Cemeteries of the San Gorgonio Pass

As pioneers colonize a new town there is a hierarchy of development. A new settlement eventually needs water, housing, stores to purchase necessities, schools, churches and ultimately burial grounds or cemeteries to complete the cycle of life.

American author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote; "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison." The term "cemetery" is derived from a Greek work meaning "sleeping place."

This article will feature histories of six Pass area cemeteries; The San Gorgonio Memorial Park in Banning (originally called the Sunnyslope Cemetery), the St. Boniface Indian School Cemetery in Banning, the Stewart Sunnyslope and the Mountain View Cemeteries in Beaumont, and the St. Mary's and Moravian Church Cemeteries on the Morongo Reservation.

In the early days of settlement prior to the 1870s, San Gorgonio Pass burials were often on family land or remote areas deemed appropriate for a gravesite, following the traditions of pioneer settlers. One example of this is the Dr. William Isaac family graves which were at one time located on the property of the Smith Ranch (presently the Highland Springs Resort) before later being moved to the Stewart Sunnyslope Cemetery in Beaumont. There were certainly deaths associated with the early settlement of Hall City above Cabazon but no official cemetery was established there. One rumor of an early local cemetery places one on the south side of W. Ramsey St. in and around the 2400 block. This has not been substantiated but if there was one it could have been an early pioneer family gravesite which was not uncommon in the early days of the West.

Banning Cemeteries

As the San Gorgonio Pass began developing in the 1870s and 1880s, communities were forming and settlers began putting down roots to stay. One eventual, common necessity for these new communities became the need for cemeteries. George Barrett bore the unfortunate distinction of being the first one in need of such a service in Banning. Rancher/farmer Barrett lived in a canyon north and east of Banning and was murdered in 1878, by a neighbor, N. M. Peterson (known by the nickname of "Big Pete"). Peterson was hanged for his crime four months later in San Bernardino but the body of George Barrett needed to be buried somewhere, soon.

A group of Banning residents, including Welwood Murray, decided to inter Barrett's body on "a sitely point of hill north of Banning," thus providing the first description of the present-day San Gorgonio Memorial Park. (a full account of the George Barrett murder and Peterson hanging can be found in the Tom Hughes book, "The History of Banning and the San Gorgonio Pass," available to the public at the Banning Public Library). As the deaths of Banning residents increased, more bodies were buried in this section of land surrounded by a wire fence.

The land that now contains the San Gorgonio Memorial Park was originally Native American land, a part of an earlier Cahuilla village at the mouth of the Banning Water Canyon. The Southern Pacific Land Company gained ownership of the land and passed the ownership on to Frank E. Dudley, the owner of the Alta Vista Hotel in Banning, who had purchased 159.5 acres in 1904. After discovering there were as many as 30 graves on his property Dudley quickly opted to sell 3.74 acres of his land for $1.00 to a group of five Banning citizens who incorporated under the name of the Banning Cemetery Association. These five men; Charles D. Hamilton, John M. Westerfield, Joseph R. Fountain, N. H. Hargrave and Christopher F. Jost were all early Banning businessmen and pioneers who are now buried at the cemetery.

The Banning Cemetery Association surveyed the land in 1905 and began staking out plots which were sold for $6.00 each or $5.00 when purchased in lots of five. Present-day costs for a single lot are approximately $1,000 a plot. The Banning-Cabazon Cemetery District was later created in 1931.

There is an older section of the cemetery on a slope that borders the rock wall on the west side of the paved drive and extends south from the office to the end of the rock wall. This section has been called at times the "Indigent Plot," "Potter's Field," and "No Man's Land," where burials were made at no cost or paid for by the County of Riverside. Many of the burials in this section of the cemetery were performed by family members who dug the graves and laid their loved ones to rest in private ceremonies. Lin McGillvray is the Office Manager of the San Gorgonio Memorial Park and has held her position for six years. Her father, Don Foster, had been the manager of the cemetery for 30 years. According to Lin, the oldest grave in this section is approximately 1903, however many of the wood and metal crosses have deteriorated in time making specific dates difficult to document. According to the Tom Hughes book the body of Carlota or Elota (there has been a long history of dispute over her name) of the famous Willie Boy saga is buried at the Banning Sunnyslope Cemetery although the cemetery office has no record of her burial there.

The Banning cemetery was named Sunnyslope until 1963, when the name was changed to San Gorgonio Memorial Park. The current office and shop building were built in 1954 and the old office building which was on the east drive of the old section was demolished in 1963. A newer section of the cemetery was added in the late 1950s and the cemetery is still expanding. A

section of the cemetery on the curved part of the road that is enclosed by an artful concrete heart is reserved for babies and small children. This section was added in the 1960s. The total acreage for the San Gorgonio Memorial Park is approximately 30 acres.

