

The modernization of Mountain View

Vancouver's only cemetery is an innovator

BY SHELLEY FRALIC, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 10, 2014



Glen Hodges has been managing the city-owned Mountain View Cemetery for 11 years and has come up with creative ideas to make use of limited space, including the construction of above-ground
Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider, PNG, Vancouver Sun

The last place you might expect innovation, or perhaps even progressive thinking, is a cemetery.

But smack dab in the middle of Vancouver, where lies the city's only graveyard, change is well underway in the burial business.

It's the kind of change that one doesn't expect from the quiet, sombre resting place of the 146,000 souls interred at Mountain View Cemetery during the 127 years since it opened in 1887.

But Glen Hodges, who has been managing the city-owned graveyard for the past 11 years, is an energetic man with many ideas, some of them so creative that he may well be leading an industry charge.

As you might imagine, Mountain View holds both mystery and history, a place of countless stories - from the sad toll of the 1919 flu epidemic to the last home of 12,000 soldiers, from the trend of upright tombstones to the easy-maintenance requirement of flat grave markers, from the shift from religious casket burial to the more non-denominational and economic practice of cremation.

Today, as ground crews maintain its picturesque 105 acres - bordered north and south by 31st Avenue and 43rd Avenue, and east and west by Fraser and Prince Edward - Hodges knows that innovation is the key to Mountain View's future in serving an ever-changing city.

He talks of the place with both authority and fondness, and immediately sets about telling a visitor that its venerable history can be categorized into several important eras.

From 1887 through 1964, the cemetery operated rather informally, with about 80,000 graves set among a somewhat haphazard landscape of vegetation, monuments, tombstones, pathways and boulevards.

Over the years, as the city's population increased, the cemetery began to fill up (a grave cost about \$110 back then) and, in the years after 1964, some of the pathways were used to create another 14,000 grave sites.

Then, in 1986, sensing a continuing space crunch, Vancouver city council decided to suspend the sale of inground plots, leaving only a few hundred graves available for indigent burials (a practice it discontinued in 1999).

Mountain View never was much of a money-maker - nor was it intended to be, for it was and is a municipal service - but it would soon become apparent that taxpayers were increasingly subsidizing its operation and, when a private buyer stepped forward in the mid-'90s, the city considered selling it.

Vancouverites were outraged. Their heritage was not for sale, hundreds protested, and city council took note, realizing Mountain View was a historical jewel worth preserving. Consultants were subsequently hired to explore capacity opportunities, new building requirements, and to reimagine the physical site.

A comprehensive 100-year vision plan was produced and, among other things, it divided the cemetery into 12 "neighbourhoods," such as the Masonic and Chinese areas, and formulated an action plan for each, including the exploration of more burial space.

One major revelation: Many of the still-existing pathways and other unused bits of land in the "neighbourhoods" could be used for burial plots. Oh, and North America's growing preference for cremation over in-ground casket burial demanded above-ground niches.

And that's why, starting in 2008, Mountain View was once again open for business.

First, columbaria were built in the Masonic neighbourhood, starting with 2,500 niches to hold cremated remains. More than 600 have been sold - for \$3,000 to \$4,500 you get one cubic foot of space in perpetuity for two cremated remains, with the option for an inscription. To ensure a clean modern look in the columbaria, shelves were installed for flowers and mementoes, and the niches were staggered, to avoid that filing cabinet look.

Next up was the in-ground initiative, where gaps in the boulevards and pathways were identified as not being large enough to hold a casket but big enough, say four-by-five feet, to hold cremated remains, given that some customers still want to be buried. Close to 300 spots were created, able to hold up to four cremated remains each, and were offered for sale for as much as \$4,000.

And then came the tougher prospect - finding additional in-ground casket space. It is a delicate undertaking, says Hodges, because once you start talking about it, the uneasy rumours begin.

"The biggest fallacy," says Hodges, "is that we take back graves and bury strangers with strangers."

What Mountain View is doing, in fact, is adhering to provincial legislation that allows it to reclaim grave sites under strict lack-of-use criteria. That includes, in the surest and most delicate interpretation of the law, meticulously tracking down the owners of grave plots that were purchased pre-1940 and have remained unused.

In several instances, relatives have come forward, and the plots stayed untouched. But the search turned up about 1,000 plots that qualified for reclamation, and are now available for sale. That is how Mountain View came to be advertising in recent weeks that it is back in the casket burial business.

(The cemetery is one of the few that doesn't use concrete liners for casket burials, which has also allowed families to "reuse" their casket space once time allows for decomposition and casket disintegration. In those cases, the remains are removed, the grave deepened, and the remains are reinterred in the grave bottom, providing room for a new casket on top.)

A reclaimed plot today - about 100 have been sold - costs about \$22,500, and includes room for two caskets, eight cremated remains and four markers, one of which can be upright. That's right, the upright monuments are back. Originally disallowed in 1964 and reinstated in 2003, which was about the same time that Hodges began promoting his cemetery not just as a place for the dead, but for the living.

Today, ceremonies and cemetery tours are routine. For the past eight years, Hodges has hosted All Soul's Day events with artists and musicians, attracting as many as 2,000 participants to honour the dead. People now walk their dogs through the wellgroomed acreage. A new main office building and staff quarters are clustered next to a beautiful glass-fronted Celebration Hall, all built recently in the crisp bearing of West Coast modern architecture.

And Hodges is not done yet.

He wants to explore the possibility that strangers can actually opt to share plots with strangers, providing a more economical burial option.

"The big challenges are things like 'green burial', and the reuse of grave space," he says. "What I see is the law defining two kinds of burial - perpetual and a defined period."

In saying that, he admits that in the North American cemetery business (there are about 20 cemeteries in Metro Vancouver alone, with a mix of private and public ownership), Mountain View is somewhat ahead of the curve.

When it comes to reinventing a cemetery, "We're going to be the people that other civic governments want to talk to."

Meanwhile, through all the innovation and reclamation, the history of the place palpates, a physical nod to a city's place and time.

Mountain View's first grave, still intact and marked Feb. 26, 1887, is that of Caradoc Evans, the son of David and Nellie Evans. He died at the age of 10 months.

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