

CEMETERY SLATED TO MAKE A RESURRECTION COMET LODGE SITE WILL BE TRANSFORMED INTO MEMORIAL PARK

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A century-old cemetery in Seattle's South End that had degenerated into a bramble-choked refuge for transients is being resurrected after decades of neglect.

A coalition of county government and an association dedicated to preserving graveyards has brought in a group of convicted criminals to cut down the thorns and expose gravestones at the historic Comet Lodge Cemetery near the intersection of 23rd Avenue South and Graham Street.

The cemetery gets its name from the International Order of Odd Fellows, which built it in the late 1800s and subsequently lost control of it. In 1938, King County foreclosed on the lot for non-payment of taxes, said Pearl McElheran, director of the King County Construction and Facilities Management Department. But somewhere along the line, the county forgot they owned the cemetery, said Andi MacDonald, president and co-founder of the Washington State Cemetery Association.

King County got a reminder in 1989 when a now-defunct organization attempted to take over the site and build a house and garden there without obtaining the proper permission, MacDonald said. After a piece of heavy equipment fell into a grave, neighbors became enraged. That's when King County was reminded of its responsibility and put a stop to the attempt to develop the property.

Since then more than 20 groups have tried to restore the historic site, but all have failed, MacDonald said.

Yesterday, a weary-looking MacDonald labored in the cemetery along with a crew of men convicted of minor crimes and ordered to perform community service. Among their tasks is to reset more than 90 headstones displaced and shoved to the side of the cemetery during the 1989 attempt to build there.

With the cemetery shorn of most of its underbrush, it is no longer a gathering spot for unsavory activities and a sleeping area for the homeless. That makes neighbor Desree Griffin happy. "I am pleased to have it cleaned up," she said.

But just because the thorns are gone doesn't mean the ghosts are.

Anthony McDavid, whose mother-in-law lives in a house built on land that was once part of the cemetery, says she is convinced her home is haunted.

McDavid said his mother-in-law called in a psychic consultant after hearing strange noises and noticing her dog, Syris, acting peculiar. The psychic pronounced the house haunted by the spirit of a child who walked its split-level floors. Yesterday, Syris seemed ill at ease, bared his teeth at a pair of visitors and barked maniacally.

John Dickinson, co-chair of the Rainier Beach Neighborhood Council, did his master's thesis on restoration of the Comet Lodge Cemetery. In an interview, he said his research revealed the cemetery was split in half in 1908 and 11 homes were built there.

Dickinson's project included a 5-year permit from King County in 1997 to restore the cemetery, but the permit was revoked a week later because he was allegedly not restoring the cemetery properly, MacDonald said.

Even if the tales of ghosts in the night are false, McDavid said he still isn't comfortable living on top of a cemetery.

"It's just not respectful," McDavid said, "A cemetery is an isolated area. It should not be this close with houses right next to the cemetery."

MacDonald said it will never be possible to restore the cemetery as it once was. There are no records detailing which headstones belong with which grave. But with funding from King County and the help of community service convicts, MacDonald plans to create a memorial park where people can walk quietly along wooded trails.

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