



Whonnock Cemetery – Maple Ridge, BC

In our growing list of cemetery adventures we took great pleasure in visiting the Whonnock Cemetery because it is a small, intimate cemetery. But rest assured, for us it has all of the historical and visual impact of larger ones we've had the pleasure of experiencing. Engaging with gravestones has little to do with the size of the plot of land in which they are embedded. This tucked away gem certainly proved to be most fascinating and educational. The location of Whonnock Cemetery is down a long and winding path in the woods which seems most appropriate. Driving towards it means you steadily leave the bustle of the nearby city and suddenly find yourself in a quiet, peaceful out-of-the-way place where time hasn't infringed much upon the land in terms of major development. Time has crept along more slowly in Whonnock to lend way to a serenity that is now coveted by those who wish 'to get away from it all'.

Whonnock Cemetery is located on a dead-end street shadowed atmospherically by mature, towering trees which lean and loom over the grounds and markers. The cemetery consists of two sections—the Norwegian or Lee Cemetery which was first established by members of the Norwegian community around 1905 and the second section which was eventually purchased by the city of Maple Ridge from the Kwantlen First Nation in 1919.

Many of the Norwegian settlers like the Sorensens came to Whonnock and were fishermen. In 1997 Millie (Sorensen) Kirkwood remembers:

He (my father) liked to set his own lines—he was a very good fisherman. And as he stood on the deck he noticed this ripple coming out of the sea and he said it looked like it was aiming for him. So he stood there and watched it and finally it came up under the boat and circled around three times and it had a body just like a barrel. It eased its way—part of its way on deck and even peered at those men below deck and my father said that he had never ever seen anything like it and that it must be the face of the devil. Those awful eyes that peered at you and then finally he let himself slither back in the water. In those days it was sailing boats—this is many years ago. The crew said, “Andrew, —that was my father—“you will have to get yourself a new crew. We would never come out at sea again.”

In 1982 the two parts of the cemetery were joined with the municipality owning both sections. As it evolved many from the community were gradually laid to rest here leaving us their unique stories. Anne Watson is believed to be the first person buried in the newer section of the cemetery in 1922. An inscribed weathered cross marks her grave. One of the youngest children to be buried here is Amy Lynn Norman. Her stone reads, “Our little sweetheart, Aug 10-Aug 18, 1987, forever in our hearts”. Meandering through the cemetery you can’t miss the section where many of the Japanese settlers and families of Maple Ridge and Whonnock were buried. There is an eye catching monument which commemorates pioneers and reads, “In Memory of the Japanese Pioneers of Whonnock, Ruskin and Albion 1915-1942, August 20, 1955AD”.

There are many children buried here and two who caught our attention, Yasuki and Aiko were some of the most haunting because both died the same year in 1929. A local Japanese resident familiar with the history recalled that the children died of typhoid fever. The father, Shoji, was in the Canadian Army in the First World War. Sadly, like all of the Japanese families in the area, he too, was forcibly evacuated in 1941. Very few families returned to the area once the war was over and they were allowed to leave the internment camps. One woman, after relaying her family’s story graciously declared:

“I don’t hold it to the government, but what they did to dad and mom, you know. Dad came here in 1903. Forty years of hard work, all down the drain. We

had property in Whonnock. We had a brand new house on the place. Never could enjoy that or anything.”

Many of the families eventually settled in Eastern Canada and the memorial was erected by the Japanese farmer’s organization who didn’t disband during the war. They had a little money left and invested in the commemorative stone in the 1960’s.

Many grave stones in Whonnock Cemetery are so weathered, moss covered, cracked and chipped that they can’t hide being steadily clawed by time. We looked intently and many of the names were thoroughly worn but they stood holding their own in the green grasses. Still they call out beneath draping tree branches and edge through their shadowy realms. They may be rough to the touch but there is a beauty about them as they have now claimed the scenery instead of the other way around. We didn’t dare overlook them, and in fact, lingered as if staring at them would prevent them from disappearing altogether.

We never visit a location, whether it be a haunted house or a historic cemetery, with any pre-conceived hopes or expectations other than we will, undoubtedly, find our excursion satisfying after we learn more about the history of the places we visit. We come away with a greater appreciation of the locations we research than when we first arrived. And then there are the people and their stories, there is that. We unearth information as we go along. Slowly the people materialize from ghosts of the past into living, breathing human beings who struggled, felt joy, lived through pain and eventually, with gracious souls, triumphed over difficult times and in many cases, injustice.



That's what cemeteries are, in a way—places where the fading memories of these souls are kept, until we walk through and recount their stories. We dust them off, to once again, bring them into full colour. We pay attention and listen to those distant calls. When we leave those we've just visited, they are no longer strangers as we pack fragments of their stories out with us as we go. We try our best to share what we learned. Like the weathered gravestones, the stories can sometimes be rough. On this particular day instead of finding anything haunted, rather, we found several stories that are haunting. Those are the souls who stay with us as we gather them carefully and carry on through the occasional darkness. These are the souls who offer up their unwavering light to help guide us to our next unknown adventure.