

## **Giving dignity to the dead B.C. tried to hide from view**

By Mark Hume

NEW WESTMINSTER, B.C.

"It's here somewhere," Pat Feindel said as she pulled at the weeds and tall grass that had grown up in a corner of the lost graveyard.

After a moment she found a simple headstone, and brushed dirt from the faded, concrete surface to expose the inscription: Leong, Sue, DIED, Oct. 19, 1950.

"Somehow this one got overlooked. It's one of the few that was never taken," said Ms. Feindel, who is part of a remarkable project aimed at restoring dignity to a graveyard that government authorities tried to erase from sight nearly 30 years ago.

The Woodlands Memorial Garden Project, unlike anything undertaken in Canada before, is seeking to bring life back to a long-forgotten graveyard by repatriating headstones that were stripped from the site to hide its existence.

The project is not simply a case of tending to a few neglected plots, but involves recovering the history of an entire graveyard that was all but wiped from British Columbia's memory in 1977, when the province authorized the removal of 3,000 headstones.

The stones had marked the graves of former inmates of the Woodlands Institution, a notorious asylum on scenic, wooded lands that slope down to the Fraser River in New Westminster that became known as the "prison for the insane" shortly after it opened in 1878.

It was B.C.'s main facility for people with mental disabilities until it was closed in 1996. The property has been sold to private developers who are building condominiums at various locations on the site.

"What happened," explains Ms. Feindel, a spokesperson for the BC Association for Community Living, "is that when Queen's Park Hospital was built next to the graveyard [in 1976] somebody decided that the elderly patients would be disturbed by looking out at headstones. So they tried to erase the graveyard."

With the headstones removed, the area became overgrown with grass and the graveyard slowly faded from memory.

When Ms. Feindel's organization, which supports people with mental disabilities, started to research the history of Woodlands, it heard from several former inmates about a graveyard that didn't seem to exist.

"I'd walked over the site," she said. "I couldn't imagine where it was."

But former inmates, like Richard McDonald - who was placed in Woodlands when he was 9 - insisted it was there and asked that it be found and restored.

"I knew there was a cemetery because I was in the building right close to it, and I watched the hearses come in," Mr. McDonald said.

He said other inmates "were totally outraged" when they learned that the grave markers had been removed. "We want to get it all fixed up and make it respectable and have a memorial to show respect and not to have that happen again."

After searching archival files and recovering old site plans, Ms. Feindel and her colleagues rediscovered the graveyard in a weed-choked, overgrown field between the hospital and new housing developments spreading up the slope.

"We got here just in the nick of time," she said. "Otherwise I'm sure this land would have been buried by new housing projects."

Ms. Feindel said that even with property plans, she and her colleagues weren't sure where the graveyard was until they were on top of it.

"I looked over here, saw the slight indentations in the ground and realized, 'Oh my God, this is it.' We were standing on 3,000 graves."

Sue Leong's grave marker, perhaps as obscured then by weeds as it is now, was one of a few left behind that helped confirm the location.

With the graveyard rediscovered, a search began for the gravestones. Some were found in a retaining wall in a nearby ravine, some were found in walkways, and in a bizarre twist that seems to embody the indignity of the event, some were found in a barbecue pit that had been built for Woodlands staff.

"That was just really weird," said Ms. Feindel, who, along with a group of others, has spent the past few years tracking down headstones.

"Some of the gravestones were even face up in the patio, so you could see the names and dates. I just don't understand that," Ms. Feindel said. "It's pretty chilling."

More than 500 gravestones have now been recovered, but the trail has run cold and Ms. Feindel said the rest may never be found.

Those that have been recovered will be used to construct a memorial wall at the site later this year.

"There's been so much erasure of these people's lives and who they were as individuals. We felt it was really important to bring back these names - to bring them back into the light. These stones have been hidden away for 40 years."

During the hunt for the missing gravestones, one of the volunteers, Cathy Anthony, learned from her mother that her grandfather's older brother, Arthur Thomas Davis, had been admitted to Woodlands in the 1920s.

She had never heard about him while she was growing up.

"Those things weren't talked about at one time," Ms. Anthony said. "And had I not been involved in the project, I might never have heard that story."

Searching the records, she learned that her great-uncle had been buried at Woodlands nearly 70 years ago. One day at the site, as she helped a group of volunteers catalogue 300 headstones, she heard a team member gasp. From a jumbled pile of old grave markers, the headstone for A. T. Davis emerged.

"It was almost like finding someone who'd been lost," Ms. Anthony said. "I held the stone and began to weep . . . it was like reclaiming a part of your history, your family."

All of those who worked recovering gravestones were deeply moved by the experience, she said.

"We weren't just touching stones, we were touching people. By recovering these headstones we're saying, 'They will no longer be forgotten.' "