



In Search *of the* Spirit World

Hunting for ghosts in the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery

BY AARON RAGAN-FORE
PHOTOS BY LANNY SEVERSON

Do you feel the chill in the air?

DAYS ARE GETTING SHORTER, shadows are longer and Halloween is just around the corner. We're heading into that time of year when you'd just as soon stay indoors, curling up at home with a mug of something hot. You may triple-check that the doors are locked before you go to bed. And you're in the mood for a good ghost story.

Eugene is home to many legends of the supernatural, but few people realize just how haunted the city may be. The Bijou Theatre, once a funeral parlor, is prone to strange mechanical failure; investigators have photographed unexplained floating lights. Boxes are reported to scoot around under their own power in the back room of the Toys R Us at Valley River Center, of all places. Eugene schools seem to be most popular with the unquiet dead: Fox Hollow Elementary, South Eugene High and Sheldon High are all said to be haunted. One particular elevator shaft at Lane Community College is even said to have its own resident specter.

In short, Eugene isn't suffering from a shortage of spooky spots.

Grave situation

That brings us to Eugene Pioneer Cemetery. Although the memorial park, situated at the southwest corner of the University of Oregon campus, is horseshoed on three sides by the teeming life of an academic community, Pioneer Cemetery is unaffiliated with the university.

It's not for lack of trying on the part of the Fighting Ducks. The park was dedicated in 1872, a full four years before the UO was founded, and nearly every headstone bears a 19th-century birthdate. The purchase price of the cemetery's original 10 acres was \$600 in gold. Today, due to its proximity to the McArthur Court arena, the land would be worth . . . substantially more.

Mid-20th-century proposals called for disinterring the plots to pave the cemetery over for parking, or adding a multi-story garage above it for a sort of basement-level mausoleum. The schemes were thankfully derailed in 1997 when the cemetery was added to the National Register of Historic Places, leaving undisturbed this resting place of many a westward-migrating Oregon Trail pioneer. The park now stands as a somber reminder of the



Courtesy of Martina and Todd Baker

Martina Baker's dowsing rods pick up a ghostly presence emanating from the Kincaid Monument.

transience of life amidst the giddy, teeming dreams and hopes of college-aged youth.

It's easy to overlook the memorial park. You might see it only as an incongruous impediment to the flow of foot traffic or as a ready oasis to wander when you need five minutes to clear your head.

But is there unseen life here? In other words, when you're tracking between the headstones, are ghosts walking by your side?

Neither recently outgoing cemetery-board president Everett Smith nor current board secretary-treasurer Ruth Lake Holmes reports any knowledge of supernatural activity during their long associations with the memorial park. But local lore tells a different tale.

The UO's Randall V. Mills Archive of Northwest Folklore includes an account of a student witnessing strange fires burning in the cemetery after dark. It offers evidence of weird rituals that left behind candle wax and holes dotting a gravesite. Shrieks are said to emanate from the park at night. Perhaps creepiest of all is the so-called "Peeping Tom" ghost who has been sighted on a street corner near the cemetery; he reportedly will sometimes stroll down the block to stare into the dorm rooms of nearby Stafford Hall.

Despite these weird happenings, Pioneer Cemetery has a curious dearth of truly gruesome ghost stories. That seems odd, considering the cemetery's gothic nature. So one day I accompanied a team of ghost hunters to the cemetery as they conducted an investigation to search for signs of the supernatural.

Who you gonna call?

Martina and Todd Baker are a Portland-area couple who, for almost six years, have operated the Pacific Paranormal Research Society. The Bakers rely on scientific devices to determine whether a particular spot is haunted. "We have to go in as skeptics, basically," says Todd, who today is sporting a "Ghost Hunters are Deadiicated" ball cap.

Upon arriving at the cemetery, my guides lay out a complicated array of instruments and gauges, which they carry in very official-looking metal briefcases. Martina informs me that though it's not quite as atmospheric, our daytime visit to the cemetery (which officially closes each evening at 10) is just as likely to net us phantoms as would a nighttime expedition, and that cemeteries are often no more haunted than any other locale.

This is the Bakers' first investigation of Pioneer Cemetery, and they want to make sure they'll have it documented. Todd carries a digital camera to gather photographic evidence. Digital audio recorders are on hand to record electronic voice phenomena (EVP) that usually resonate at a lower frequency than human ears can detect. A small plastic box resembling a Star



Trek tricorder turns out to be a device for detecting electromagnetic waves. Perhaps the coolest gadget of all is a digital thermometer that reads temperature changes instantaneously . . . handy for identifying those infamous pockets of cold air that are said to accompany spectral activity.

In addition to their technical means of detection, Martina describes herself as a “quiet psychic”—she doesn’t showboat, in other words—sensitive to the presence of visitors from the other side. Almost immediately, Martina says, she feels a presence, on the memorial park’s west side. “It’s like a heavy feeling in your chest,” says Martina, “from here”—she points to her larynx—“to here”—she indicates her stomach.

The Bakers differentiate between spirits and ghosts. Spirits, they tell me, are deceased visitors from the ethereal realm. They can flit back and forth at will, across the veil between this realm and the next, sometimes visiting family members, familiar places or even their own gravesites. Ghosts, on the other hand, have made a deliberate choice to remain on earth after death and

are generally much more aggressive. With luck, we’ll encounter plenty of spirits today, but no ghosts.

From her case, Martina produces her least technical but most effective ghost-tracking tools: a set of two small copper wires curved into L shapes. These are her dowsing rods, which she says she uses to communicate with the spirits.

