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Memorial Wall at the reinterment site on the grounds of Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights

Memorial Wall Will Pay Tribute to 'Potter's Field' Remains Uncovered During Gold Line Construction Project

By Laura Kloth
Staff Writer

(Feb. 18, 2010) When Metro contractors began excavating around 1st and Lorena streets during construction of the Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension in June 2005, they couldn't have imagined that they would be unearthing a potter's field or pauper's cemetery where the remains of 174 people were buried during the late 1800s.

"We had environmental clearance of the area and they had done some research and it was indicated that there was little risk of encountering any human remains," said Metro Principal Environmental Specialist, Carl Ripaldi.

In his position, Ripaldi is routinely responsible for insuring that all state and federal environmental laws are complied with during construction projects.

So when the first human remains were discovered and pieces of a coffin were uncovered the following day, Ripaldi suspected he'd be dealing with more than the usual air, noise and safety concerns during the project.

Now, some 4-1/2 years later, Ripaldi says he believes Metro, with the assistance of contracted archeologists, Metro staff and the community have made every effort "to do the right thing" in handling the matter.

Respect and sensitivity

Yvette Rapose, Community Relations Manager said, "The right thing was to reinter the remains in a manner respectful and sensitive to the findings and in a process that is transparent."

To that end, Rapose notes that in January 2005, Metro invited the public to participate in the process.

During the next four years, Metro's Community Relations team along with Dennis Mori, Project Director led the effort to create an Ad-Hoc Sub Committee of the Review Advisory Committee (RAC) made up of members from the Chinese Historical Society of Southern Calif., the Chinese Benevolent Association, as well as representatives along the Eastside Alignment.

Monthly meetings were held at which the Ad-Hoc Sub Committee developed and forwarded a set of recommendations that included where and how to reinter the remains in as respectful and responsible a manner as possible.

The culmination of the Committee's efforts will take place March 8 when Metro is expected to host an unveiling ceremony to dedicate the re-burial site and memorial wall at the Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights near the Chinese Historic Shrine.

"The newly erected memorial wall aptly pays long-overdue tribute to those whose remains were uncovered in the 100-plus year old potter's field, and their reinterment at Evergreen Cemetery will honor them with a burial that they were once denied," Rapose said.

The remains will be re-interred directly in front of the wall beginning in April.

Commitment pays off in gold

Part of the Ad-Hoc Sub Committee's recommendations was to conduct a next-of-kin outreach campaign to see if any living relatives of these descendants came forward. After placing ads in numerous publications and running cable ads locally and in China, one family responded with a link to a headstone belonging to one T. E. Buzbee, who died of meningitis in 1883 at the age of 17.

Rapose, who noted that a number of other city and community dignitaries will attend the ceremony, met with Gaye Buzbee of Empire, Colo., a great-great niece of the deceased, to invite her and her uncle Donald Buzbee of Anaheim to attend the memorial.

"Engaging in my family's genealogy has paid off in gold," Gaye Buzbee told Rapose during their meeting.

"Gaye Buzbee said she would have never imagined finding T.E. Buzbee and was fascinated to learn about how his life ended in California, so far from home in Empire where he grew up," Rapose explained. "She was overjoyed and couldn't believe the efforts made in paying tribute to her great-great uncle and the other remains. While she appreciates all that was done, she was surprised at the care and commitment Metro showed."

Overall, Metro invested about \$2 million on the wall, furnishing the grave sites and covering the archeology fees and other costs associated with the project.

In the end, Ripaldi notes the irony of the whole process is that before the digging began, Metro had the choice of using a second site where some 11 residences were situated.

"It was either take down these people's homes or build on the chosen site" he said. "So obviously I think we did the right thing so we didn't have to

disturb the people's homes."

"I think the fact that you see that memorial out there -- that's evidence of the success of the whole effort," Ripaldi said. "It was very much a joint effort of a good representation of the community."

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