

Cemetery's unexpected gifts

Oakland's Mountain View not only a place to celebrate memories, but also create new ones



LAURISA OOM/STAFF PHOTOS

A bicyclist makes his way up the main road Monday at Mountain View Cemetery, the sprawling 200-plus-acre oasis in Oakland.

People walk dogs. Mothers push baby buggies. Bikers race down steep hills. On April 4, the Easter Bunny will pose for photos and hand out treats to children.

This is not like any cemetery I've ever heard of. But then, Mountain View in Oakland is not your typical cemetery. The sprawling 200-plus-acre oasis is part cemetery, part giant park. It is a community gathering place for the living in happy times as well as sad ones — without all the noise and traffic of Lake Merritt.

People come from all over to enjoy the serenity of the beautiful grounds, hike the hilly walking paths, and take in stunning unobstructed views of San Francisco Bay and Mount Tamalpais.

Oakland resident Kelly Fry comes four times a week for the exercise and what he calls "the best view in the Bay Area."

"It's really community-oriented," Fry says, walking Maya, his son's dog. "There's several groups of people who have gotten to know each other from walking here, so it's a real social connection for people to come here."

Mountain View Cemetery's primary function is, of course, to help people lay their loved ones to rest and maintain the grounds. Six months ago, the Mountain View Cemetery Association opened a new on-site funeral home. Current expansion plans call for adding an additional 5,000 plots with desirable views of the bay.

Those areas — deemed to have good feng shui — will appeal to the cemetery's growing Asian clientele. There are also plans to build a new post-funeral reception center.

Yet Mountain View Cemetery has also actively promoted the cemetery as a place to spend time for people who aren't burying loved ones or visiting graves. There are public events throughout the year.

and strange place," Lindeman says. Mountain View Cemetery also gives free history tours. About 163,000 people — including many titans of California history — are interred at the cemetery.

Some of the more famous include railroad builder Charles Crocker and former Oakland Mayor Samuel Merritt — who created Lake Merritt. Both men are buried in a section called "Millionaire's Row," marked by its costly and ostentatious mausoleums. By contrast, Julia Morgan, the first licensed female architect in the state, who designed the grand Hearst Castle, has a modest headstone that you have to hunt to find. Others from more modern times include Marcus Foster, Oakland's first African-American schools superintendent, who was murdered in 1973, and civil rights activist Fred Korematsu, an Oakland native who famously defied President Franklin Roosevelt's odious order forcing Japanese-Americans into camps during World War II.

"There's so much history when you contemplate the names on the older structures, and then you see the more recent influx of different ethnic groups," says Piedmont resident Carolyn Collins, who visits about twice a month. "I

just find it interesting to contrast some of the older structures that have fallen in disrepair with the vibrancy of the newer ones."

Mountain View was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who is also known for Central Park in New York City. It is a garden setting, rather than the churchyard-style cemeteries that had been in vogue before the 1860s.

"The layout of the cemetery is always remarkable in the natural topography of this valley very north of town and very far from what Oakland consisted of back then," says historian Annalee Allen, who leads walking tours of Oakland for the city.

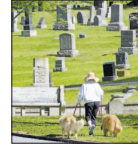
The cemetery, which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, is on the National Register of Historic Places. "I'm always surprised more people don't know about it."

"A lot of people hear the word cemetery and think, oh, kind of a creepy place, but it's not that at all," says Jane Larow, a Mountain View Cemetery docent. "I tell people, this is like a hidden jewel in Oakland."

If you haven't been, you owe yourself a visit. It's a real treat.

Tannerlin Drummond is a columnist for the Bay Area News Group.

Residents come to Mountain View Cemetery to walk their dogs and take in the views of the bay and Mount Tamalpais.



LAURISA OOM/STAFF PHOTOS

163,000

Approximate number of people interred in the Mountain View cemetery in Oakland



Foster

Famous people interred include: Former Oakland Mayor Samuel Merritt; railroad builder Charles Crocker; Julia Morgan, the first licensed female architect and Hearst Castle designer; Marcus Foster, Oakland's first African-American schools superintendent, who was murdered in 1973; civil rights activist Fred Korematsu, an Oakland native who defied President Franklin Roosevelt's order forcing Japanese-Americans into camps during World War II.

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