burning while members of the family took turns maintaining vigil. A book of etiquette of a hundred years ago (John H. Young, *Our Deportment*, 1881) recommended the following demeanor:

There should be no loud talking or confusion while the body remains in the house. All differences and quarrels must be forgotten in the house of mourning, and personal enemies who meet at a funeral must treat each other with respect and dignity.

Usually the funeral services took place in the home, following which the mourners walked or rode in carriages to the cemetery. When the two young sons of Clark and Julia Crocker died within a day of each other, the *Bee* on June 26, 1872, gave a brief description of the double funeral:

The coffins were placed in one hearse, and followed by a large number of the friends of the bereaved parents, were conveyed to the City Cemetery. Impressive funeral exercises were conducted by Rev. Dr. Dwinell.

After the funeral, relatives and close friends usually wore mourning dress, distinguished by its somber color and absence of frills and jewelry, for three months to two years, depending on their relationship to the deceased. The recommended time was two years for a widow, one year to signify the loss of a parent or a child; six months for a grandparent, a brother or sister, or a friend who had left you an inheritance; and three months for an uncle, aunt, nephew or niece.

Victorians recognized varying degrees of mourning, and these were reflected in minute details of dress, down to and including the handkerchief. According to the aforementioned book of etiquette, "*Mourning handkerchiefs should be of very sheer fine linen, with a border of black, very wide for close mourning, narrower as the black is lightened.*" Kleenex probably would not have been acceptable.

Although Victorians wore mourning dress for a rather long period of time by today's standards, they did not encourage seclusion or prolonged grieving. The same book of etiquette recommended a prompt resumption of normal everyday activities:

It is the duty of every one to interest himself or herself in accustomed objects of care as soon as it is possible to make the exertion; for in fulfilling our duties to the living, we best show the strength of our affection for the dead, as well as our submission to the will of Him who knows what is better for our dear ones than we can know or dream.

For Victorians, death was a community affair. Moreover, it was a temporary, as well as a temporal condition. The implication of eventual reunion was graven in stone and reflected in the nature of the setting: the care and craftsmanship lavished upon the granite and marble monuments, the maintenance of trees, shrubs, and flowers and particularly, the custom of placing family members next to each other in death. Certain areas were set aside for members of fraternal and religious groups and military organizations, in the manner of an extended family, for these social affiliations were valued also and perpetuated in death.

Whatever vocation or status a man may have held in his lifetime, most of the monuments and markers reflected his role in the family: "*Father*", "*Son*", "*Brother*". Women, the keepers of home and hearth, also were commemorated for their domestic roles: "*Mother*", "*Daughter*", "*Sister*". Married women were identified most often by their relationship to their husbands; as for example, "*Laura, wife of Richard Dale*", "*Mary, wife of George H. Dana*" and "*Prudence, wife of Joshua Fountain*".

For young girls accompanying their parents to set flowers on the grave of a loved one, the lesson was clear: the family was the key to immortality. The woman who married and had children would be commemorated with a tombstone denoting her role as wife or mother. The feminine principle was honored and revered in the cultural response to death. Woman's domestic sphere was extended to include not only the home and community, but the after-life as well.

Thus, the city of the dead reflected and re-created the roles that were valued in the city of the living. As Sacramento citizens walked through the cemetery in the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, the "*sermons in the stones*" reinforced their belief in the bonds of family and friendship.

As the role of the cemetery in community life diminished following World War I, mourning customs also changed. By the end of the 1920's, bodies no longer lay in state at home, but were removed to the funeral parlor as soon as possible to await burial. Outward symbols of mourning, such as somber dress, veils and black armbands, were no longer worn after the final rites were over. Crepe ribbons or wreaths no longer identified the family residence. Children were shielded from the reality of death.

Along with the reduction in ritual surrounding death went a withdrawal of institutionalized social support for the bereaved. The death of a loved one used to be considered a painful but ennobling experience to be shared and publicly acknowledged. As social mores changed, such a loss became a more personal and private matter, almost an embarrassment. Survivors cried alone.

SOURCES

Aries, Philippe, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974. 107 pp.

Mahan, William, "Welcome to the Historic Sacramento City Cemetery" brochure, City of Sacramento Department of Community Services, 1981.

Willis, Terry, "Sacramento Women in 1872" thesis, CSUS, 1977.

Willis, William, *History of Sacramento County*, Los Angeles, 1913. Page 147.

Young, John H., *Our Deportment; or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society*, Chicago, 1881.

With appreciation to Dr. Joseph McGowan for his encouragement and guidance.

— TW

The author, Terry Willis,
is the proprietor of
RIVER CITY RESEARCH,
specializing in public relations and local history
912 - 21st Street
Sacramento, California 95814
(916) 446-0686

SACRAMENTO COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P. O. Box 1175
SACRAMENTO, CA 95805