



The Cemetery That Isn't

By Cynthia Leal Massey

On a windswept hill sits an old mansion with a graveyard that isn't, graves that aren't and tombstones that don't belong. The convoluted story of a cemetery that isn't could only take place in the town that gave birth to—dare I say it?—Mulchie, the gigantic mulch pile that really wasn't.

The story begins last year as I was sleuthing around Helotes for a book on the history of the town. When people learned of my project, I began getting emails from residents directing me to various sources. One resident mentioned the cemetery in his neighborhood and asked me to find out about it. He thought it was “strange.” Indeed, it was.

I became immediately suspicious about the “cemetery” when I saw that it was in the back of one of the most unusual residences in Helotes. The house, which resembles a rural prison, complete with metal window shades and a black wrought iron fence, has a flat roof upon which fifty or so chimney pots and several gargoyles perch. The roof looks like a chessboard, and so the house is often referred to as Chess House. In front of the house serving as an address marker is a tombstone. That was my first clue.

Other clues about the dubious authenticity of the “graveyard”

became apparent as I explored it: the 10 or so tombstones bore different surnames, only a couple indigenous to Helotes. Rural cemeteries are for the most part family cemeteries and since it was apparent these people were not related, my suspicions continued unabated. Not only were the people not related, they were Hispanic and died before 1960, yet a German family had owned the property on which this “cemetery” was located until the 1960s. The low concrete liners that surrounded each of the “graves” did not match their tombstones. It was apparent that the original tombstones had been larger. Another big clue was that the “graves” were situated on slabs of rock, Texas hill country limestone.

After my cursory walk-through, I was certain this was not a cemetery, but a facsimile of one, minus the bodies. Nevertheless, when I got home, I did a census search of all the names on the tombstones, spending a few hours crosschecking and going through several different census periods. None of the names appeared.

The next question was “Why would someone have a fake cemetery in his yard?”

Okay, call me crazy, but I was hesitant to go to the front door of this house (which would have been difficult anyway due to the locked iron gate) and question the owner about

the “cemetery” in his backyard. I did the next best thing. I questioned a few of his neighbors.

One who had lived in the area for more than 30 years said she did not notice the graveyard until a few years ago. Another told me that the mother of the man who lived in the house had once told her that her son liked historical things—all the chimney pots on the roof were antiques from England.

About this time, I was hot on the trail for other more pertinent material for my history book on Helotes and I put the “cemetery” on the back burner, where it probably would have stayed had I not been researching at the San Antonio Genealogical and Historical Society (SAGHS) library and discovered the Bar D Trail Cemetery listed in the SAGHS’s *Cemeteries of Bexar County, Texas*, Vol. 3.

I was dumbfounded. How could a fake cemetery get into a reputable research entity’s publication?

I emailed the president of the SAGHS, giving her my litany of reasons for concluding that the cemetery was not genuine. I asked her to highlight the error in a subsequent newsletter. “Not so fast” was the gist of her reply. “We need proof that the cemetery is fake.”

One suggestion was that I might consider hiring someone to use sonar equipment to see if bodies were buried in the graves.

I wondered if sonar could penetrate solid rock.

We emailed back and forth several times, until I finally asked, “How did your researchers learn about this cemetery? Did they talk to the owner of the property?”

Turns out they didn’t. It seems a neighbor told someone at SAGHS about the “graveyard” and the intrepid researchers drove over, walked to the “cemetery,” which is visible from the street and not fenced, wrote down the names, took notes, then left. They never spoke to the owner.

Not that I fault them for that. As I mentioned earlier, there’s a certain fear factor regarding this unusual property.

Back to square one. The SAGHS president was reacting defensively at this point. After all, the organization is a purveyor of historical records, which most people would like to think have some veracity. Additionally, the organization’s *Cemeteries of Bexar County, Texas*, Vol. 2, had received the Texas State Genealogy Society’s First Place Writing award in 2000. The organization would be reluctant to acknowledge a faux pas regarding Vol. 3.

