



German shepherd "Osara," one of the human remains detection dogs associated with the Institute for Canine Forensics seeks old unmarked graves at the historic Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery Saturday, Nov. 21. (Photo by MARK ARONOFF/The Press Democrat)

Reclaiming Santa Rosa's century-old graves

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The graves are thought to be well over 100 years old, forgotten over time, unclaimed and uncelebrated.

Tiny yellow and red flags newly planted Saturday in several overgrown areas of the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery began to acknowledge the loved ones who rest there and the history they represent.

But Rhea, Eros, Alice and Osara, four dogs trained to sniff out old bones, were focused firmly on the present as they criss-crossed designated areas of the 17-acre cemetery in search of human remains.

The canine foursome - as well as several others still in training - were brought to Santa Rosa by the Woodside-based Institute for Canine Forensics, which trains and deploys Human Remain Detection Dog teams.

Though some also work in search-and-rescue contexts and seek out human remains from recent tragedies, the Institute is the only such agency in the world focused on detection of historic remains, whether in law enforcement or archaeological contexts, representatives said.

Dogs associated with the Institute have been used, for example, to search for human remains at the home of a Hayward couple charged with kidnapping of Jaycee Dugard, who was snatched off a Lake Tahoe road at age 11 and kept for 18 years.

They've also identified Native American burial sites around the western United States, and served at New York City's Ground Zero and along the trail of the Space Shuttle Columbia, which exploded over Texas.

They came to Santa Rosa at the invitation of the Rural Cemetery's volunteer Preservation Committee. The organization hoped to determine whether human remains were buried in more than 100 plots

recently discovered on maps long tucked away from human eyes and never marked by gravestones at the cemetery, said Sandy Frary, who, with her husband Jim, is a key organizer for the committee.

Committee members thought it possible the plots had been mapped and never used, and wanted to find out, part of their effort to restore the cemetery fully and document its history in as precise a manner as possible.

The scent of cadavers lingers in the soil and can be sifted and distinguished with a dog's sensitive nose, though it's sometimes hard to pinpoint precisely from where the odor comes, handlers said.

Dogs can even detect remains in ancient sites after centuries of burial.

The gravesites sought Saturday were probably closer to 130 or 140 years old, though there was plenty of doubt they were there in the first place - especially on a rough, sloping area along Franklin Road where 12 flags were left Saturday, indicating multiple burial plots.

Nobody had thought there were burials in those sections of the cemetery, Sandy Frary said, adding, I'm totally amazed.

Another 10 or so flags were scattered about a meadow and adjacent hillside at the north side of the cemetery, while half a dozen others remained planted along a back road near the top of the acreage.

Volunteers still hope to rake the areas, pull up weed cover and probe around to see what more can be determined, Frary said.