

"See That My Grave Is Kept
Clean"

Eastside Cemetery Tells the
Story of San Antonio

History buffs won't find Meadowlawn Memorial Park in Google search results for "historic San Antonio cemeteries." But this quiet Eastside institution is a time capsule of San Antonio history. From Meadowlawns' 1850's origins as a family burial plot for German cotton farmers to its 1963 purchase by Cy Weller to the 200-seat state-of-the-art funeral chapel opened in 2014 by Weller's daughter and son-in-law Craig and Mary Cates, the evolution of the cemetery parallels San Antonio.

Familiar San Antonio names like Gemblar, Ackerman, Coker and Marquardt are carved on faded granite in the cemetery's oldest plot, "Founders' Garden". "Preachers' Row" holds the mortal remains of local African-American well-loved ministers J.J. Rector, E. Thurman Walker and Claude Black.

The Craftsman cottage which served as Meadowlawn's Tribute Center until the new chapel opened in 2014 once housed John Tucker's weekly poker game, attracting after-hours visitors from nearby Eastside Country Club like local jazzman Kenneth Fisher, later the first person cremated at Meadowlawn. San Antonio blues legend Willie "Jitterbug" Webb is buried at Meadowlawn, along with hundreds of everyday folk known only to their friends and relatives.

There is even a grave originally set up as a charity burial, later paid for by a Salvation Army colonel who told Meadowlawn officials that the man had left the organization \$1.2 million.

But the stories told by Meadowlawn's living, not its dead, tell us of the powerful bonds of love, tradition and family forged at the cemetery from life's most predictable tragedies, the loss of loved ones.

A Modern-Day Dilemma

When Cynthia Austin learned that her brother Tom had a fatal heart attack at his New Jersey home in 2013, her immediate task was to coordinate plane tickets to get her family to the funeral. Four days later, she learned that Tom, a Kirby native and former Marine, would be interred at Ft. Sam Houston because of long waits at Arlington Memorial Cemetery.

With no plans in place, Cynthia faced a typical modern-day dilemma: How to say goodbye when there are no rules to go by. 54-year-old Tom had made no firm plans other than preferring cremation and interment in a military cemetery. His widow arranged a funeral mass for family in New Jersey. But what next?

Meadowlawn took over to coordinate the logistics of bringing Tom to San Antonio, arranging visitation, cremation, and interment at Ft. Sam Houston's cemetery.

Long-time funeral director Greg Medcalf and his staff helped Cynthia and Tom's wife Valerie find a priest, coordinate music and set up the ½ hour time window allowed by Ft. Sam. But friends and relatives stepped in to say goodbye in their own way. Cowboys, Spurs and UT memorabilia were displayed at the visitation, reflecting his die-hard loyalties to his Texas teams. These, and other mementos would be cremated later with him. A woven tapestry made from a favorite family photo, provided by Meadowlawn, was a welcome tribute.

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Friends and family gathered at the Tribute Center. The small-scale venue, relatively unstructured event and family involvement reflect national trends of personalization, according to the National Funeral Directors Association:

"As baby boomers age and find themselves having to plan funerals for loved ones and themselves, they are making funeral choices based on values that are different than previous generations. Baby boomers see funerals as a valuable part of the grieving process and are seeking ways to make them meaningful.

Today, funeral service consumers are planning funeral services that are as unique as the person who died. The idea of personalization has resulted in an explosion of unique services that reflect the hobbies, passions and interests of someone who has died."

Family Tradition Means Togetherness Forever

The children of dairyman Margarito Garza and wife Maria had no questions about what to do when their parents died. Willie, Olga, Minnie, Mary, Louie and Mike all knew they would be buried in a church graveyard. But family members could not be buried together with their parents, and that bothered the close-knit siblings.

Sister Mary had met MMP owner Craig Cates she was his boss. After he joined Meadowlawn, she persuaded the family to purchase a family plot at the cemetery. This involved moving family members already interred elsewhere, so brother Willie was initially reluctant, but eventually all family members agreed, and the family plot was established in 2005.

In 19xx, Mary was buried next to her parents. The family purchased upright grave markers of black granite, etched with the Virgin of Guadalupe. The family plot is graced with shells, stones and vases of flowers.

Sisters Minnie and Olga are faithful caretakers, visiting the plot almost daily. They water the grass, keep flower vases filled and often fill empty vases on adjacent graves. They pray. They commemorate death and birth anniversaries. Over the years, they both say, their time at MMP has become like a church for them, providing a spot of calm and peace in their days.

Willie and Alice spent time last year selecting and designing the headstone that will one day mark their grave. The couple picked out a monument of nested hearts with an enameled medallion containing a color photo of the couple at their happiest. Perhaps reflective of their time moving all over the world as part of a military career, the family plot represents for Willie coming together of the family that grew up together in a small house, and then scattered.

Eastside African-American Community Fuels Cemetery Growth

The Garza's desire to own a family plot in a perpetual care cemetery was a trend that fueled the growth of Meadowlawn in the 60's. Funeral Director Sharol Curry remembers visiting the cemetery as a 16-year old when her mom had to return to San Antonio from California to arrange for her own mother's burial.

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At the time, Meadowlawn's location was considered the outskirts of town. Sherry and her mom met with MMP staff in a 10x10 building on the premises, against the protests of the rest of the family who were upset that their mom was being buried "way out in the country".

However, her mom wanted to make sure that her mother was being buried in a cemetery with perpetual care. In those days, MMP was the only perpetual care cemetery available to members of the African American community. Eastview, a traditional burial place for African Americans, and the City Cemeteries, were not perpetual care cemeteries, meaning that family members were responsible for upkeep of the graves, which was not practical for many families.

