

# Ventura Cemetery Becomes City Park

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Tombstones removed from Ventura cemetery are stored in hidden canyon.

## TOMBSTONES HAULED AWAY

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BY CHARLES HILLINGER

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VENTURA—Hardly a week passes that someone doesn't storm into the City Hall here, demanding to know what happened to Grandpa or Aunt Martha.

The out-of-towners have just discovered the old Ventura Cemetery in the heart of the city isn't what it used to be.

All the tombstones and monuments are gone.

What has happened, it is quickly explained to relatives unreached previously by the city, is that the old cemetery—weed-choked and cluttered with shattered headstones for at least a quarter century—has been converted into an attractive memorial park.

But the bodies of the 2,298 persons buried there, plus an unknown number of Indians in a common grave, remain beneath the spacious lawns and trees.

For years Ventura tolerated the blighted graveyard, just as hundreds of cities across the land put up with old cemeteries dotted with deteriorating markers and seldom-visited gravesites.

Burials began in the Ventura

graveyard in 1862. They were discontinued in the two-block long, one-block wide cemetery in May, 1944, when an ordinance was adopted prohibiting further burial.

For nearly 30 years city officials tried unsuccessfully to clean up the cemetery grounds.

"It had been an eyesore as far back as anyone can remember," says Park Supt. Ed Lupton. "Vandalism had always been a problem.

"Half the tombstones would be turned over or scattered throughout the county each Halloween, turning up on front lawns, in back yards, in the middle of Main St., or on the Ventura College campus.

"The cemetery was the city's free hotel for bums and winos who slept in its weeds, in empty crypts."

As long ago as 1938, the City Planning Commission suggested the cemetery be made into a public park. The city attorney, however, ruled at the time that the city could not remove or obliterate the markers.

In August, 1949, the planning commission recommended the tombstones be razed and multiple housing be erected but the plan was rejected. The cemetery was so unsightly that a 10-foot high hedge was

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Former Ventura eyesore is now a spacious city park. In foreground, Bob Myers, left, city's administrative assistant, and Ed Lupton, park superintendent. Times photos by Kay Graham

# CEMETERY PARK

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planted around it that year to hide it from public view.

Last year City Manager Charles W. Reiman got the go-ahead from the City Council for the memorial park plan.

Letters were sent to all relatives who could be located. Hundreds were contacted. Several hundred others could not be traced.

All but one family contacted agreed to let the city remove the tombstones, but not disturb the graves. Finally the single holdout permitted the city to place their headstone in another cemetery, leaving the body behind.

The cemetery has Catho-

lic, Protestant, Jewish and Chinese sections.

Tombstones and monuments now rest in a hidden canyon, a city storage area. Many monuments originally cost thousands of dollars. They span a century. Some are crudely marked in English or Spanish and made of wood. Others are ornate granite.

Some are chalky Spanish-American War veteran stones. Others are from graves of veterans of the Civil War, the Mexican War and World War I.

Tombstones of pioneers litter the lonely canyon — names that appear today as streets, town, canyons, rivers and mountains in Ventura County.

Any relative who so wishes may claim his family

headstones, but few have.

Bob Myers, the city's administrative assistant, said the city has assured all relatives the headstones will be buried in a deep canyon or deposited in the sea after storage for three to five years.

The memorial park now is a green belt overlooking the sea with walkways and benches soon to be added. A large fountain will be erected. A plaque will list the names of all buried there.

At each gravesite will be a small bronze number keyed to the large memorial.