The onus was on me to prove the cemetery was not what it seemed.

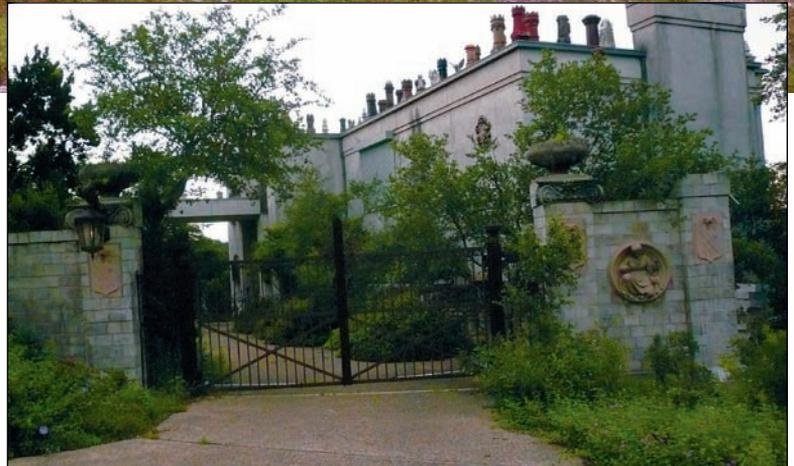
Not long after, while I was interviewing the Helotes police chief for the history book, I mentioned the cemetery and explained that I needed to prove it was fake because it was in an official cemetery book of Bexar County. He knew of the cemetery and he knew the man who owned the property. He promised to follow-up.

About a week later, he called and told me that the owner acknowledged that the cemetery was not genuine and that he

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had purchased the damaged tombstones from a friend who owned a monument business. “He showed me the receipts,” said the chief. “It’s not illegal to purchase old tombstones.” Nor, apparently, is it illegal to erect a fake cemetery. Boothill Cemetery in Tombstone, Arizona, is a prime example.

“What was his reason for erecting a fake cemetery?” I asked.

“To keep people off his property. Scare them off.”

I laughed. “It seems his scheme backfired. His ‘cemetery’ has become an attractive nuisance, drawing people in, rather than keeping them out.”

I asked the chief if I could give his [the chief’s] phone number to the president of the SAGHS so he could verify my claim that the cemetery was fake. He agreed.

When I next spoke to the chief, he told me the SAGHS president had indeed called. He explained everything to her and she was satisfied that the cemetery was not genuine.

Waiting to see an acknowledgment of the error in a subsequent issue of the SAGHS newsletter (I am a dues-paying member of the group), which by early May had not appeared, I was surfing the Web when I stumbled upon the Bar D Trail Cemetery listed on the SAGHS Web site. It seemed the cemetery would not die.

The president informed me that the organization’s Web person had resigned, so changes to the Web site were slow in coming, and she had been very busy for the past several months caring for an ill daughter. She invited me to write the story of the Bar D Trail non-cemetery for the SAGHS newsletter.

I agreed, knowing that I’d have to finally interview the man who owned the house. I not only spoke to him, but also to his

mother, who thought the whole thing was a hoot. The owner (who wished not to be identified) was reticent to talk about his little “cemetery.” He had no idea that his creation—he actually called it a “garden”—was in an official book and was causing so much commotion. “Where can I get it?” he asked.

After I told him, I asked why he had erected this fake cemetery. “I like old cemeteries and I believe in spirits. And who’s to say nobody’s buried there?”

In one respect he is right. In the Helotes hills are many burial grounds, marked and unmarked; however, the Bar D Trail “Cemetery” is not one of them.

Perhaps this article will help hammer the nail in the coffin of a graveyard that isn’t, graves that aren’t, and tombstones that don’t belong.

On the other hand, this is Helotes we’re talking about. Never mind. **SA**

Cynthia’s book Helotes: Where the Texas Hill Country Begins will be released in early fall. There is no mention of the Bar D Trail (non-) Cemetery in the book.