



Photo illustration of
ghosts in a cemetery.
(BETH SCHLANKER/PD)

Ghost Stories

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They're peaceful, pretty, slightly spooky and frequently a little forlorn. In autumn, the oaks and overgrown shrubbery that shroud many an old graveyard in Sonoma County take on a bony look that makes them all the more compelling — and ever so creepy — in that spine-tingling way that makes us love a ghost story.

Leaves scuttle against tombstones etched with the names of people no one remembers, and the sun, if it's out, burns cold, casting long shadows over gray slabs cloaked in lichen.

In the days when communities had few if any parks, cemeteries were the public green spaces in which to stroll, contemplate and even have a picnic. This is a beautiful time of year to take a walk among the dearly departed, particularly in the old rural and pioneer cemeteries, with their ancient headstones, elaborate marble and granite crypts and monuments with angels and doves.

There are at least 116 graveyards in Sonoma County, many just little family plots secreted away on ranches, according to Jeremy Nichols, who assembled the definitive guide in 2002, available at the Sonoma County Library.

“In the early days, there weren't very many cemeteries,” says Nichols, who lives in Santa Rosa and continues his research. “And if somebody died, you buried them there on the farm. They had no choice. It was hot. Or the middle of harvest. Nobody had time to put a body on a wagon and cart them all the way to Petaluma or Santa Rosa.”

Some of those plots evolved into community burial grounds. And these atmospheric places offer some of the most interesting places to take an autumn walk, mixing history with nature and a little bit of the macabre.

"It's funny. I see it time and time again. Someone will walk the cemetery and then they're hooked," Sandy Frary says of the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery, a prototypical old burial ground dating back to 1854, where the city's most esteemed citizens rest in peace beside some of its most notorious.

Frary is a longtime researcher and tour guide with the Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee. So dedicated is she to this shady knoll she calls "a magic place" that she maintains a desk in the deputy coroner's office, where she spends hours delving into old records to dig out more tidbits about the more than 5,000 people buried there. Among the cemetery's citizens are her grandfather and two cousins, one of whom died when he was only 11 back in the 1930s.

"We have a ghost there. She has been known to tap people on their shoulders. She died in Burke's Sanitarium (six miles north of Santa Rosa) and she's buried in the Stanley section, near the border of Santa Rosa Memorial Oak," says Frary. Sarah Geneva Duffin, also known as Neva, died at 29 under mysterious circumstances. Dr. Burke, who headed the sanitarium, was arrested several months after her death for attempted murder.

"He placed dynamite under the bed of his mistress," she says, "and then dressed her wounds with arsenic."

Frary says there are other alleged ghosts who reside at the cemetery.

There is a friendly fellow named Mr. Lemmon, dubbed by volunteers as "our social ghost" because he has allegedly been spotted at the pillars of the McDonald Avenue entrance several times during cemetery activities, apparently wanting to horn in on the fun.

The Rural Cemetery is the final resting place of some 182 Civil War veterans. One of the 22 Confederate soldiers, Lt. Col. John Gotea Pressley of the 25th Infantry, has supposedly been spotted walking between his grave and the graves of two Confederate captains, Robert Press-Smith Sr. and Robert Press-Smith Jr.

Frary said when ghost hunters combed the cemetery with their high-tech equipment they "discovered extreme cold" spots at the original site of "The Hanging Tree," where three outlaws who shot Sheriff Jim Petray and two detectives were taken from the jail by a lynch mob and strung up.

"It has been reported that on full-moon nights, sometimes the bodies of the three hanging men can be seen at the site of the original tree," Fray says.

You don't have to be in search of ghosts, however, to seek some quiet time in a graveyard. There is a hushed, forgotten beauty to an old cemetery, along with the poignancy of the life stories buried beneath the stones.

"Cemeteries are like history books," says Nichols. "All you have to do is walk into one of them and look at the names. They are the people who built Santa Rosa and Sonoma County. The streets are named for them and in some cases, buildings and whole areas or districts."

Sonoma's wild and hilly Mountain Cemetery at the end of First Street West is home to Gen. Mariano Vallejo. Make your way to the high ground in Healdsburg's 1859 Oak Mound Cemetery (601 Piper St.) and you'll see familiar names like Matheson and Heald.

Among the more hidden gems are the Bloomfield Cemetery, with its obelisks jutting up from a wind-swept hillside. Established in 1864, it is located at Hillview and Sutton Streets in Bloomfield.

The placid Forestview Cemetery in Forestville, 5925 Gravenstein Highway, spreads over 5 acres, and has been accepting the dead since 1873. It is intriguingly dotted with Russian Orthodox crosses.

The Liberty Center at Liberty and Center Roads, west of Petaluma, has a special section set aside for Canadian war veterans. Look for the British Union Jack.

The oldest marked grave in Sonoma County dates back to 1812 and is at Fort Ross, where a graduate student, poring through old records in Moscow, managed to identify 89 of the 131 people believed to be buried there. The oldest working cemetery in the county is St. Francis Solano in Sonoma, sitting on land granted to the Sonoma Mission fathers in 1835.

His favorite is the Chanate Cemetery near Sutter Medical Center, the city's old Potter's Field for the poor.

"Some of the stories of people buried there are absolutely pathetic," said Nichols, who is still researching. "Some are so weird you can't believe they happened."

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