Her intuition drives her toward spirit presences from burial plot to burial plot, starting with a gravesite close to the Knight Library. At each stop, she poses a series of affirmative or negative questions to the spirit, instructing our ethereal hosts to cross the dowsing rods for a Yes and open them for a No.

Cylindrical metal handles allow the rods to swivel freely, parallel to the ground. Martina is careful to hold her tools level so as to avoid any suggestion of a scam. It’s a near-breezeless day and the ensuing movement of the rods appears to be drawing from some exterior force. And move they do. Through a volley of cautiously worded questions and ensuing rod movement, we identify three separate spirits.



Touching the other side

The first, a male, is interred close to a sign near the graveyard’s northwest corner, which warns against unauthorized burials or removals. Our correspondent expresses frustration at the beer cans left scattered by his family’s plot, so we clean them up before leaving the park.

As we near the burial site of the prominent Kincaid family, Todd detects an abrupt temperature drop of more than 25 degrees . . . in the sun, no less. Martina’s questions and answers reveal a female spirit unrelated to the Kincaids but visiting their plot. Before the week is out, Martina will e-mail me a photograph taken during our conversation with the spirit. An unexplained, smoky presence bobbles above the Kincaid monument.

Our most impressive evidence arises from the Grand Army of the Republic plot, the resting place of more than 50 Union veterans of the Civil War, plus a few wives and children. Using the yes-and-no dowsing-rod method, Martina locates and quizzes a spirit who turns out to be female, stood under 5-foot-4, and had brown eyes and straight, light-colored hair. The spirit indicates that her extended family still lives in the area. And she tells us which gravestone is her own.

Someone in the party comments on how young our conversant was when she died. We couldn’t hear it at the time, but when we listened to the audio recording later in the week, we heard a chilling whisper uttered by none of us living investigators. It was a woman’s voice matter-of-factly agreeing: “People and kids suffered.”

In all, our little team gathered five reasonably clear electronic-voice phenomena, ranging from single-word answers to our questions to full-blown sentences requesting that we deliver messages from the beyond.

Scratching an itch

Whatever the truth of what I experienced in Pioneer Cemetery, the simple fact is that I want to take it at face value. On some level, I think, all of us do. The supernatural scratches an itch that our civilization feels, an itch that might allow us to fill in blanks our rational minds cannot. Hunting for evidence of the spirit world provides us a unique and tangible link to our own pasts. In a way, we’re all searching for ghosts.

The week after my expedition with the Bakers, I happened to be walking through Pioneer Cemetery on my way to work. An intent-looking young man, probably a student, was standing near a tree. Impressively large headphones covered his ears as he held aloft a microphone wired to an iPod.

I waited as he completed the recording and switched off his equipment. Then I asked: “Are you ghost hunting?”

“I’m recording sound effects,” he replied. He paused, grinned and seemed to reconsider my question. “Maybe,” he said.

I nodded, and kept walking. ■

CARETAKER OF THE UNDERTAKEN

It might be difficult to imagine the personality type that would consider free housing in the middle of a graveyard to be a job perquisite. But Pioneer Cemetery caretaker George Dull doesn't see his lifestyle as all that offbeat. For the past decade and a half, Dull has been gathering the garbage left by college students, mowing the weeds left by nature and basically engaging in the dozens of little tasks that keep this little enclave of Oregon history running smoothly. Or, rather, lying still. Very still.

Dull hails from the Oregon town of Sutherlin, and except for a brief military stint in Korea and Tacoma, Washington, he has lived within an hour of his birthplace all his life. Dull's home since 1992, a trailer at the heart of the cemetery, has become a familiar fixture for visitors, often prompting a surprised, "I wonder who lives there!"

The historical aspects of his job provide a welcome diversion for Dull as he engages in the mowing, weeding and tree-limb removal that comprise the bulk of his work. In an age when the average life expectancy was decades shorter, Dull wonders, how is it that some of his charges lived to see their 90s? And why did so many of them die close to their birthdays?

Dull himself, who turns 50 this year, admits that he's slowing down with age, that the yard work and other duties take him a bit longer than they used to. It's hard to take him at his word, however, as he energetically scrambles onto the tailgate of the trailer he uses to transport trash, preparing to lash down his burden for a trip to the dump. Expediently and without sentiment, quickly and unobtrusively, he marches across plots and over buried bodies, picking up stray bits of litter. "I can't believe that people pay four or five dollars for a cup of coffee," grouses Dull, noting the cardboard remnants of grande lattes and tall chai teas.

Dull claims not to be creeped out at home, at night, in the dark, in a cemetery. He has grown inured to whatever it is that makes cemetery visitors quiet and reverent and uncomfortable, courtesy of 15 years working and living in the memorial park. He isn't superstitious, he says, and has witnessed no paranormal activity since he took the job. Occasionally Dull does find himself haunted by the earthbound, however . . . as when a deranged park visitor started beating the trailer with a tree branch some months back.

One might think the daily reminders staring him in the face would cause Dull to dwell on his own eventual death.

But he really hasn't given much thought, he says, as to how he'd like his remains handled. Instead, he focuses on the here and now.

Dull enjoys visiting with family frequently: Most of his siblings live locally. Even though his colorful day job provides him with housing, Dull's salary—funded by donations to the Pioneer Memorial Park Association—isn't enough to make ends meet. So in the evenings, he works as a custodian at Shasta Middle School in west Eugene.

For the most part, though, Dull likes to keep to himself. That's consistent, perhaps, with the norms of his occupation. "Neighbors are quiet," the caretaker quips, with the polish of a man who has been practicing cemetery jokes for well over a decade. "They're the only kind of neighbors I can get along with!"

—Aaron Ragan-Fore



Susan Surtton (2)

