

Anatomy of a Graveyard – The Granite Creek Cemetery

One can imagine a line of bedraggled prospectors in 1886 struggling to carry a wooden casket up the narrow trail to the cemetery above. Tattered hats clenched in gnarled, muddy hands, showing respect to the newly deceased who, many times, they barely knew. One person – usually someone recognized as a town leader – would be chosen to mumble a few memorized passages from the Bible and, oh so gently, the coffin would be lowered into the ground. Prospecting shovels would fill in the hole with dirt and rocks; and a makeshift wooden cross would be hammered at the head of the fresh grave. As caretakers of the Granite Creek Cemetery, we have spent years studying the anatomy of this graveyard.

Here, at the Granite Creek Cemetery, the dead “speak” in silent whispers and allow us to walk through history. Their headstones tell genealogical stories; however, much can also be learned from the layout of a cemetery. Looking up at the cemetery from the gravel road below, we notice the cemetery is located at the top of a hill overlooking the town site of Granite Creek and also the river itself (site of the 1885 gold rush). Perhaps the first prospectors chose this site to allow their fallen comrades to watch over them in death and to continue to relish in the hoots of joy with each new gold strike.

Most of the headstones in the graveyard face east. Historically pioneers would have their feet facing east. This was to allow them to rise up and face the sun of a new day upon the coming of the Saviour. Was this also the reason for the positioning of the graves at Granite Creek or were they located this way to give the interred a clear view of the mining camps below? Most likely, the reason was twofold.

Sometimes cemeteries are very telling regarding prejudices of the day and this is the case here. The original cemetery boundaries were to the right of a gravel path in the graveyard. Notwithstanding some newer graves which have been placed to the left in more recent years as the cemetery expanded, immediately to the left of the trail is the grave of Madam Hattie McBride. Murdered in 1920, her profession as a prostitute in Coalmont would not have allowed her to be interred in consecrated ground; consequently, she was laid just on the outskirts of the original cemetery boundaries. Walking past Hattie’s grave, into the trees, one can see numerous holes in the ground. This was the Chinese section of the Granite Creek Cemetery. Even in death they were segregated from the other members of the community. It is a Chinese belief that unless their bones are repatriated to their place of birth, their souls will remain in turmoil. Decades ago, someone removed most of the Chinese from the cemetery with the promise to return them to China. After investigating this story, we believe their remains went missing and did not make it to their final resting place.

The actual locations of many of the earlier graves are not known as the headstones would have been wooden crosses which deteriorated over time. To continue to honour these men, their names have been added to the list of interred with “location unknown” beside their names. The most magnificent headstone is for Foxcrowle Percival Cook. Mr. Cook was a prominent businessman in Granite Creek, Coalmont and Princeton. He was a

respected, community-minded family man who did much to assist the growth of the communities he was involved with. It is only fitting that his marker is so prominent in the graveyard.

The Granite Creek Cemetery was created from a need when prospectors, alone in the valley, passed away with no family to grieve over them. Each grave, each person, had a story to tell. While the cemetery is a place of death, it is also a place of rebirth for the history of the valley. The Granite Creek Cemetery is a sacred place of beauty and serenity. It is a place where the stories of the past will not be forgotten. As stewards of this important cemetery, the Granite Creek Preservation Society works very hard to preserve not only the headstones, but also the history of Granite Creek.

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