



Episode 021 – “The Villains of Valhalla” (transcript)

Introduction

You’re listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at burbankinfofocus.org.

Announcements

“Reading gives us someplace to go when we have to stay where we are.” Summer Reading registration begins soon for our annual program that runs from June 1st to July 31st. Summer Reading is not just for kids anymore! Everyone is encouraged to participate and can even win prizes. Find more details on our website burbanklibrary.org or pick up a Summer Reading brochure at any Burbank Public Library.

Story

And now for today’s story...

Close your eyes and think of a cemetery. I predict your visions are that of a serene, somber, maybe even spooky place. I would be hard pressed to find someone who associates scandal in that mental picture, unless, of course, that person is familiar with our own Valhalla Memorial Park.

I am a taphophile, a tombstone tourist, an epitaph enthusiast, a graveyard groupie. I love all things cemetery. So, to entertain that peculiar proclivity, I decided to research Burbank’s local cemetery, Valhalla Memorial Park, named after the mythical afterworld reserved for Norse warriors. Valhalla is situated half in Burbank and half in North Hollywood. The ephemeral line that splits it is apparent when you walk the grounds as there are truly two different parks in one. The new portion of the cemetery lies in North Hollywood. It has an airier, fresher vibe. Here you can find an enormous fountain dedicated to Washington and the majority of the park’s columbaria. As you cross the imperceptible boundary into the Burbank portion of the park, those who are sensitive to locale energies, might notice a resounding melancholy reserved for that older portion of the graveyard. This might be due to the scandal brought on by the park’s original owners or perhaps because of several aircraft that had tragic descents in the expanse of graves. I am happy to explore both histories.

Valhalla Memorial Park was founded in 1923 by two Los Angeles businessmen, John R. Osborne and C.C. Fitzpatrick. Before they had even officially opened the premises, the two men were already being suspected of malfeasance. According to a 1924 L.A. Times article, "A certain project known as the Valhalla Memorial Park is being promoted by the Osborne-Fitzpatrick Syndicate, and many thousands of citizens have purchased sections or burial plots in the proposed cemetery. A great many buyers claim that false and fraudulent representations were made them when they purchased said sections or burial plots. It is reported that, at a mass meeting of section buyers a few days ago, there were more than 1000 persons present and they all seemed to agree that the promoters represented to said buyers, through their agents, that their sections would be resold on or before September 1, 1923, at a greatly advanced price over the purchase price. Many people, the majority of who appear to be widows and women of no investment experience, have placed their savings in the project." The investors were told that their money was to be used to beautify the grounds to attract new buyers who would pay a higher price for the plots, but this was all found to be false. Charges of fraud were officially brought forth in February of 1924. According to a written statement, "Several hundred salesman employed by the company are believed to have been instructed by the promoters to make the false and fraudulent representations. The prospective buyers were told that the available burial space in Los Angeles and vicinity would be exhausted in eight years," when as a matter of fact, three of the seven local cemeteries were equipped to take care of burials for sixty-five years. The buyers were also told that the prices of lots in established cemeteries were far higher than that of Valhalla, which was untrue. Local cemeteries charged between \$22 and \$42, whereas, Valhalla was charging anywhere between \$25 and \$158. "Section buyers were told they would make more than 100% profit on their investment in three months or less through re-sale of their holdings by promoters, [when] virtually no res-sales [had] been made. The promoters represented Valhalla cemetery as a 35-minute drive from Los Angeles when, as a matter of fact, it [was] located on the other side of Burbank, [could only be] reached over one and a half miles of very poor dirt road from the boulevard to the cemetery and would require at least an hour and a half for a funeral procession to reach it from any Los Angeles undertaking establishment." The promoters had also described Valhalla as a spot of "excessive scenic beauty, when [it was actually] situated amidst dairy and stock-raising properties. [And] the only improvements noticeable include[d] a \$4,000 pump, the plowing of a 30-acre area that [had] been piped for irrigation, a lath house for shrubs and plants, and a small force of fifteen to twenty workmen employed on the [multi-million dollar] project who [were] 'wandering around like lost souls, apparently trying to accomplish nothing and succeeding very well.'" The 65-acre lot had cost the Osborne-Fitzpatrick duo \$60,000 and within a year they had sold 8 million dollars in lots, of which 3 million had already been collected.

Real Estate Commissioner Kelser presided over a formal investigation against the Osborne-Fitzpatrick Finance Corporation that commenced on March 3, 1924. The assembly room got so heated that at one point an ex-Valhalla sales manager jumped to his feet and struck Leo Youngsworth, attorney for the plaintiffs, giving him a black eye. Final arguments were heard on

April 3, 1924 and a decision deferred until early May in which the Real Estate Commissioner found the company guilty of using or permitting the use of misrepresentative statements in connection with the sale of burial property. Licenses of four of the sales managers involved were revoked. "The commissioner's findings set forth that promises were made of resale on burial lots within a period of from thirty to ninety days at a profit ranging from 100 to 500% over the prices at which the property was originally purchased and that these pledges were made with no intention of carrying them out but with intent to deceive." He also determined that Osborne and Fitzpatrick's declaration that they were men experienced in the development, management, and operation of cemeteries to be untrue. He found that the 1 million dollars avowed to be set aside for beautification of the property was bogus as well.

