

THE EVERGREEN CEMETERY

by

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Life was difficult in Leadville during its early years and those unfortunate enough to succumb to its rigors were laid to rest in the Gulch, later called the Leadville Cemetery.

The first burial ground was situated at the end of Chestnut Street, west of the city, at a point where the upper and lower roads to Malta separated. It covered about one acre of barren ground. Indeed, it must have been a dismal setting as described in the Daily Chronicle, May 26, 1879. ". . . There was no flowery lawns, spouting fountains, shady nooks, grassy plots, nor artistically carved marble. The weeping willow, the winding walks, the twining arbor, the rustic chair - there were none of these. In short, there is nothing about the burying place for the dead of Leadville to make a well man desire to die. . ." The Leadville Herald reported, ". . . A worse or less inviting spot for the repose of dead could not have been found within the environs of our city. Here all the vast transportation of a great mining camp passes in daily bustle and confusion and the sleep of our dead is forever disturbed by the oaths and the black snake of the irreverent freighter as he vainly endeavors to encourage his jaded team. . ."



Vandalism is very much in evidence.

Mr. Vincent Kreig was the first gravedigger for the cemetery. The first interment took place on November 17, 1877, the body of Captain Sullivan Breece. Of the next eighty-nine burials little is known, as death certificates or burial permits were not required and Mr. Kreig kept no records.

On December 26, 1878, Mr. Harry Talhurst was placed in charge as the sexton. He was concerned about the careless ways of disposing of the dead and began keeping a record of those he buried. This proved to be a difficult task, as sometimes not a person could be found who could provide even a name for the record.

The cemetery land was owned by the City, and as space was limited, lots could not be sold. To the people who had made Leadville their home, it soon became apparent that they needed more than just a hole in the ground when it became necessary. They wanted large plots where family members could be buried together, in more serene surroundings.

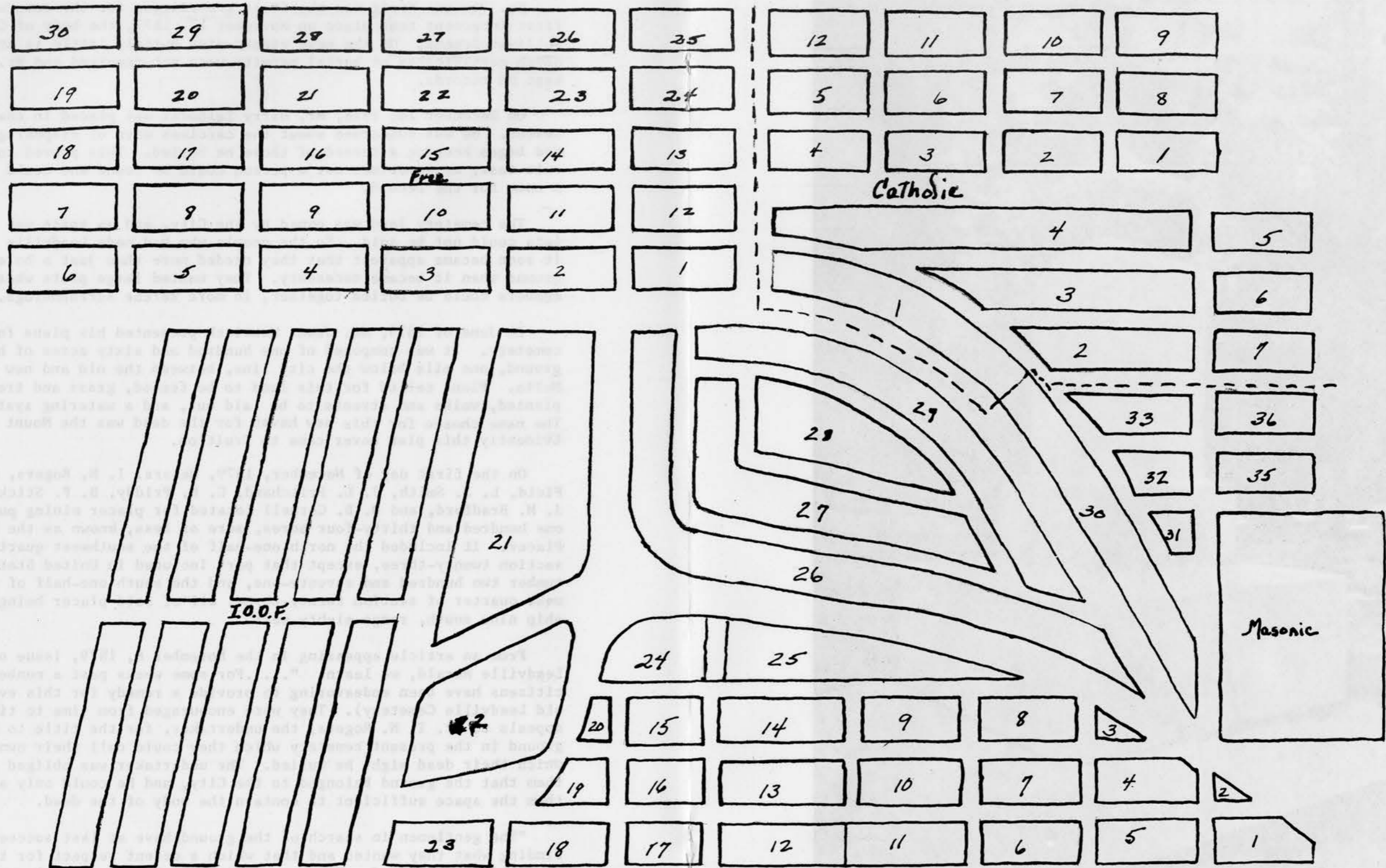
In June of 1879, Mr. James Montieth presented his plans for a new cemetery. It was composed of one hundred and sixty acres of high rolling ground, one mile below the city line, between the old and new road to Malta. Plans called for this land to be fenced, grass and trees to be planted, walks and streets to be laid out, and a watering system installed. The name chosen for this new haven for the dead was the Mount Hope Cemetery. Evidently this plan never came to fruition.

