

A Grief Delayed

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Dave and Helen Mitchell feel better knowing the son they never talked about is remembered in the new infant memorial garden at Mountain View Cemetery. Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Last month, Helen Mitchell was on a B.C. ferry, returning to Vancouver from the recreational home she shares on the Sunshine Coast with her husband. She was alone, and picked up a newspaper to help pass the time. Her heart raced when she read a short article about the development of a new memorial garden at Mountain View Cemetery to remember thousands of babies buried in unmarked, mass graves there in the last century.

She got home, made one phone call and received news that had been hidden from her and husband Dave for 50 years: their baby, who had died prematurely three days after he was born in Vancouver 1956, was buried in Mountain View.

She waited for Dave to return home. He walked into their longtime home-two blocks away from and almost in view of the cemetery-and saw that his wife had been crying.

"We found him," she replied. Then they both cried.

The Mitchells are among thousands of local parents who had no idea their infant was buried at Mountain View. Almost 11,000 babies are buried in common graves in three sections of the cemetery. Some were stillborn, others had lived a few short minutes, hours or days. The new memorial garden commemorates the more than 6,000 buried in one section alone. From 1914 until now the graves contained no markers, but the cemetery kept meticulous records of the grave location of each child. And like the Mitchells, more parents are now coming to the cemetery to finally catch up on a grief delayed.

The Mitchells agreed to speak to the Courier about their private story to let other parents in their situation know they need to talk about the past, and to encourage them to contact Mountain View to find out whether their infant is buried there. At the time of their son's death they were told it was best to be strong, to move on and have another baby as soon as possible. They regret the years they spent not speaking to each other, or to anyone else, about their loss. The Mitchells hope the

new memorial will spark that discussion among other families who've suffered a similar loss and encourage them to search for their children.

"At first we weren't too sure if we wanted to talk about it to the media," admits Dave, a gentle-looking man with a grey beard and a ponytail. "But we discussed it and agreed that if we can help other parents find their child then this is something we should do."

In 1956, Helen gave birth to a son who was two months premature. At first all looked well. Dave says their son was so "beautiful and skookum" that one of the nurses promised to take a picture for them. But three days later the tiny boy passed away. The couple was stunned.

"I got home from work and the hospital called to say he died," says Dave. "I was in a state of shock and I have to tell you I was mad at God for a very long time. I kept asking, 'Why, why, why? Why did you do this to us?'"

He didn't want his wife staying in the hospital surrounded by new mothers and babies, so he told their doctor he'd pick her up immediately. Hospital staff assured them they would take care of the baby's burial. Dave told the doctor they'd like to call the baby David, but the physician suggested the couple might want to save that name in case they had another son. Following his advice, they named their child "Baby Mitchell."

The distraught couple left the hospital and drove to the top of Little Mountain, now better known as Queen Elizabeth Park. They sat there for several hours talking about their loss. To their later regret, it was one of the few times they spoke of the baby.

"That's just the way it was," says Helen. "It was like when my father died. No one ever said to me your father died of a heart attack. No one wanted to talk about death."

Dave agrees.

"In those days there was no counsellor to tell you what to do. You didn't even get any time off work for something like this," he says. "We were just in a state of shock."

According to Mountain View manager Glen Hodges, the Mitchells' story is typical. From the beginning of the 20th century through to the 1970s, the nurse or person in charge at a hospital where a baby had died would assure the parents or mother their child would receive a proper burial. They were then told to carry on with their lives. "Often the advice to the husband would be, 'You just go and get her pregnant again and she'll forget about this baby,'" says Hodges. "But of course that wasn't the case."

Hodges recently met a woman who came to the cemetery at the request of her dying father. The father told his daughter that her mother had given birth to premature twin boys in 1947 and both died after living only two days. He asked his daughter to find out where the babies were buried and she headed to Mountain View looking for answers. The woman discovered her brothers were buried at the cemetery and put

her father's mind at ease. But before the man died he made his daughter promise she wouldn't tell her mother.

"He said he didn't think she could handle it," says Hodges. "After her father died the daughter went to her mom and told her she'd found the boys' grave. Her mom told her that for 58 years she thought he knew what had happened to the babies, but had never told her. They just never talked about it. The advice they used to get back then was just move on with your life and I guess that's what they pretended to do."

Wandering through the new memorial garden on a sunny fall afternoon is a shock to modern sensibilities. More children died prematurely or at a young age in the early and middle years of the 20th century than do now. Many more.