Summit Cemetery District Manager Donnie Sibole has a long family history associated with the Banning cemetery. His father, Bill Sibole, was the foreman at the San Gorgonio Memorial Park for more than 30 years. Donnie started out as a mechanic there and later took the foreman position his father held. Donnie became the manager of the Summit Cemetery District in 2009. According to Donnie the cemetery will reach its full capacity in forty to fifty years, with little land left to be developed into cemetery use.

In 1996, the Banning-Cabazon Cemetery District and the Beaumont Public Cemetery District merged into one; the Summit Cemetery District, which includes Banning's San Gorgonio Memorial Park and Beaumont's Mountain View and Stewart Sunnyslope Cemeteries. The Summit Cemetery District is a California Special District, not a city or county entity.

The Banning Public Library recently received a donation of historic photographs from C. O. Barker's granddaughters, Carolyn and Joan. While processing these photographs a tiny 2" x 3" photograph was discovered showing an early image of the Banning Sunnyslope Cemetery. I enlisted the assistance of Banning local history sleuth Bernie Howlett to help verify the location of the photograph. Bernie has conducted extensive research on the history of the cemeteries of the Pass while working with the San Gorgonio Pass Genealogical Society. After careful hillside comparisons of the photograph and the present-day cemetery both Bernie and I concluded this was indeed an early photograph of the Sunnyslope Cemetery, dated somewhere around 1910, but we wanted further verification.

I took a blown-up print to Cemetery District Manager Donnie Sibole and after we compared the background hills and the general slope of the ground he also concluded it was the Sunnyslope Cemetery. In the last 100 years the landscape has changed drastically through tree plantings, grading and natural erosion and some of the early tombstones have been altered or laid down so it is difficult to imagine this is the same location. There is also a large crypt in the photograph that must have been removed at a later time *(please see accompanying photograph).* If any of our readers have any information about this crypt or other early photographs of the cemetery please contact Bill Bell at the Banning Public Library.

During the 1980s, the San Gorgonio Pass Genealogical Society, of which Bernie Howlett is a member, initiated an inventory of burials at Pass area cemeteries with the goal of making available a book with the information they gathered. Bernie personally walked each cemetery and recorded the information on any grave older than the year 1950. He went through all the rolodex records at the San Gorgonio Memorial Park Cemetery and photocopied each card which

listed the burial sites and information about the individuals. He ended up with more records of burials than actual marked graves.

The St. Boniface Indian School Cemetery

The St. Boniface Indian School Cemetery is located against the foothills north of the St. Boniface School property. According to former San Bernardino Diocese archivist Bruce Harley there were 77 individuals buried in the St. Boniface Indian School Cemetery, including three priests, five nuns, and 16 St. Boniface students. Another 53 residents of the San Gorgonio Pass, including many children who died of tuberculosis in the early 1900s, are also buried in the St. Boniface Cemetery. After extensive vandalism in the 1970s some of the nuns' remains were reburied elsewhere. Through the years the cemetery has fallen into neglect and although a chain link fence was at one time constructed around it vandalism has continued.

Morongo Reservation Cemeteries

The land containing and surrounding the Morongo Reservation has historically been inhabited by Native Peoples and has been the location of numerous villages which used portions of the land for sacred burial sites. There are several cemeteries on the Morongo Reservation dating back to the early 1900s and late 1800s. Along with a traditional tribal cemetery, there is a cemetery located next to and associated with the Moravian Church which was established in 1889. Another cemetery on the Morongo Reservation is a part of St. Mary's Catholic Church which was established in 1898.

Beaumont Cemeteries

There are two cemeteries within the city limits of Beaumont, the Stewart Sunnyslope Cemetery, located at the south end of Pennsylvania and First Street, and the Mountain View Cemetery, located at 1315 Edgar Avenue. While researching the history of Pass cemeteries Bernie Howlett communicated by letter with Fred. A. Hicks, a former caretaker of both Beaumont Cemeteries.

Much of the research on the Beaumont Cemeteries came from Mr. Hick's notes and Bernies' research through cemetery office records.

The Stewart Sunnyslope Cemetery

A transcription of a portion of Fred Hick's letter to Bernie Howlett in 1994 reads: "The Stewart Ranch extended all the way to Pennsylvania and the Stewart family decided to keep the land situated on a knoll on the corner of Pennsylvania and 1st Street as a family cemetery. Before any of the Stewarts passed away friends began asking the Stewart family if they could bury their loved ones in this cemetery and the Stewarts gave permission. The Stewarts asked the Osburn

father and son *(David J. Osburn and J.J. Osburn)* if they would take care of the record keeping which began to be more extensive."