On the first day of November, 1879, Messrs. I. N. Rogers, Curtis Field, L. J. Smith, J. L. Pritchard, C. N. Priddy, B. F. Stickley, J. M. Bradford, and D. B. Cornell located for placer mining purposes one hundred and thirty-four acres, more or less, known as the Evergreen Placer. It included the north one-half of the southwest quarter of section twenty-three, except that part included in United States Survey number two hundred and seventy-one, and the south one-half of the northwest quarter of section twenty-three, all of said placer being in township nine south, range eighty west.

From an article appearing in the November 8, 1879, issue of the Leadville Herald, we learn: ". . . For some weeks past a number of our citizens have been endeavoring to provide a remedy for this evil (the old Leadville Cemetery). They were encouraged from time to time by appeals to Mr. I. N. Rogers, the undertaker, for the title to enough ground in the present cemetery which they could call their own and in which their dead might be buried. The undertaker was obliged to tell them that the ground belonged to the City, and he could only afford them the space sufficient to contain the body of the dead.

"The gentlemen in search of the ground have at last succeeded in finding what they wanted and that which a decent respect for the dead imperatively demanded. The ground has been surveyed and located, and a stronger force of men have been busily engaged during the past week in preparing those grounds for the reception of the dead. . . ."

On November 12, 1879, Messrs. Rogers, Smith, Field, Pritchard, Priddy, Stickley, Bradford, and Cornell filed incorporation papers for the Evergreen Cemetery Association. The object of this company was to



Taken from Early Map of Evergreen Cemetery



Memories are kept alive by memorials such as this.

provide, prepare and establish suitable grounds for the sepulcher of the dead, and to acquire the title to land, to hold, govern, control, and dispose of the same. The capital stock of the company was \$30,000, divided into 1200 shares of \$25 each. Each share entitled the holder to one vote in the company.

The men who owned the Evergreen Placer, on which the cemetery was located, sold it to the Evergreen Cemetery Association on March 22, 1880. By the middle of November, 1879, the Evergreen Cemetery was established. Sixty burials were held before the end of the year. Records indicate that the earliest one took place on October 18, 1879.

The cemetery reflected what was happening in Leadville in 1880. Seven hundred and sixty-seven burials recorded for that year bore silent witness to how the population swelled. The social life was represented by the plots purchased by the lodges and organizations flourishing in Leadville. Among these were the Odd Fellows, Masons, Y. M. C. A., P. O. S. O. A., and the A. O. U. W. There were special sections set aside for the Catholics and the Hebrews. Large, well cared for family plots, marked with ornate monuments and wrought iron fences, said that people were putting down roots. The free section of the cemetery told the other side of the story, for many were buried at the County's expense as paupers. Here were laid to rest the unfortunate ones, with no one to mourn their passing.