According to B.C. Vital Statistics in 1925, 791 babies under one year of age died, including the stillborn. In 1975, there were 558 infant deaths, though it's unsure if that figure includes the stillborn. In 2005, 176 babies under the age of one died and 315 were stillborn.

The garden is designed as a dry stream bed flowing through a section of unmarked graves. It is planted with 800 perennials, young trees, shrubs and thyme. It also contains a handful of small memorial stones placed among thousands not marked—the idea of the design is that grieving families will buy stones to memorialize their young loved ones and spread them throughout the landscape.

The dates on the small stone markers tell the story of an earlier, harder time. Some bear a single date, marking lives measured in hours: "Anna-Maria Thews, July 19, 1956," "Salvatore Loconte, Sept. 7, 1957." Others remember infants who lived for two or three days, such as the stone dedicated to Rodney Joy, April 13-16, 1966. At the edge of the new infant area, a full-sized grave, unlike some others, holds only one child. The granite marker on the neatly groomed plot reads, "In loving memory, Carrole Joyce McCutcheon, 1940-1941, Remembered always."

Hodges says this grave is unusual because it holds only one child, compared to the others that contain the bodies of 20 or 30 infants.

"For some reason this family paid for a whole grave," says Hodges.

The new garden stands in stark contrast to the lack of recognition given to dead infants decades ago. But according to Hodges, the infant mortality rate was so high near the beginning of the 20th century that too many babies were dying to allow for separate graves and markers. The bodies of several infants contained in tiny coffins or boxes would be placed at the bottom of an adult-sized grave and covered with a board on which more coffins were placed. That stacking continued until the grave was full with anywhere from two to three dozen bodies. The names and locations of most of the babies buried in these mass graves were registered, which is why their exact location can be pinpointed today.

Mountain View opened in 1887 on a parcel of land now known as the Old Cemetery, bounded by Fraser Street to the east, East 37th Avenue to the south, 33rd Avenue to the north and a row of tall trees to the west. Between 1914 and 1928, infants were buried in a half dozen graves in the Old Cemetery. In 1929, the cemetery found it

had no more room for infant graves in that section, so from 1929 to 1971, 6,610 infants were buried in the mid-section of the cemetery, an area that sits outside Mountain View's temporary office.

"Except for in 1952, 1953 and 1954 when they used an area by that big tree," says Hodges, pointing. "I don't know what the rationale was, but they're there."

Each section of the cemetery where the infants are buried will eventually be recognized by a memorial. Hodges has taken on the task of erecting those memorials as a personal project. He says recognition for the grief of families is overdue.

"Based on staff reports, in about 1971 parents started finding out where their child was and they started asking if they could place a marker," says Hodges. "But with 20 and 30 infants to a grave it couldn't be done. You can't fit 30 markers on one grave. And the question became, 'Do you let one family and not the others?' So the staff had to say no." Not allowing parents and families to mark these graves was hard on Mountain View staff.

"Families would come looking for information and they'd be so happy to finally find out what happened to their child, or brother or sister," says Hodges. "But then they'd ask to place a marker and staff would have to say, 'No you can't.' The cemetery was run as an outside entity and that went against its protocol, policy and procedure."

Prior to coming to Vancouver in 2002 to manage Mountain View and oversee the ongoing redevelopment project, Hodges managed the municipal cemetery in Saskatoon. As with Mountain View, the Saskatoon cemetery also had an infant area containing anonymous mass graves. Creating an infant memorial in that Saskatoon cemetery was always a priority for Hodges, but it became even more important after his wife suffered a miscarriage.

"We were devastated. I don't know if it compares to losing a child after birth, but it was really difficult to deal with."

Hodges, who now has two healthy children with his wife, wanted an appropriate memorial. The idea of a traditional "big hunk of granite" with the names of infants engraved on it didn't sit well with him. He discussed with his staff the memorial's purpose and how to avoid repeating the anonymity of past tradition. He hired a landscape architect and together they decided on a design that included a linear landscape with a water element that would flow across the mass graves. The end result was the dry stream bed lined with stones.

A large boulder at the east end of the memorial is engraved with an explanation for the memorial. "One stone for every infant," the engraving reads. "Buried in this area of Mountain View Cemetery are many infants who were stillborn or died shortly after birth. One stone has been placed in this dry stream bed in memory of each infant. This garden is dedicated to these little ones and their families. Sept. 30, 2006."

