

## A link to the past, and dear departed

Memorial to lost babies a poignant new part of historic Mountain View Cemetery

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The departed

They visit us in dreams

They glide over our memories

Like shadows over streams

-- from the Reimer family tombstone at Mountain View cemetery

To Glen Hodges, the trees and stones recently installed in a dry stream bed at Mountain View Cemetery, to mark the deaths of more than 6,600 Vancouver infants, connect to his own life.

Before Hodges came from Saskatchewan in 2002 to run the Vancouver cemetery, his wife had a miscarriage.

It was not something the couple wanted to let ruin their lives, but it also wasn't something they wanted to ignore.

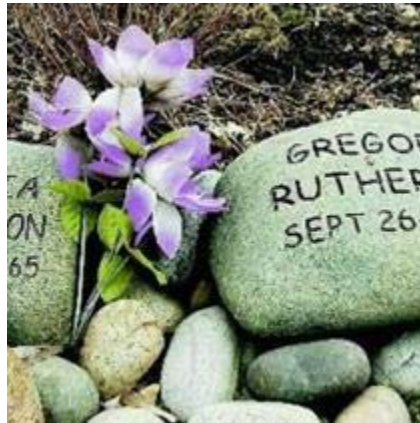
That, however, is exactly what immigrants of predominantly European ancestry tried to do in Vancouver in the early 20th century when an infant was stillborn or died shortly after birth. "Most mothers," Hodges said, "were told just to forget about it."

Times haven't completely changed. But now there are more British Columbians who want to commemorate those who have gone before, particularly babies that never had the chance to taste the joys and struggles of adulthood.

With many British Columbians placing a new emphasis on the province's heritage, Hodges feels honoured to be leading a major revival of long-forgotten Mountain View Cemetery -- one of Metro Vancouver's oldest graveyards, which virtually stopped accepting remains in 1986 when its grounds became too full.

The official relaunching of city-owned Mountain View, which buried its first remains in 1887, is scheduled for this summer, when construction should be completed on stylish stone columbaria (which hold cremated remains), flowing fountains, classy offices, elegant walkways and a tasteful memorial "celebration" hall.

Thousands of Vancouver families that don't already own plots at Mountain View will be able in the next few years to deposit their loved one's ashes in the new columbaria. A redesign of the cemetery will allow, within a century, the remains of



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun

At Mountain View Cemetery, a dry stream bed runs over an area where more than 6,000 babies were buried in unmarked graves in the 20th century. There is a stone for each baby buried here, and families can pay to have a name inscribed.

another 100,000 dearly departed to be placed in the East Vancouver graveyard, adding to the 150,000 already there.

The renewal of Mountain View as a not-for-profit cemetery is being financed in a variety of ways, including through grants from military organizations and a \$14-million loan from the city of Vancouver. In the near future, however, the cemetery is projected to become self-supporting, eventually earning more than \$3 million annually.

### Culturally significant

Hodges and many other community advocates for reviving Mountain View Cemetery, including Tom Crean, manager of Kearney Funeral Home, know how important graveyards are around the world.

In Europe, cemeteries rank as the third-most popular tourist sites, says Crean. They are the much-visited final resting places of everyone from Napoleon to Jim Morrison, Karl Marx to Oscar Wilde, Soren Kierkegaard to Isadora Duncan.

Despite B.C.'s relatively brief recorded history and what Hodges describes as residents' unusually strong tendency to cremate loved ones' remains and spread the ashes among nature, Mountain View has many notable gravesites.

They include those of world-record sprinter Harry Jerome, legendary lifeguard Joe Fortes and Janet Smith, the Shaughnessy victim of one of Vancouver's most notorious unsolved murders. Mountain View, as well, is the final resting place of 13 of the city's mayors, a lieutenant-governor, a famous stagecoach driver and a survivor of the Titanic sinking.

Mountain View also reflects a dizzy multiculturalism. It contains graveyards for Scots, Welsh, English, Italians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Jews, Buddhists and Indo-Canadians, not to mention a big section for Freemasons.

It's also home to the largest number of war veterans' graves in Canada. The soldiers are buried in military sections that are being upgraded, beautified and expanded as part of the cemetery's resurrection.

### Rites and rituals

On a moody, grey day this week, Hodges led a tour of the sprawling cemetery on the hilltop at Fraser Street, between 33rd and 41st Avenues. In many ways the cemetery shows its age. The turf is spotty and often uneven, and many markers are in disrepair.

Hodges, however, points out many impressive changes. And he gives the impression of being gently but firmly determined to shape Mountain View Cemetery into an up-to-date, living repository of Vancouver's collective heritage.

In a fast-paced culture obsessed with moving on to the next "hot" thing and subjected daily to consumer-based "planned obsolescence," Hodges is one of those people who believe in ritually honouring those who have come before.

When he came to Vancouver, he thought operating Mountain View Cemetery was going to be just another job. He was given the position mainly because he had expertise in using computers to upgrade handwritten ledgers.

But in a short time, something about Mountain View grabbed hold of him and gave rise to a mission: to help British Columbians remember.

Soon after Hodges began his new role, some of the relatives of Vancouver infants who had died at or near childbirth between 1914 and 1971 began showing up at the cemetery's modest office, asking where to find the babies' remains.

Many relatives were stunned to learn there was no tombstone or even plaque devoted to their tragically departed loved one.

