

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

O.C. Cemetery District historian presents 'Grave Concerns' talk

At the 16th annual Orange County Pioneer Council dinner held last April 17, Orange County Cemetery District historian and story-teller, Judy A. Deeter, told the audience some local and not-so-local "tales from the crypt." Former Tustin School Board President Chris Layton was the chairman and master of ceremonies of the event held at the Officers' Club of MCAS El Toro.

Following are some excerpts of her talk.

"Places of the dead are some of Orange County's most beautiful sites. Most of these areas started out as anything but pretty. They were barren stretches of land with dirt or gravel lanes winding among the grave sites.

"For years, Santa Ana citizens complained about the Santa Ana Cemetery. *The Herald* of June 5, 1886, referred to it as a 'bare, desolate disgrace known as Santa Ana Cemetery.' *The Weekly Blade* of June 9, 1892, mentioned 'patches of corn, potatoes and

grain interspersed with graves.'

"In those days, there were no endowments for maintenance (perpetual care). Clean-up efforts at the Santa Ana Cemetery were made by the Chamber of Commerce and the Masons and the Odd Fellows lodges.

"Those buried early would be astonished if they could see our cemeteries today. In fact, they might not recognize the places they were buried.

"Old cemetery paths have been paved over, lush greenery has replaced barren land, fences to keep out grave robbers have been taken down from around individual family plots and some grave yards have been moved to make way for homes and schools.

"Cemeteries were first established based on need. Sometimes immediate need. When the great Mission Church at San Juan Capistrano collapsed from an earthquake on Dec. 8, 1812, a burial spot for 40 bodies was immedi-

ately needed. The Anaheim Cemetery was organized as a result of bad weather. The cold winter of 1860 caused illness among Mexican laborers...

"Some of you are probably thinking that we now have embalming. You might be interested to know that mandatory embalming in the state of California ended in the early 1970s. A process of refrigeration has taken its place...

"Laguna Beach High School was built over the Laguna Beach Cemetery on the hill in 1934. Only the body of **Capt. Oliver Brooks** was removed. He was buried there in 1896. A scraper cut into his casket in 1928 when Park Avenue was being graded. Pupils at a local school gathered his bones as souvenirs. His daughter came the next day and collected her father's bones in a box. Supposedly, he was reinterred in Santa Ana Cemetery.

"Of course today, many people want to be cremated. There are

several stories about cremations 'gone wrong,' but perhaps the most unique appeared in 1948 in *California Jubilee* by Ed Ainsworth:

'Ashes to ashes and dust to dust has been said in a lot of parodies and funny songs. To Earle Ovington, owner of Ovington Air Field in Santa Barbara, it was more than just a phrase. It was a nightmare.

'It was the funeral of a friend that caused all the trouble. The deceased had been a flyer, too, and he had requested that his ashes be scattered by Ovington over the Pacific Ocean off Santa Barbara. Ovington climbed sadly into his plane, carefully placed the urn containing the ashes in the cockpit where they could be easily reached and took off.

'When he was far enough for the final gesture, he cast the mortal remains of his friend into the surging surface of the limit-

less waters. As befitting the occasion, he scattered the ashes to the wind. He looked over the side, then, for a final glimpse of his friend drifting downward to the sea. They were nowhere to be seen, not even the filmiest wisp of a cloud of them.

'They had vanished. Ovington, amazed, leaned farther over the side of the plane, and his hand came in contact with the outside framework. When he drew his hand away, it was wet. Paint! Wet Paint!

'The whole plane had been repainted. Horrified, Ovington looked back toward the tail of the ship. It was true. The wind from the propeller had done it. Sticking to the side of the plane, firmly and irremovably imbedded in the wet paint, was his friend, or all that remained of him.'

'We've come a long way since the early 1900s when you could buy a tombstone from the Memo-

rial Department in the Sears and Roebuck catalog.

The Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove offers some of the most unusual burial features. For \$2,400 to \$5,000, individuals can have 'cremated ashes inserted into an outdoor mosaic or a floor-to-ceiling stained window.' Custom tombs are also available for \$150,000 and up. These tombs offer skylights for those desirous of more light over their tombs.

"Cemeteries are important to communities. They teach about the past of where we live and who lived among us. Increasingly, tours are given to teach children history.

"El Toro Memorial Park established a tour for its centennial observance in 1996. Sometimes children who participate in a tour there receive an Eskimo Pie at the end in honor of Christian Kent Nelson who invented it. He is buried there."

FAMOUS GRAVE

Columbus Tustin, founder of the