Families can purchase a stone engraved with the baby's name, which will then be placed in the stream bed as close to where the infant is buried as possible. A stone costs \$250 to purchase-the actual stone and engraving is \$150, with the balance of the payment earmarked for the cemetery's perpetual care fund.

"The staff went to a masonry and hand-picked and counted each of the 6,610 stones," says Hodges. "It was important to them. It was part of the process."

Support for grieving parents today is different than what it was years ago.

Kay Johnson, director of Griefworks B.C.-the bereavement program for B.C. Children's Hospital and Women's Hospital and Health Centre, says for decades parents who lost an infant would keep their grief to themselves. But that doesn't mean they weren't deeply affected. Johnson remembers as a nursing student working on a psychiatry assignment assessing the emotional well-being of patients. She was struck by those people she'd met who had lost babies or infants.

"I spoke with 50-, 60- and 70-year-old women, and men, who had a stillborn child when they were young, maybe 16 years old," says Johnson. "This had been a burden to them ever since, but they had never talked about it. Losing an infant is an extremely important loss that should be honoured and acknowledged, but for years it wasn't."

When a woman enters the hospital now to give birth, an entire team-including doctors, nurses and social workers-gets involved, whether the pregnancy is healthy or not. From the start social workers ask about the woman's cultural, religious and personal beliefs to determine what the family's needs are. If there's any indication of a problem with the infant, the social workers work even more closely with the family. If the baby dies, the social workers and staff in the intensive care unit meet with the family to plan their next steps.

"For example in some cultures there might be a time frame during which the body has to go to the temple or church to be blessed," says Johnson. "Staff will work hard to make sure that happens. If an autopsy is necessary the social workers will work to get the baby blessed before it takes place."

Instead of encouraging parents to be strong and get on with their lives, staff help grieving parents create a bereavement or memory kit. It includes mementos such as a lock of hair, the infant's little blanket, a beaded identification bracelet and plaster casts of the baby's hands and feet.

"Those plaster casts are so tiny and precious," says Johnson. "The kit also includes quite a bit of written material. The kit is something the parents can keep to remember their infant and that's important."

Fifty years ago, there was no support and no bereavement kit for Helen and Dave Mitchell. Helen had always assumed their son, who was born at Grace Hospital-the former name of B.C. Children's and Women's-was buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Burnaby. She felt guilty for never looking for him there, but the subject was so painful she decided not to broach it with her husband. Dave also thought about their son during the years, but also kept silent.

They both now wish they had talked about their grief with each other and about their lost son to their children, Kathy, Tracy and their youngest David. That is the message the couple wants to share with others who might now have the chance to find their infant's resting place.

"We did feel guilty and we did the shoulda, woulda, coulda," says Dave. "But now we're just happy we know where the little guy is. We decided to talk to you because if we can help someone else get 'closure' as they call it today, we'd like to do that."

Standing by the garden, Dave looks fondly at his wife. "Thank-you sweetie for being such a good detective," he says.

Turning to the large boulder at the end of the memorial, Dave reads aloud from the engraved message: "This garden is dedicated to these little ones and their families."

They never knew how close they were to their own little one. The Mitchells moved to their home, so near to the cemetery, two years after their son's death. When their other children were little, Helen would walk with them through the cemetery, near where the infant memorial is today, on their way to school.

The Mitchells ordered a memorial stone for the garden, but it doesn't read "Baby Mitchell."

"We've named him," the couple says almost at the exact same time.

"His name is William Wallace Mitchell," says Dave, proud of his Scottish heritage. "We think it's a fitting name."

William Wallace was a ferocious Scottish knight who fought the English for Scotland's freedom in the late 1200s, early 1300s. Wallace became a hero to the Scots, who dubbed him Braveheart. As Dave and Helen speak about naming their son, it's the first and only time during their visit to the cemetery they lose their composure. A question is quietly asked: Are they sad or happy?

"There have been a few tears, but this is a happy time for us," says Dave. "We are so happy this garden is here and we've found our boy."

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An alphabetical list of burials is available through Mountain View's website, www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/nonmarketoperations/mountainview. For more information, call 604-325-2646.

Kay Johnson says anyone dealing with the death of an infant, either recently or decades ago, can call Griefworks B.C. for help at 604-875-2741 or go to www.griefworksbc.com, a website that offers support and information.

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