How to Bury a Dead Cemetery

By Dennis Knight

How to bury a dead cemetery is a riddle that faced Denver's city fathers at the turn of the twentieth century. But first I should tell you the story. In the 1850's, William Larimer, Denver's founder, felt that a first class cemetery was necessary to make the city prominent. With his father, he staked out and made a claim for land east of the city, which, ironically, was at the time sacred burial ground of the Arapaho. By1860 the grounds of the new Mount Prospect Cemetery had been laid out and folks were being buried. Within a decade its plots were filling in and the grounds were maturing nicely.

Fierce competition in Denver's cemetery industry soon arose, taking a toll on the fortunes of Mount Prospect. In 1876 came Riverside Cemetery on the Platte River and then, in 1890 began Fairmount Cemetery, several miles southeast of Mount Prospect near the new Windsor Farm. Fairmount became the big player in the industry, having invested in the new Highline Irrigation Canal and thus gained important water rights for its future.

Mount Prospect fell into weedy neglect with crumbling, tumbling tombstones and all sorts of wild and domesticated animals roaming the grounds. After less than four decades of life, it was a dead embarrassment to Denver. Robert Speer, the new mayor, decided in 1904 to decommission it and rededicate the grounds as a fine park befitting his view of the burgeoning metropolis as the City Beautiful. The east sections of the new park would be reserved for the new Denver Botanic Gardens.

Walter Cheesman was a Chicago druggist who brought his profession to Denver and went on to become a real estate developer, player in the city's infrastructure and developer of big water projects, with his reputation taking hits along the way. On his death, his widow gave a hundred thousand dollars for a pavilion to be built in the park to advance his honor, and thus Cheesman became the name of the park as well.

So how do you bury a dead cemetery? First, you unbury as many of the residents as you can, move them to another graveyard, and throw more dirt over those left behind. Starting out, family members were given notice to move their loved ones to another cemetery. But there were many left behind, so a local undertaker by the name of Edward McGovern undertook a contract by which he was to be paid a dollar and ninety cents for every casket he moved to a surrounding cemetery.

The project became an entertainment event in Denver, drawing spectators by the hundreds. McGovern devised ways to dig up extra profit by directing workers to divide the remains of single graves into several caskets. Stories broke in the Denver Republican of bones scattered haphazardly, and workers stealing rings and jewelry. McGovern's company was fired, and the city issued a warning to family members that they had ninety days to get the bodies out, or the park would be built right over the top of them, which, in due time, it was.

My fellow citizens, may I remind you now, a century later, that, under the grounds of Cheesman Park and the Denver Botanic Gardens are the remains of pioneers of our fair city abandoned in disorder and neglect. Please join my petition for a new undertaker to finish the job, once and forever. By the way, times being what they are, I will need to get more than a buck-ninety per casket.