There were many cases where people made a serious effort to preserve and protect their plots . . .



. . . and some cases where everyone forgot.

The next turn of events in the cemetery chronicle occurs on February 23, 1881, when, for reasons unknown to me, the land believed to be owned by the Evergreen Cemetery Association was donated by an Act of Congress to the Veteran Union Association of Leadville. This Act reads: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled. That the following described tract of land, situated in Lake County and the State of Colorado, be donated to the Veteran Union Association of Leadville, its successors and assigns in said State, for the use and purpose of locating thereon a hospital and cemetery, to wit: the north half of the southwest quarter of section twenty-three, township nine south, of range eighty west, excepting however, from said tract that part included in the United States Survey number two hundred and seventy-one; and also donating for the said uses and purposes to said association the south half of the northwest quarter in the section, township, and range aforesaid. Said land is hereby donated upon the express condition that it shall be used exclusively for such hospital and burial purposes; and should there be a failure to comply with the conditions herein expressed for two years from passage of this Act, or should said lands ever cease to be used for said purposes, then said lands shall revert to the Government of the United States."

On March 26, 1881, the Veteran Union Association sold to the Evergreen Cemetery Association most of the land donated to them. They did this to carry out a contract they had made with the Cemetery Association on the 23rd day of November, 1880. The Cemetery Association was bound by the same conditions stated in the Act of Congress.

On the twenty-seven and six-tenths acres, located along the eastern boundary of the cemetery, the Union Veterans built a hospital. It operated until 1886 and after it closed the land was used for burial purposes. In

the late 1880's, the Catholic Church established its own cemetery, called St. Joseph's Cemetery. Many of the graves in the Catholic section of the Evergreen Cemetery were moved to the new grounds.

Through the years, the Evergreen Cemetery has set the scene for many events. Elaborate funerals for people such as Charles Vivian, the founder of the Elks, and Mollie May, a local madam, took place here. Leadville's first legal hanging took place in or near the cemetery and thousands of people thronged to see the event. Memorial Day ceremonies were held at the cemetery and many attended to hear the bands and speeches.

Of course, no cemetery is complete without reports of strange occurrences that happen on dark, moonless nights. If you should find yourself in the Evergreen Cemetery on such a night, you should be prepared to see the elk statue turn around to watch you pass, or have a strange, glowing blue light soar down from the top of a tall pine tree, or perhaps you will catch a glimpse of Erona, the deer woman, dressed in her flowing white cape and flying over the tombstones.

The ravages of time and neglect, along with the acts of vandalism that have occurred in recent years, have taken their toll in various parts of the cemetery. Many of the beautiful headstones have been pushed over or have tipped over due to the earth sinking below them. Pauper's Field is slowly being reclaimed by nature. Weeds and sagebrush have replaced the grass and flowers. In this cemetery lies much of the history of Leadville. It, too, should be preserved. With a concerned effort of the community, a minimum of money, and a maximum of manpower, it could be returned to its former beauty and its rightful place in the heritage of Leadville.

". . . Nature in her most saintly mood could not have created a fairer spot than this and with the protection, which discipline and artistic hands will throw around it, it must indeed become a resting place for the dead. Hereafter, when the excursionist and the visitor come to look upon our city and its vast carbonate fields, the Leadvillian may with pride, carry him over Capitol Hill to look upon Evergreen Cemetery, the city of the dead."

SOURCES:

1. Lake County records - Lake County Courthouse
2. Leadville City Directories
3. People who supplied information:
Mr. Ron Dump - Surveyer
Mr. Bernard Kochevar - Surveyor
Mr. James Connors, Lake County Assessor
4. Newspapers - copies and microfilm:
The Daily Chronicle - May 26, 1879 - copy provided by Western History Dept.
Denver Public Library
The Daily Chronicle - June 6, 1879
Leadville Herald - November 8, 1879
Leadville Daily Herald - August 29, 1884
Leadville Herald Democrat - January 1, 1887 - copy provided by Western
History Dept., Denver Public Library