

Redwood City WEEKLY NEWS

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Union Cemetery's Memorial Day

By LYNDA ALLEN
Weekly News Correspondent

Union Cemetery, where many of Redwood City's war dead and pioneer citizens found their final resting place, has been the traditional site of the city's on-and-off-again Memorial Day observances for the past 100 years.

When the cemetery was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, a number of civic groups banded together to re-establish an old-fashioned kind of community commemoration featuring school children singing songs like *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* and lapping up ice cream cones.

The 1990 version, sponsored by the Archives Committee of the Redwood City Public Library, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Native Daughters of the Golden West, the Heritage Association and the Boy Scouts and

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Girl Scouts, will begin at 10 a.m. Monday, May 28 at the cemetery, located at the corner of Woodside Road and El Camino Real.

It will be videotaped to become part of the Redwood City Public Library's film archives.

No one has been buried in the cemetery since 1959, but its history dates back to 1852. With the influx of squatters to the embarcadero at Redwood Creek, burials were improvised on a plot of ground owned by William Carey Jones.

In 1859, Jones sold the land to Assemblyman Horace Hawes, who demanded a stop to the burials.

The Union Cemetery Association was formed that year and the bodies were moved to six acres of state-owned land adjoining the southern boundary of Hawes' property. Anxious to have the cemetery relocated, Hawes contributed toward the \$500 purchase price.

The association actively managed the cemetery for 40 years and last met in 1918. By then, the automobile had made the hometown cemetery unnecessary and the concept of buying perpetual care along with the grave site had made the association superfluous.

Though Redwood City helped maintain the property beginning in 1937, the state didn't deed the cemetery to the city until 1962.

In 1963, the cemetery became the town's first designated state historical landmark. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 due to the efforts of the Archives Committee of the Redwood City Public Library and support from the community. Inclusion on the list means a better chance at funds for restoration and extra protection by prohibiting the use of federal money to destroy or change the use of the landmark without additional review of its historical significance.

Vandalism has plagued the Union Cemetery as far back as 1890. Fences have been torn down or burned, tombstones stolen, moved or destroyed, flagpoles ripped from their pedestals and

vases and statues broken. Perhaps most shocking was the destruction of the life-size pot-metal (an alloy of copper) statue of a Civil War soldier. It was erected by the soldiers of the Grand Army of the Republic in 1889. After repeated attacks by vandals and attempts at restoration, it was removed for safekeeping.

(In 1987, thieves broke into two tombs and stole teeth and fillings from three 100-year-old skeletons.)

The cemetery has also encountered periods of neglect when weeds and litter cluttered the grounds. However, clean-up drives and periodic repairs have been organized over the years by various community groups, civic organizations, con-

cerned citizens and relatives of those buried in the cemetery. A recent cleanup by volunteers removed 11 tons of debris from the cemetery.

It is estimated that nearly 2,000 people have been interred in the Union Cemetery. The last burial took place in 1959.

Burial plots were initially sold for \$10, \$15 or \$25, according to size, but increased as the local population expanded.

Along with immigrants, families, paupers and unknowns, the burial register list includes local pioneers, county officials and prominent citizens. Simon Mezes, founder of Mezesville, which became downtown Redwood City, was buried in the Union Cemetery but his remains were later removed to a Colma cemetery.



This memorial to California's Civil War dead resided in Union Cemetery until it was damaged by vandals. Photograph courtesy Redwood City Public Library.

Others buried in the historic graveyard are: Captain John Greer, a founder of Woodside; Sheldon P. Pharis of Kings Mountain, known as the "shingle king"; John Sears, a founder of Searsville and LaHonda; Sarah Wallis of Palo Alto, who led the California suffrage movement; and James Peace, the first to raise the American flag in the county, a historic event that occurred on July 4, 1856, at the Woodside Store. Peace was buried in that flag.

County officials include Benjamin Fox, the first judge in San Mateo County, and George Buck, who was district attorney in 1882 and later served as a superior court judge from 1890 to 1932.

More than 40 Civil War veterans are buried in the cemetery's Grand Army of the Republic plot. Among them are Lt. Will Frisbie, who fought in famous battles at York River, Suffolk and James River, and later served as coroner and public administrator in Redwood City; First Lt. George Filkins, who fought at Missionary Ridge, Nashville and Stone River; and James Baxter, who was wounded in the neck with a sword at the Battle of Gettysburg. He died in 1936 and was the last one buried in the G.A.R. plot. There are no soldiers buried in the cemetery who were killed during the Civil War.

Sept 10, 1993

Union Cemetery Reborn

By Erik Høgh-Sørensen

There's movement at Union Cemetery.

After close to a century of vandalism at the pioneer graveyard, a non-profit group has started careful pruning and registration of plants including rare, century-old heritage roses.

The Historic Union Cemetery Association (HUCA), a local non-profit corporation founded in March, has also temporarily removed some fences and wooden grave markers that, officials said, had been used partly for firewood.

During the last few months, HUCA volunteers have met every third Saturday to do weeding, pruning and trimming.