In December of 1924, Osborne and Fitzpatrick found themselves in court again as 6,000 investors filed a bankruptcy petition against the men. The petition charged the same irregularities and fraudulent acts as were charged in the first indictment. On August 14, 1925 the pair was sentenced to ten years in prison and fined \$12,000 each for using the mail to defraud its clients. They served 5 years and were paroled in 1930. John R. Osborne committed suicide in 1935. He is buried at Valhalla Memorial Park. It is unknown what became of C.C. Fitzpatrick. That sums up the scandal that laid the cemetery's foundation.

I have not forgotten that I mentioned earlier that plane crashes would be in this podcast. Locals who know the geography of Burbank, know that the Burbank Hollywood Airport lies just across the train tracks from Valhalla Memorial Park...literally. There is the airport, Empire Way, the train tracks, Vanowen Street, and the cemetery. Planes take off and land frequently over the modest final resting spot. So, it should be no big surprise that a few have landed inside the cemetery, right? Well, the first one might be a bit of a headscratcher because it happened in 1929 and our local airport wasn't in service until 1930. It seems aviators have a preternatural affinity to the area. A flight instructor, Arnold Geldart established his own airport at 4412 Victory Boulevard, which currently appears to be an empty lot and a strip mall near the corner of Clybourne. The Los Angeles Times reported the following, "Dropping like a plummet from an altitude of 2200 feet, two flyers were killed yesterday when their airplane went into a nose-dive while they were soaring over Valhalla Cemetery." The victims were the 32-year-old instructor and his student pilot, 18-year-old Rex Crouse. Geldart was a seasoned pilot, having served in the Royal Canadian Flying Corps during World War I. The second crash happened on April 8, 1940. Pilot Charles DeWitt was making a landing into the airport when "at 250 feet, apparently maintaining insufficient speed, DeWitt attempted a vertical bank and stalled. He crashed within a few feet of the Valhalla Mausoleum." He died later at the Burbank Emergency Hospital. In one crash the pilot was lucky and walked away unscathed. On September 22, 1950, Captain Ray Lester of Nellis Air Force Base was reported as being 'too hot' on his approach, so he decided to go around, but his engine lost power with a flame-out. "He put the F-80 down on an unused portion of the cemetery, gouged a long swath through the dirt, sliced between two trees—losing both wings—and caught fire." He leapt out of the plane with only his hair singed and one lost shoe. The airplane was destroyed. And lastly, on July 18, 1969, Charles Burns and Gene Bain

both perished when their twin-engine aircraft “crashed into the dome of the Portal of the Folded Wings Memorial, which stood to honor famous flyers. The plane split in half.” Damage to the memorial itself was considered superficial.

At some point after the trial, Valhalla Memorial Park was taken over by the state of California. It is unclear how long the state owned the cemetery, but it was eventually bought in 1950 by Pierce Brothers. That company still owns it to this day, but under the corporate name Dignity Memorial. The original entrance is off Valhalla Drive where a 75-foot marble and mosaic structure was commissioned to sculptor Federico Giurgi at the cost of \$140,000. It was built in the late 1920s as a grand portico to the grounds, but later the entrance was moved to Victory Boulevard. On December 17, 1953, the structure was dedicated to honor dead American Aviators in recognition of the 50th anniversary of powered flight. It was renamed the Portal of the Folded Wings and has become a resting place for the cremains of many famous flyers. On the west side of the monument, is a model of the space shuttle Challenger with a plaque dedicated to those lost in its 1986 explosion. Comedian Oliver Hardy is buried at the cemetery, along with a slew of old-time B-list stars. And if you are not one of the folks who gets spooked in graveyards, it is quite a tranquil place to get one’s steps in.

News from Burbank

Today’s news is from the November 5, 2005 *Burbank Leader*.

A Glendale cemetery under investigation for allegedly mishandling thousands of cremated remains and several skeletal remains was prohibited from conducting new business for an indefinite amount of time. In a routine surprise inspection, a state inspector uncovered a closet filled with the cremated remains of about 4,000 people that were never buried properly or disposed of, many of which dated back to the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. Along with the thousands of cremated remains, the skeletal remains of seven people were discovered in a vault. According to the petition for interim suspension, many other violations were uncovered as well. Cremated remains were found in a dumpster or spilled on the floor, remains were not buried at proper depth requirements, and accurate cemetery records were not being kept. Investigators also uncovered records showing that at least seven grave sites were sold more than once to different parties. [Neighborhood resident Monica Lopez said], “Over the years, I’ve noticed the cemetery has really fallen apart.” She says she sometimes takes walks there because she finds it peaceful, “but lately, she had noticed unusual odors, unlocked closet and storage room doors, and stained walls and carpets in the mausoleums.... Investigators believe many of the uncovered remains that were stored away belonged to indigents, or were unclaimed.”

And that’s the news from November 5, 2005.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfocus.org.

Thank you for joining us today.