

AUSTIN

## **Graveyard tour details Austin's early murders and untimely deaths**

### **'Murder, Mayhem and Misadventure' is fundraiser for city cemetery preservation group.**

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If every life is a story, then every burial plot, every tombstone silently holds the secrets.

Danny Camacho's job is to make the dead speak.

How did they meet their fate? How did their deaths affect their families? What does death reveal about forgotten times and places in early Austin? These are the questions Camacho ponders in the bowels of the Austin History Center as he researches the stories that fill "Murder, Mayhem and Misadventure," a walking tour and Halloween fundraiser for Save Austin's Cemeteries that spotlights 19th- and early 20th-century murders and untimely deaths.

The third annual tour is Saturday at Oakwood Cemetery, a 40-acre resting ground at 1601 Navasota St. in East Austin. Established in 1839, when it was known simply as City Cemetery, it is the oldest of Austin's five city-owned burial grounds.

Camacho, a vice president of the cemetery preservation group, pores through microfilm of historical newspaper accounts and the faded pages of sextons' ledgers with their cursive listings in long, sterile columns detailing name, age, sex, color, nativity, disease, attending physician and burial information. He collects pieces of information like broken chips of an antique porcelain tea cup and carefully puts them back together.

"I try to say, 'That's their story,' and put it in context, in a respectful way," said Camacho, who gets research help from Kay Boyd, the cemetery preservation group's secretary.

"'Murder, Mayhem and Misadventure' is our best fundraiser of the year," said Leslie Wolfenden, an architectural historian and president of the cemetery group, which seeks to preserve the city-owned cemeteries.

"It's like going back in time," said Carlos Alba, an Austin medical assistant and an organizer with Austin Paranormal Investigators who has been on previous tours.

The tours typically last about an hour and feature 10 to 12 grave sites selected from a list of about 20 stories that Camacho and Boyd think people will find fascinating. For the researchers, newspaper accounts are unflinching with their details of gruesome, tragic deaths.

Camacho says he is careful not to dwell on that. But murder and mayhem are messy and hold a certain fascination; there is no getting around it.

"We try to be respectful. If we're quoting graphic details, we point out this is what the paper said," said Camacho, who also is one of the tour guides. He usually starts with a disclaimer that some of the stories deal with adult themes and graphic violence. The group is sensitive to the fact that many of the dead have descendants in Austin. Camacho and other Save Austin's Cemeteries volunteers have family members buried at Oakwood.

In 2008, "Murder, Mayhem and Misadventure" stopped at what was known as the "Colored Grounds," one of the oldest sections at Oakwood where most of Austin's early African American population is buried. It is also the resting place of victims of the so-called Servant Girl Annihilator. Their unidentified serial killer is probably buried somewhere in the cemetery; if there were wooden markers on the victims' graves, they have been lost to time.

In 1884 and 1885, the serial killer stalked women in the city, initially targeting the black servants of white families. Likely wielding an ax and a knife, he bludgeoned and gashed his victims, leaving horrific wounds. Historians think he killed at least eight people and maybe as many as 20.

Saturday's tour will note the deaths of Eula Phillips and Susan Hancock, both white, whose grisly Christmas Eve murders in 1885 were attributed to the serial killer. The Christmas day headline in the Austin Daily Statesman blared: "Blood! Blood! Blood! Last Night's Butchery. The Demons Have Transferred Their Thirst for Blood to White People."

Some have speculated that the killer was London's infamous "Jack the Ripper," suspected in a series of deaths in 1888. Camacho says the evidence is flimsy at best.

"We try to be as factual as we can," he said. "You really don't have to embellish the facts."

Sometimes, deaths from illness, such as those from diphtheria, which took William Tumey's two children, Robert Homer, 2, and Mable, 4, within a week of each other in 1888, are powerful in their poignancy or instructive of a time when the epidemic stoked fear among families.

At last year's tour, one of the deaths featured was that of Gilbert Searight. On the morning of June 16, 1895, while working on one of the city's moonlight towers on Ninth and Guadalupe streets, Searight, 22, missed his footing, plunging 150 feet to his death to the horror of two witnesses, including a young boy. That history is notable as well for illuminating an era when the moonlight tower lighting systems were common in U.S. cities. Many still stand in Austin, and in 1976, they were added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Camacho, a retired food services worker and history buff, prefers zooming in on the period before 1900 because it is both revealing and familiar through his many years of volunteer work at the Austin History Center. "You get those little period details that stick with you," Camacho said.

Death in those times was considerably more personal, he said. Funerals and wakes were routinely held at home, and families, friends and neighbors gathered in large numbers in the family room. A horse and buggy carried the casket to the cemetery, and mourners walked alongside. Families regularly maintained their loved ones' burial plots.

"You didn't just go to the cemetery for the funeral. There was that relationship," Camacho said.

Save Austin's Cemeteries hopes that its fundraisers "are the squeaky wheel to get things going," said Wolfenden, the group's president.

Last year's tour drew about 200 people and raised about \$500, she said.

With the city having budget problems, and because the public doesn't use cemeteries as much as it does parks, maintenance can fall to the bottom of the list of things to get done, she said. But there are many needs; vandalism and theft, fallen trees, roads, fencing, plumbing and infrastructure are perennial issues.

Wolfenden said "Murder, Mayhem and Misadventure" is popular "because it's Halloween and people are looking for something spooky to do." She laughs.

"But we don't think Oakwood is spooky."

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