



Guests walk past a re-enactment of the 1913 murder of Luella May Butts, played by Amy Lovato, center, at The Dark Side of the Cemetery tour at the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery. Sitting on her lap is Luella's daughter, Helen Butts, played by Maisy Gibson. Butts was killed by her husband Claude. (CRISTA JEREMIASON / *The Press Democrat*)

## Walking the past in Santa Rosa

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The Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery provides a final resting place for more than 5,200 people, from famous figures such as its founding father Julio Carrillo (died, 1889) to forgotten folks like Harry Barkas, Jr. (died, 1933), a baby whose grave is topped with a crude, handmade marker.

After going bankrupt during the Depression, the cluster of four private cemeteries fell into a moribund state, as vandalism and neglect slowly took its toll on the 17-acre plot of land bordering Franklin Avenue in northeast Santa Rosa.

When the City of Santa Rosa took it over in 1979, however, things started looking up. In 1994, an ambitious group of volunteers began cutting back the overgrown weeds, adopting grave sites and giving tours as a way to raise funds for its restoration and preservation. It's a story of redemption, from rags to relative riches.

"We are celebrating our 20th year," said Bill Montgomery, volunteer coordinator for the cemetery. "Over the years, we have put over \$400,000 in our endowment fund for the upkeep of the cemetery into the next generation."

Nowadays, there are upwards of 200 volunteers devoted to the care and feeding of the cemetery, which also boasts a Habitat Garden focused on native, drought-tolerant plants, and a Memorial Rose Grove dedicated to the victims of the 1906 Earthquake.

This summer and fall, the cemetery comes alive with a series of walking tours, offering history buffs a chance to learn about the pioneers of Sonoma County, get up close and personal with its headstones and watch its long-dead occupants come to life in original, theatrical skits, complete with costumes, lighting and props.

History buffs with a taste for the macabre snatched up tickets to the ever-popular Darkside Tours on June 13, which incorporated four, theatrical reenactments from Santa Rosa's grisly past.

"The emphasis is on the suicides, murders and deaths" Montgomery said. "These are the saddest parts about the cemetery."

One skit, dating back to the early 1900s, involved a tale of infidelity. A man who suspected his wife was seeing another gentlemen stormed to her parents' house to find her and got into an argument with his wife's father, who threw him out.

"He went home, got his rifle, then shot his wife dead through the window," Montgomery said. "Her little girl was on her lap."

On July 19, four free walking tours of the cemetery will explore the carvings and symbols on its headstones, which date from the early 1800s through the 1950s.

"This was a gentle time, so there are lambs and weeping willow trees, flowers and wreaths," Montgomery said. "Most of the tombstones are granite, but some are marble."

One of the most common carvings is two clasped hands, a symbol that was popular in the late 1880s. "If you look very closely, the cuff of one of the hands is a woman's, and the other is a man's cuff," he said. "That's a symbol of a husband and wife saying goodbye on this earth."

As an introduction to the cemetery, newbies can choose from four free History Walking Tours on Aug. 9. These tours introduce some of the more illustrious folks buried beneath the cemetery's gently rolling hills.

One of these is Colonel James Armstrong, a high-ranking Civil War veteran who donated 490 acres of old-growth redwoods in 1880 to what is now the 805-acre Armstrong Woods State Preserve in Guerneville.

"There are a lot of human interest and history stories, and a bit about the Civil War, the Mexican War and the War of 1812," Montgomery said of the History Tours. "We stop at about 30 different spots." Also buried in the cemetery is the sole survivor of the Centralia Missouri Massacre of 1864, which occurred when a group of Union soldiers on furlough were accosted by Confederate guerrillas.

"They were all executed, except for one, who moved to Santa Rosa," Montgomery said. "He is buried here."

The Lamplight Tours of the Rural Cemetery, set for Sept. 19 and 20, take place after dusk, when the cemetery is naturally at its spookiest. The walking tours include eight, original skits acted out next to the graves where the characters are buried. The tours tend to sell out early.

“Each year we do new vignettes,” Montgomery said.

“They are the story of something that happened to someone buried in the cemetery.”

Months in advance, volunteers decide on the stories, work up the scripts, recruit the actors, rehearse, gather costumes and create their own lighting, sets and special effects for the skits.

“For the Lamplight, there are about 100 people involved,” Montgomery said.

“This year, we have one that's set in pre-Civil War, one about the Centralia Missouri Massacre of 1864 and something from 1935.”

Tickets to the Lamplight Tours are \$30, available through the Santa Rosa Recreation and Parks Department at the Finley Community Center, the Steele Lane Community Center or at [srcity.org](http://srcity.org).

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