"It is very simple and straightforward maintenance that our city gardeners would do every three or four months or when they had time," said Ramon Aguilar, city management analyst.

However, the work is not without dissension from local history buff Nita Spangler, who wants a cultural resource management plan in place before any work is done to

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the cemetery.

Union Cemetery is one of only a handful of California's about 2,000 cemeteries to have a special historic distinction with the National Register of Historic Places, according to Spangler.

"A plan would tell you what to do and how it should look," Spangler said, adding that the specifics should be worked out by professionals.

"For example, if you're going to restore a house from 1900, do you then use plumbing from that time period?" Spangler asked.

HUCA members, however, counter that nothing has been done for years, and that the state of the cemetery reached a critical point where action became absolutely necessary. Aguilar and HUCA secretary Helen Graves said wooden markers had been used for firewood.

Graves said substantial good had been done in only a few months.

"One of our biggest advances was the old heritage roses that were being gobbled up by shrubs," said Graves, who is a member of the city's Historic Resources Advisory Committee, which advises the City Council.

Graves said the heritage rose plants are more than 100 years old and rare because they bloom in different colors every year. She also said a Palo Alto rose enthusiast had offered to donate 13 heritage rose plants, one dating back to 1842.

The rose plants and additional cuttings from the site's own heritage roses would be transplanted next spring, Graves said.

She added that HUCA and the advisory committee is working on a management plan including the criteria for doing projects at the Union Cemetery.

In the meantime, volunteers are following guidelines established by the state of California and the Na-

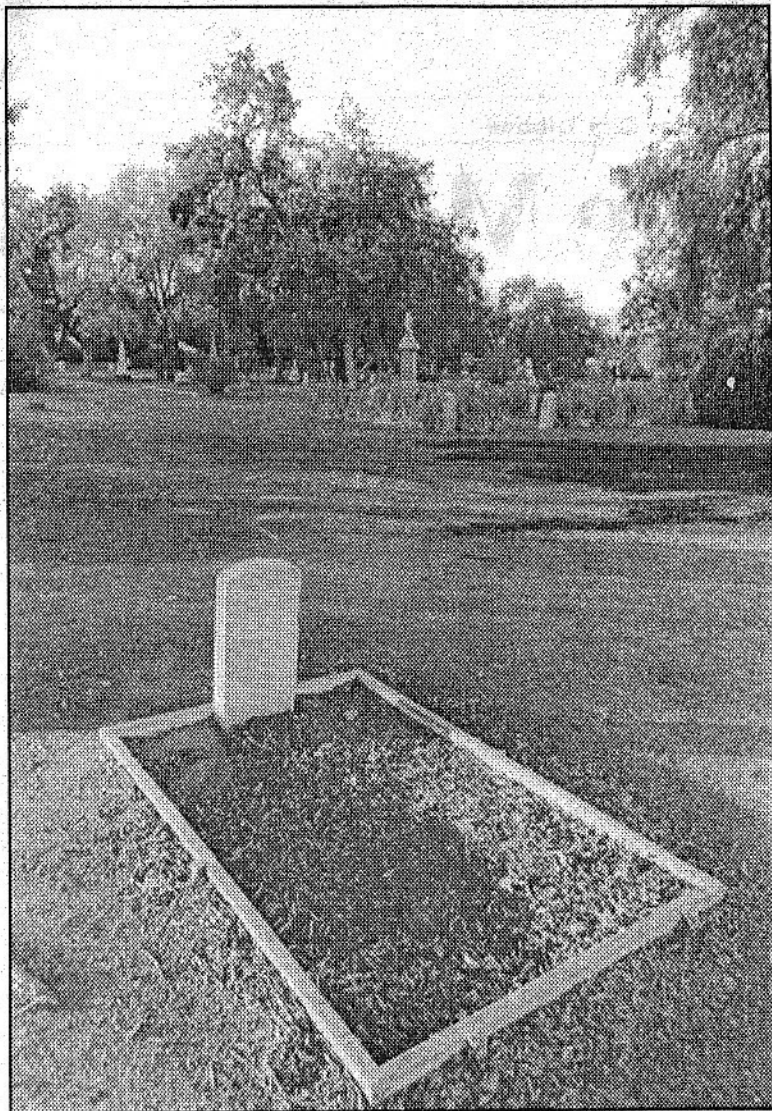


Photo: Susan Garrison

The Historic Union Cemetery Association is working on upgrading the site, which dates back to 1859.

tional Register of Historic Places, according to Graves.

"The state office of Historical Preservation says it's not necessary to have a plan in place before taking action," Graves said.

In addition, the city Park and Recreation Department has already established some guidelines for what the volunteers can do at the cemetery.

For her part, Spangler envisions the desolate cemetery should be more like a park. This would foster

more use by Redwood City residents in search of a free space while still preserving the memorial aspects, according to Spangler.

"If the cemetery is to be preserved, more people should be interested in it and enjoy it," Spangler said. "If more people come in, that would deter vandalism and justify city spending on it."

Spangler said a park-like use of Union Cemetery would be in line with the current view of a cemetery: "Society's attitude toward death and cemeteries has changed."