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A green way to dispose of the dead

Environmentally friendly burials are popular in Europe and the U.S., but only one Canadian cemetery offers the chance to truly be one with the earth

By Nicholas Read, Special to the Sun January 15, 2009

Late last year, the Royal Oak Burial Park in Saanich held what is believed by cemetery and government officials to be the first green funeral in modern B.C. history.

The deceased, whom Royal Oak executive director Stephen Olson was not at liberty to name, was placed unembalmed in a fully biodegradable container made of materials that will break down completely in the surrounding soil. There was no concrete liner or vault in the grave, and burial was a little shallower than usual. Instead of the customary two metres, the coffin was placed 1.5 metres below ground to facilitate an even more rapid rate of decomposition. But "still deep enough to prevent intrusion of the grave by wildlife," promised Olson.

Between now and next spring, the soil above will lie fallow. But come March or April, Royal Oak will plant indigenous ground cover in it and possibly even a native species of tree -- say, an arbutus, fir or maple -- so that with time what was once a clearly defined gravesite will become indistinguishable from the forest around it. And then the cycle will be complete. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and now in a modern green twist, death to regeneration.

Of course, it's preposterous to suggest that what happened at Royal Oak was the first green burial in B.C. Native peoples have been returning their dead ceremoniously to the soil since the dawn of human culture.

But European, and especially British, immigrants brought with them the idea that graves and tombstones were meant to transcend nature -- that humankind could protect them somehow from the ravages of time and weather.

So places like Ross Bay Cemetery in Victoria and Mountain View in Vancouver were born.

More recently, Olson said, cremation has taken over as the preferred form of interment. Burying a small urn of ashes is thought to be a more efficient use of space than a

traditional grave. But when you consider that it takes the equivalent of 180 litres of gasoline to reduce the average human corpse to cinders, there is, popular notions to the contrary, nothing environmentally friendly about it.

Which is why Royal Oak has now taken the revolutionary [at least by modern standards] step of setting aside one-third of one acre in its 135-acre property as so-called "green burial" ground.

"As far as we know, we're the first in Canada," Olson said in an interview earlier this month. "We were approached almost 10 years ago with the idea by a woman who lived in Nanaimo. She was a very strong personal advocate for green burial. She came to talk to me and she said, 'Would you ever consider this?' I said we would look at it."

Sadly, the woman in question [Olson declined to identify her] died before she could see her idea realized. "Given that it was something new, we took our time looking at it," Olson explained.

But today, thanks to her vision, there is now room for 255 green graves on a triangular piece of Royal Oak turf bordered on two sides by native forest, thus giving it the appearance of a clearing. A number of trees have been planted in it already, and during the spring and summer native grasses and wild flowers grow there too.

However, once all 255 graves are full, the idea, Olson said, is to restore it to a state where it will be impossible to see where the new forest ends and the existing one begins. To all intents and purposes, it will be one forest, he said.

"It took 150 years for us to develop the interment and funeral practices we have in North America today. But now people are starting to say maybe there's a different way of doing this."

The modern idea for green burials was conceived in the United Kingdom in 1993 as a way of utilizing and preserving green space simultaneously. The first so-called green burial site was set aside that year in Carlisle in Cumbria. Now there are more than 200.

"Traditional burial grounds become problems when they become full, with memorials in neglect, tombstones falling over and no money for maintenance," Mike Jarvis, a spokesman for the National Death Centre, a U.K. charity that promotes green burials, told the Guardian newspaper shortly after the idea was born.

"They become sterile and the land is never going to be used for anything else. Natural burial grounds degrade very quickly and then you're left with an area of mini-green belt with regenerated flora and fauna not cluttered up with marble or granite memorials."

Then it was the United States' turn. Its first green graves were dug amid a small grove of pines and poplars in Westminster, S.C., in 2004. They were the handiwork of local doctor and environmentalist, Billy Campbell, who laid to rest friends, patients and strangers --

without embalming them -- in biodegradable coffins, or no coffins at all, in a nature preserve he created alongside a local creek.

At the time, reports the American Association of Retired Persons, which tells the story on its website, local people were skeptical, even angry.

"People accused us of throwing bodies in the creek or laying them for buzzards to eat," Campbell told the association. One irate woman "told me I was a rich doctor who could drink bottled water, but she would have to drink dead men's soup."

Even so the idea caught on. According to the Natural Burial Cooperative, a U.S. organization that promotes the idea of green burial, there are now 13 "natural burial sites" south of the border in Maine, Florida, Texas, California, Ohio, New York, Georgia, Utah, New Jersey and New Mexico, as well as Campbell's in South Carolina. More are being developed in Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Washington and Colorado.

In fact, according to a survey done earlier this year by the association, 70 per cent of Americans polled said they want to have a green burial when they die.

But here in Canada it's taken us four years to catch up. So far, at least as far as anyone can tell, that tiny third-of-an-acre Royal Oak site is the only designated green burial ground in the country. But if the idea catches on -- and early signs are it will, Olson said - - the cemetery could set aside another 30 acres. Already a quarter of the 225 green graves Royal Oak has planned are spoken for.

Most of the interest in green graves is the result of an increasing environmental awareness, Olson explained. "It resonates with a philosophical belief in people."

But as an added inducement, they're also cheaper.

The graves cost \$2,600 each. Add to that a \$735 interment fee and the total cost is \$3,335. A \$400 inscription on a communal headstone is optional. That's compared to up to \$6,500 for a traditional grave and \$625 for a concrete liner. A marker, Olson said, can cost anywhere from \$650 to thousands of dollars.

According to Tatiana Chabeaux-Smith of the Business Practices and Consumer Protection Authority of B.C., the provincial agency that regulates cemeteries, Olson is right when he says Royal Oak is B.C.'s -- and possibly Canada's -- first green burial site. But, she added, there is nothing in provincial regulations that prevents any, or every, B.C. cemetery from going green, too.

"The obligation they have under the law is to let us know how they intend to operate," Chabeaux-Smith said. "It's solely a cemetery decision."

So why is there only one? "It could be that no one [until Royal Oak] wanted to be the first," she speculated. "Maybe the rest are just waiting to see how it goes for Stephen."

Olson suspects that's the case too. But so far so good, he said.

"We have some strong evidence that there is a desire for this," he said of the level of preliminary interest. Then, allowing himself to indulge in a little more enthusiasm, he added: "I've never seen something where the public has so much interest in it."

In fact, truth be told, he finally conceded, "The interest is so great, and I know this sounds kind of silly, that people who hear about it almost can't wait to die."

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