

Statement made at the dedication of the State Hospital cemetery January 21, 2011 by  
Carolyn Mirich, Friends of Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services Cemetery

On behalf of families and the Friends group we would like to thank everyone for coming to the dedication of this beautiful monument and for the rededication of the cemetery now protected both by a new fence and by law. For many buried in this cemetery, my own relative included, this may be the first time words were said over their graves by hospital authorities or by clergy.

Some of you may wonder how our non-profit Friends' organization came to be involved. I can tell you that you do not wake up one day and say "I think I'll invest two or three years of my life in a cemetery." There has to be a very compelling reason to do that. This began over two years ago with a search for one family member, Cora Clark, who is buried here somewhere in an unmarked unplotted grave. What we then found was that there were hundreds, possibly over a thousand, of others like Cora and that something about this cemetery was haunting, intriguing, and terribly wrong.

During our initial research, a unique group of passionate people came forward, one by one, to volunteer their cemetery preservation experience, archaeological knowledge, first-hand experiences, research expertise and their time. Our primary goals as a group were to see that the cemetery was properly memorialized for the people buried here, for their families and so the cemetery might be preserved as a part of Nevada's rich history. With this common vision we spent untold hours researching burials and in search for an explanation why the cemetery fell into such a dismal state. What we learned we shared with State and City officials and the community.

Getting people to understand the importance of this all but forgotten cemetery was one of our challenges. We found many members of the local community did not know it even existed. What became clear to us from the beginning was that the remains of mental patients within this cemetery were treated differently than those of our other ancestors who are buried elsewhere. It was hard for families to learn what became of relatives, or research their family medical histories, as information was not readily available to the general public. There may not have been a death certificate, obituary, marker, and, there was no burial location map. In many instances families were never notified their relative had died.

We have found it is not at all uncommon for old State asylum cemeteries across the country to have become neglected. The costs of mental health care are staggering. Over the years a cemetery may not have been a fiscal priority, but it was still a moral one to provide decent burials and keep records of the location of the graves. Though the burial locations for all in this cemetery are unknown, today a fitting tribute has been provided to these former patients and the grounds and boundaries are defined and protected.

This hospital cemetery has an amazing history and anyone who comes to know it better will find that absolutely nothing about this cemetery is dead. It is ever-changing in its physical attributes, it has had evolving boundaries, remains moving from place to place, and many controversies over the years.

This cemetery comes to life as you learn the incredible stories of hundreds of former patients. Among those buried here is Martin Dean, who was once the Mayor of a city. Louisa Piper, of Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, was an accomplished musician. Eli Goddard was a stage coach driver before he was a patient. Francisco Guido, an Italian immigrant, was also a gardener who helped tend the grounds of the asylum. There were miners, Veterans, a druggist, a butcher, a seamstress, a harness maker and a tinsmith. Many of these people helped build Nevada.

There were many reasons people found themselves where we stand today. Some patients lived their entire lives in the hospital while others were admitted only during their last few months or years with diseases of aging. People were committed for reasons we would not imagine—loss of business, jealousy, poverty, menopausal symptoms, or because they may have been eccentric or inconvenient to society or to a spouse. It is good to know that today the mission of the hospital is to assist people with mental illness to live as independently as possible.

No matter where they started, whether they were rich or poor, young or old, regardless of their race, nationality or religion, a leader of a community or an immigrant traveling through Nevada, these people all shared a common fate passing through the doors of the State Hospital and ending in unmarked graves in this cemetery.

The condition of the cemetery as we found it in 2008 was certainly not the fault of the current hospital administration and not the first time it has come under scrutiny. The 1945-1946 Biennial Report said “the hospital cemetery has been the object of adverse criticism for many years.” It said there would be a fence put around this cemetery to guard against defiling. That fence has now been installed some 66 years later.

It was 129 years after the first burial and under the watch of Governor Gibbons, the 2009 Legislature, Dr. Harold Cook, Robbie Oxoby of Public Works, Ronald James of Cultural Affairs, and their staffs, that a proper memorial became a reality. Today affirms Nevada's renewed commitment to the protection of the graves and the grounds.

We wish to thank Senator Coffin for his early interest in this cemetery. As families and friends, we thank Senator Bernice Mathews and Assemblywoman Debbie Smith for sponsoring and introducing SB 256. They, together with every Legislator who voted on behalf of the best interest of this cemetery, may be very proud of their efforts. We also thank Mayor Martini and the City of Sparks for graciously releasing an ill-placed community park to its proper purpose.

This dedication says a great deal about respecting those with mental illness. Now families and members of the community have a place to come show their respect and see the names of their ancestors proudly displayed on the new monument, not shamefully hidden.

After this ceremony, please don't let anyone forget these former mental patients or this historic site again. While once little information was available, through the efforts of many people and organizations over the past couple of years, we can now say there is a great deal of information about the asylum and cemetery available online and at the historical societies and libraries. As families and friends of these former patients we ask that you come visit this cemetery often. Bring your children and grandchildren. There may no longer be a play structure, but they are

welcome. Walk the grounds with them, read stories of patients' lives, and pass down to them the history of this unique Nevada cemetery and hospital.

We hope those who work here for the State will come by on occasion for quiet reflection or just to check on the well being of the cemetery and that all will come to honor these former patients on days such as Memorial Day and Veterans' Day.

We have set up a table in the Agriculture Building with photos and historical information and we invite you all to come. There is a display listing those who helped make this memorial a reality and we have information you can take home with you. Other historical groups are also here with information about the history of the cemetery and hospital.

In closing,

Benjamin Franklin once said:

“Show me your cemeteries, and I will tell you what kind of people you have.”

As today proves, Nevada has some very good people who may be proud that during their generation hundreds of former patients have had their names and their dignity restored.