Dr. Isaac Smith's gravesite was moved to the Stewart Sunnyslope Cemetery from the Smith Ranch (Highland Springs Resort) because of the development of a water project on the property. According to Clara Stewart, Dr. Isaac Smith's re-interment was the first burial in the cemetery. Smith's grave marker is in the southwest section of the cemetery near the sidewalk. His death date on the marker is listed as 1879, although Tom Hughes lists his death year as 1878. According to Mr. Hicks there is "an old Mexican/Indian burial site about 150 feet north of the maintenance building near some old trees." At one time Mr. Hicks says he cleaned up the area, planted some wild roses and erected a wooden cross. Summit Cemetery District Manager Donnie Sibole remembers seeing the cross in the 1990s. Mr. Hicks added, "the Stewart family allowed Mexican and Indian families to bury their lost ones in this area without charge and often without a mortuary being involved." In 1888, Reznor Stewart helped form the Beaumont Cemetery Association and was its first president.

When the Beaumont Cemetery District was formed in 1928, Stewart deeded the cemetery which was on his property to the Cemetery District. The size of the cemetery at this time was about 6 acres. Over the years the Stewarts donated additional land and the cemetery grew to include about 13 acres. The Stewarts also donated money to the cemetery district for the construction of buildings, fences, a water well and a sprinkler system. In recognition of the Stewart family's numerous contributions to the cemetery the Beaumont Public Cemetery District changed the name of the Sunnyslope Cemetery to the Stewart Sunnyslope Cemetery on May 30, 1962. Since the Banning cemetery was at one time known as Sunnyslope it was hoped that this name change would help clear up some of the confusion between the two cemeteries. The dedication plaque at the entrance to the cemetery reads: "This gateway is dedicated to the Reznor P. Stewart Family in grateful acknowledgement of their generous gifts of land and improvements for this cemetery." – 1962.

The Mountain View Cemetery

According to Fred Hick's notes; "Around 1885, a cemetery of approximately 5 acres in north Beaumont was purchased by a Mr.David J. Osburn who named it the Mountain View Cemetery. This became Beaumont's second cemetery. Near the present day bell tower is a large monument dedicated to Osburn. Osburn died in 1913. After David Osburn died his son, J. J. Osburn, ran the cemetery. J. J. died in 1925 and there were no Osburns left to run the cemetery. There was no caretaker for the cemetery during this time and families had to arrange for someone to dig a grave or a family member did it themselves. In 1928, the people of Beaumont voted to form a public cemetery district to be partially tax supported. A Board was appointed by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors and the first money collected by tax was used to

purchase the cemetery land from Mrs. Olive Wilson, widow of J. J. Osburn for the sum of $500.00. Adjacent tracts of land to the north and to the south were purchased and a peach orchard which was between Edgar Avenue and California Street was donated to the cemetery by the Dowling Family, bringing the total acreage of the cemetery to approximately 24-25 acres."

Cemeteries are hallowed ground. They are one of the pillars that support a community and their important role grows as we mature through life. Cemeteries are a part of the cycle of life and deserve our respect and appreciation. The San Gorgonio Pass is fortunate to have several cemeteries which were established, first out of necessity as our communities grew, and later developed into beautiful and thoughtful memorials. We entrust our loved ones, friends, and relatives to their care and they in turn provide them with a "sleeping place," thereby leaving us with the assurance they will rest in peace and dignity. Thank you to the Summit Cemetery District for the continual service you provide to all of us in the San Gorgonio Pass.

(Sources for research in the writing of this article came from historic Banning Record Gazette and Riverside Press Enterprise newspaper articles, "The History of Banning and the San Gorgonio Pass," by Tom Hughes, interviews with Donnie Sibole, Lin McGillvray and Wayne Weber of the Summit Cemetery District, notes by C. F. Jost, notes by Newland DeVault (one-time secretary for the Banning-Cabazon Cemetery District), the Banning Public Library vertical file archive on Pass cemeteries, and notes, letters and recollections of Bernie Howlett and Fred. A. Hicks. Special thanks to Bernie Howlett for his continual dedication to documenting the history of the San Gorgonio Pass.)

Please share your historic photographs, documents and recollections with the Banning Library District. To contact Bill Bell email: banninglibrarydistrict.org or call: 951-849-3192, ext. 228.