The International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association defines perpetual care as:

"The term 'perpetual care' in cemeteries has come to mean the providing of funds, to be held in perpetual trust, the income of which is to be expended in keeping up forever the necessary care of the individual lots and graves, and the maintenance, repair and future renewal of the borders, drives, water and sewer systems, enclosures, and necessary buildings." (<https://www.iccfa.com>)

Prominent Eastside residents began to purchase plots at MMP. By the 1970s, recognizing this trend, MMP's staff, including first employee Dean Claridge and later, owner Craig Cates and Raymond Clay, went door to door in Eastside neighborhoods promoting MMP to the point that it began to be known as an African American cemetery.

Fast forward to 1986. Sherry took a bookkeeping job at Meadowlawn, in spite of her nickname of "Scary Sherry", for her well-known fear of the deceased. She let everyone know of her fears, so how did she end up with a lifelong career that brought her into contact with not only grieving families but the dead themselves?

Her job included collecting the monthly \$20 payments that many people made (and still do) in person at the MMP office. These monthly contacts turned to friendships over time, as she learned to help out with all aspects of the cemetery business. She was the one people turned to when death occurred, although she maintained her fears and kept her distance from many aspects of the business. She believes that her fears stemmed from attending a funeral as a young girl, a highly emotional experience that left her with nightmares.

By 2004, MMP had acquired a funeral business. Owner Craig Cates, recognizing her natural empathy and people skills, sold her on the idea of obtaining her funeral director's license. She agreed, with the stipulation that she have nothing to do with the deceased themselves. In the real world, the boundaries she imposed didn't work. She found that she was needed to help families view bodies prior to cremation, and she gradually got used to some level of contact. At that time, she wanted to be able to be more involved in preparing bodies for burial, if only to help the families that she worked with, but she did not believe she could overcome her fears.

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It took years, but in 2007, she was fully licensed. Today Sherry is a mainstay of funeral director staff at MMP, having made the decision to fight and overcome her fears.

In the past 29 years, Sherry has seen changes, both subtle and dramatic. Hispanic and Anglo funerals and burials at Meadowlawn have increased, reflecting the diversification of the population of the Eastside. The tradition to bury the dead has shifted as cremation become more acceptable, especially to the under 50 generations.

The New Funeral: Personalization, Cremation on the rise

Funeral Home Manager Greg Medcalf concurs with this trend, over his 23 years as a funeral director, He observes that families once saw cremation primarily as a cost-saving, common when no funeral was planned. Now, cremation is part of the funeral service. Families may have a traditional visitation and funeral, to be followed by cremation. The cremation urn may be present at the service itself. Families may add personal items to be cremated with the individual.

This is in line with national trends, as religious traditions have gradually become more accepting of cremation.

In the past, funeral professionals saw cremations as an incidental service. But just as weddings have become highly personalized events driven by the personality of the participants, funerals more and more depart from the structure of the past. Families take charge, setting up the visitation area with photos and displays. Easy access to online photo and music storage allows families to put together their own digital music mix and photo presentation, often handing a disc to the funeral director.

Greg notes that visitations and funerals more often are taking place on the same day, and are morphing into "gatherings" or "celebrations of life" complete with catered food. Churches, once the normal site for the social event after the funeral, don't always have the room or the facilities to handle these gatherings. Church membership is down nationally, which means that people need another venue for funerals.

Trends like these prompted changes at Meadowlawn. Both founder Cy Weller and current owner Craig Cates, acquired acreage around the original one-acre Hermann and Sons plot, expanding to 94 acres by 2002. Cates added a crematory in 1991, and a pet cremation division, All Paws Great and Small in 2004. By 2011, cremations in Bexar County had increased by 30%. With the combined services of cremation, burial and funeral services, the 1500 square foot Tribute Center proved too small for many gatherings. The new chapel was envisioned, complete with a new sound system, and flexibly-sized visitation rooms.

Future plans include expanded facilities to host gatherings and receptions with catering, according to Cates.

Cemetery Becomes Couple's Refuge

For parents Janet and Charles Haskins, Meadowlawn is a family, not a business. After the loss of their only son in 1985, the cemetery became the most important place in their lives.

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On July 5, 1985, Michael and his dad had scheduled a meeting with an attorney to finalize the paperwork for father-son business. Before that meeting happened, Michael lost his life, suddenly and tragically. C&M Realty. The evening before, Michael went out to celebrate. He had been drinking; the police attempted to pull him over and ended up hitting his car in the rear. As the police approached the car, he was shot and killed by them. The shooting created controversy in San Antonio and tragedy for his parents.

Being a military family, the Haskins did not have a network of family in San Antonio. Janet, especially, found a family at MMP. She was aware that the entire staff knew what she and her husband were going through as they struggled to find answers, explanations, and ultimately, some peace of mind.

Like the Garzas, the Haskins came daily to MMP for years. They took walks after work and visited after church. Eventually, they had a key to the building. Owner Craig Cates would stop his black Cadillac in his daily circuit of the grounds, and hail Mrs. Haskins, "Jennie, come get in the car, let's go get a coffee"

At one point, Janet found herself sleepless on a rainy night, thinking of the 3-year-old little boy who begged his mom for an umbrella, saying "Your little chocolate boy is going to melt in the rain". Shortly thereafter, MMP arranged for Michael to be moved to an above-ground mausoleum. Later, Craig and his wife Mary contributed regularly to the scholarship fund that the Haskins created in Michael's name.

The Haskins credit the non-judgmental attitude of the MMP staff with helping them through that dark period. Ironically, the very refuge they helped to create ultimately became something that the Haskins decided, reluctantly, to separate from, as a way to re-focus their lives, and the daily visits stopped.

But the love remains. As they both agree, "We will be forever grateful".