

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

February 20, 2015

Column #17



Where Have All the Bodies Gone?

Counting Graves Along Monterey County's Homeless Trail Of Tears

By Wanda Sue Parrott

ENUMERATING live homeless people in Monterey County is difficult; counting the dead is not impossible. The 2015 Point-in-Time Homeless Survey indicates 7000 homeless children now live in Monterey County, but no one knows exactly how many homeless died here over the past decade.

According to Detective Sergeant Archie Warren of the Monterey County Sheriff's Dept., "Our computer system can track homeless individuals when this box is checked in our SIRON program, but it goes back, I believe, until 2007 when the program was purchased."

Sacramento County has an exemplary homeless-tracking record. According to reporter Cynthia Hubert in *The Sacramento Bee* (12/20/13), there were at least 500 homeless deaths in Sacramento County between 2003 and 2013.

More than 2,000 people were homeless on any given night. Deaths per season were: Spring--24 percent; Summer—26 percent; Fall—24 percent; Winter—26 percent.

In Seaside, two dead homeless people were found last year in Laguna Grande Park. Michael Paul Verga, 55, was discovered July 25. His body was so badly decomposed in a shallow grave that cause of death could not be determined. He had a record of alcohol-related crimes. Charlene Leslie, 58, was found on Sept. 15 floating under the park's foot bridge. A veteran, she turned to alcohol and became homeless after her own son was killed in military service.

Verga and Leslie were identified post-mortem. What might have happened if they remained unidentified? Are indigents' organs harvested for medical transplants, or their bodies donated as cadavers on which medical students practice dissection?

Section 102870 (s) of the California Health and Safety Code regarding Unidentified Persons mandates that if the coroner or medical examiner, with the aid of dental examination and other identifying findings, is still unable to establish the identity of a human body or other remains, dental examination records shall be forward to the Dept. of Justice and the DOJ shall act as a repository or computer center, or both, with respect to dental examinations and final report of investigation specified in Section 27521 of the Government Code.

Homelessness is costly to taxpayers. A big chunk of the Monterey County Coroner/ Sheriff's budget goes for contracts with medical examiners and forensic pathologists. In 2012, County Supervisors approved establishment of a separate Medical Examiner's unit, a plan not yet in operation. The sheriff picks up the tab for both the medical examiner/forensics investigators and disposal of remains of indigent decedents like Michael Paul Verga.

Money played a key role in shortening the career of Monterey County's long-term medical examiner, John Hain, M.D. Dr. Hain served as ME for nearly 25 years when a contract dispute that came to light in 2011 forced him to work for three months without pay.

When Dr. Hain finally retired in 2012, average cost per autopsy was \$1,000 and his annual income was \$360,000. According to Sheriff/Coroner Steve Bernal's public information office, Dr. Hain remains on call as needed.

If efforts fail at identifying a decedent, an alias might be assigned by investigators who use familiar tags like Jane Doe for adult females and John Doe for adult males. However, Monterey County also uses numbers for crossmatch identification.

Det. Sgt. Warren says, "If a person is indigent and (has) no next of kin, they are cremated, and their remains are spread at the county cemetery."

The Monterey County Cemetery (Potters Cemetery) is located at Natividad Road and Laurel Road, Salinas. As part of the online *California History & Genealogy Archives*, Tim Reese reviewed Monterey County Cemetery as a place "where the homeless/transient dead whose bodies were never claimed by loved ones are buried" along with unidentified victims of crimes and prisoners who died while in jail. He calls it a 20–30-acre drought-cracked lot with "cracks that span an average of 1 to 2 inches wide" and "the dead are marked with a 2-FT by 2-FT concrete square with a metallic number affixed or stamped to the center."

To match identities, Reese says, ". . . go to the County Records Dept. on 168 West Alisal St. in Salinas to look at the names buried there, then match it to the number block." Reese found only two graves among an estimated 250-350 that had actual names on them. Reese concludes, "This is the lowest form of burial cemetery sites that I have ever seen in Monterey County, or anywhere else."

If a dead body is *unidentified*, the coroner, medical examiner or other agency performing a post-mortem examination must submit dental charts and x-rays to the DOJ within 45 days of date the body or remains were discovered; if *identified*, a final report must be submitted within 180 days. The jaw shall not be removed until immediately before the cremation or burial.

Alternatives to burial or cremation are explained by Det. Sgt. Warren: "Generally we look at the time frame after death and, depending on the type of death, we will determine if there will be a transplant conducted on the decedent. It is a case-by-case decision regarding transplanting organs."

Twenty-seven percent of Sacramento County's homeless deaths were documented cases of drug and alcohol abuse. Ten percent were veterans. Seventy-seven percent had jail records. Half died on weekends, mostly downtown and along transportation corridors. Average age at death for homeless women was 47; for men, 50. An autopsy for an unattended homeless person's death costs taxpayers about \$1000.

While awaiting publication of vital statistics hypothetically titled "Deaths along Monterey County's Homeless Trail of Tears," consider how Charlene Leslie's homeless friends identified her final resting place: *They marked the place she died instead of her permanent obscure grave*. Visitors strolling across the footbridge in Seaside's Laguna Grande Park witness more than adorable ducks paddling in the lake. They discover these hand-painted eulogies on the rail.

Charlene Leslie

6-4-51 to 9-15-14

Will miss you and always have a special place in my heart. Love, Deanna and John

Charlene, my dearest friend, I miss your laughter.

You are missed. See you at the Cross Road. RIP, Gloria

C-YA on the Other Side. Kimberley

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