The relatives were told that dead babies in the first half of the 20th century had just been unceremoniously dropped into mass unmarked graves at Mountain View at the rate of almost one a day. At the time, no one was expected to dwell on their loss.

"If a baby died in childbirth, husbands were told to take their wives on a vacation," Hodges said.

"They were told, 'The sooner she forgets about the death the better. Get her pregnant again.'"

However, Hodges noted that having to tell visiting relatives about the lack of permanent markers for the long-gone infants seemed to add to the family members' sadness.

In response, Mountain View's memorial for dead babies began life. After consulting with the public and architects, trees were eventually planted and a dry stream bed installed over one of the cemetery's main unmarked baby graves.

Then, in a tender-hearted stroke of brilliance, more than 6,600 fist-sized river stones were added to the dry stream bed -- to signify every baby buried.

Mountain View's infant memorial officially opened in 2006. Some relatives have paid a few hundred dollars extra to have the name of the baby they want remembered engraved on larger stones.

The infant memorial, however, is just one of dozens of innovations that Mountain View has forged ahead with to further the goal of honouring the dead.

#### New options for families

During his enthusiastic tour of the cemetery, Hodges shows the rows of new stone columbaria -- walls filled with niches for cremated remains.

More than 2,000 of the bread-box-sized niches will soon be available, at a cost ranging from \$2,400 to \$5,000 each.

He proudly points out how the columbaria include stainless steel shelves on which loved ones can place flowers, candles, photos and pebbles to pay their respects.

He also reveals how a special altar-like stone table, with running water, is being built so that people will be able to cut flowers, wash stones or prepare fragrances.

Moving along a partly-completed walkway, Hodges highlights one of the cemetery's new fountains, in which water -- which is viewed as sacred in many cultures -- will soon flow calmly over polished stone, creating a spot for meaningful quiet time.

Then Hodges points out how the asymmetrical walls of the columbaria include strategic gaps between through which mourners can catch glimpses of some of the cemetery's more impressive historic monuments.

Hodges had one elaborate old grave marker, belonging to the Marsh family, rebuilt and cleaned at cemetery expense; the family couldn't be traced. Hodges felt the monument "was a gift to the community, to anybody who comes through the cemetery."

Similarly, Hodges wants the under-construction "Celebration" hall to become a centre for the public to explore Vancouver history and culture.

In addition to being available for memorial services, Hodges would like the celebration hall to present artistic exhibits on themes related to heritage, death and remembrance.

Hodges has also gathered together B.C. artists who will be available to create custom-made urns for relatives who want special artifacts, not "cookie-cutter" jars, in which to hold their beloved's ashes.

#### Evocative event

In an especially creative stroke, famed B.C. public artist Paula Jardine has become an artist-in-residence at the cemetery.

Among other things, Jardine has created A Night for All Souls, an annual multi-spiritual tribute to the dead.

The evocative event takes place at Mountain View on the last Saturday evening before Halloween.

As a kind of interfaith version of Roman Catholicism's All Hallow's Eve and other traditions devoted to the deceased, Jardine says A Night for All Souls offers a variety of rituals through which mourners can "finalize their feelings" about the departed.

"It's a really strong human impulse to light a candle in the darkness, to acknowledge and signify a person -- and to express your love for him or her through beauty," says Jardine, who, as founder of The Public Dreams Society, created Trout Lake's popular midsummer Illuminares lantern procession.

Visitors to A Night for All Souls are offered multiple means through which to express heartfelt emotions about loved ones, including with candles, flowers, visual art, paper sculptures, music, fires, fragrances, food, tombstone cleaners, lanterns and a melting-ice sculpture.

Even though Europeans and others maintain numerous customs for remembering the dead, Jardine says many immigrants seemed to have "forgot to bring those traditions with them" when they moved to Canada.

"We try to provide an opportunity for people to reflect on how they got here and on the generations who came before them. People don't get many opportunities to do this. There are only so many times you can bring it up at a cocktail party and see someone's eyes glaze over."

Jardine believes there is "great value for the living" in spending at least one day a year remembering deceased loved ones. She's seen many a tear quietly shed during A Night for All Souls.

"If you have one time to remember the dead, you don't have to feel guilty. It's a way of spending time with the departed in mindfulness, in paying attention, in meditation. A Night for All Souls has a beautiful glowing light to it. I feel like it helps take care of people's feelings."

#### Commemorating lost loved ones

One of the most powerful passages Jardine and Hodges have ever read about the significance of honouring those who have gone before was written by a Greek woman who moved to B.C., Maria Papcostaki.

"So they slept their eternal sleep, resting assured that those left behind would continue looking after them according to their traditions and familiar ways," Papcostaki wrote of the departed.

"Every one of us will end up in the same place and all of us long to know that after

we have crossed the dark river, we are still loved, and remembered and looked after."

Whenever Hodges thinks of all those who have "crossed the dark river," he is proud of the memory-enhancing potential Mountain View Cemetery is offering the living.

However, he puts his dream for Mountain View a little more simply than Papcostaki. If Hodges ever begins to wonder about the value of his job, he recalls that he's in the business of not just burying people, but also of commemorating them.

"There are 150,000 people buried in this graveyard," he says. "And everyone of them has at least one interesting story."

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To see Douglas Todd's blog, go to: [www.vancouversun.com/thesearch](http://www.vancouversun.com/thesearch)

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