



Grounds for Remembrance

In the heart of Albuquerque, a neglected graveyard tells stories of wealth, power, tragedy, and anonymity.

By **Kate Nelson**



YEAR

1881

OLDEST KNOWN BURIAL

GRAVES

12,000

ESTIMATED

BUFFALO SOLDIERS

13

MANY UNMARKED

GOVERNORS

1

EDMUND G. ROSS



FRANCISCO PEREA WAS SEATED IN Ford's Theatre that night, and he heard the bang of the bullet that killed his friend President Abraham Lincoln. Born in the village of Los Padillas, south of Albuquerque's core, Perea prospered from his trade network along the Santa Fe Trail before winning election as a territorial delegate to Congress in 1863. When he died, in 1913, his body joined those of other prominent citizens in the city's first community cemetery.

Today, a soldierly lineup of poplars and evergreens divides that resting place from the more recent green and orderly burials at Fairview Memorial Park, seven blocks south of the University of New Mexico. Felled logs amid the row of trees block a onetime driving entrance, requiring a couple of shimmy steps to enter Fairview's far smaller and long-neglected original portion.

At 17 and a half acres, Historic Fairview Cemetery likely holds as many tumbleweeds as it does gravesites—an estimated 12,000, half of them unmarked. Scraggles of desert scrub crop up among tilted headstones and eroded markers. But for the occasional clutch of faded plastic flowers and small flags marking military graves, its color scheme fades into tones of gray and sand.

American flags mark the graves of veterans, whose collective service begins with the Civil War and runs through the Korean War.

HERE LIE THE PEOPLE OF ALBUQUERQUE'S 1880s railroad boom, the entrepreneurs and politicians, the land barons and heroes, the Masons and Elks, the children and babies, the known and forever unknown.

"They say it takes two generations to forget somebody," says Susan Schwartz, the cemetery's historian. "There's something about being forgotten that really bothers me."

Around 2004, Schwartz says, she learned that the historic cemetery, created before the advent of perpetual care, also had some of the saddest burial records around. She volunteered to whip them into shape and spent years squinting at spidery handwriting on onionskin papers, digging through old newspapers, and becoming enthralled with the dearly departed.

There's Albert G. Simms and Ruth Hanna McCormick Simms, two congresspeople (he of New Mexico, she of Illinois) who fell in love, married, and oversaw the property now operating as Los Poblanos Historic Inn. In 1938, her son, Medill McCormick (of the *Chicago Tribune* McCormicks), died while mountain climbing on Sandía Peak. Ruth had both his body and the boulder it was found on retrieved. The rock is there today, at the head of the trio's graves.

There's Emma Albright and Eddie Cobb, women photographers who ran portrait studios that created a lasting record of Albuquerque's people, their fashions, and their passions.

There's John Braden, who drove a wagon filled with fireworks intended for the 1896

VISITING FAIRVIEW

The main gate to Fairview Memorial Park, 700 Yale Blvd. SE, is open from 7:30 a.m. to dusk. Turn north off the main drive and park along a tree-lined lane bordering the Historic Fairview Cemetery. Wear sturdy shoes and be careful not to step on graves. The cemetery is surrounded by urban life. Bring a friend or join a group and stay alert. Keep up to date on research and activities via the Historic Fairview Cemetery Facebook page (@HistoricFairviewCemetery).



Time turns many grave markers into puzzle pieces.

Territorial Fair parade's finale. A spark from another float landed on his cargo, setting off the fireworks. Braden's horses bolted. Fearing they would tear into the crowd, he steered the team away, his clothes on fire, before falling from the wagon and asking, "Did I save the little girls and the queen of the carnival and her attendants?" The next day, he died.

"At first, I had no interest in history," Schwartz says. "But then there's Galles and Huning and all these people I could get interested in."

She knows that some consider cemeteries merely a tool for potential ghost-hunting adventures (she's a skeptic on that score) or places of profound sadness. But she, like others, sees them as troves of historical gleanings, as well as moodily atmospheric grounds

Historic Fairview Cemetery likely holds as many tumbleweeds as it does gravesites—an estimated 12,000, half of them unmarked.

for a mindful stroll and an opportunity to pay respect to those who are gone—and those who live on. "I felt my purpose was to help the descendants," Schwartz says. "People would call and say, 'Where's Grandma?' And I would say, 'I'll show you.'"

She led tours, spurred occasional cleanups, and curated an Albuquerque Museum exhibit about the cemetery, which is owned by the Historic Fairview Cemetery board, a non-profit run by volunteers. Schwartz now lives in Florida, but the *Where's Grandma?* calls still come.

"I ask, 'Where are you standing?'" she says. "And I can tell them which row to go down."

BORN THE OFFSPRING OF A BRIGADIER GENERAL and one of his slaves, James Price grew



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up enslaved in Missouri. He enlisted in the military during the Civil War and, after it, served with the Buffalo Soldiers during the territorial era. His grave, along the cemetery's north end, is one of the few marked sites among the 13 Buffalo Soldiers buried here.

Beyond his grave stands an oftengraffitied wall and the backs of houses that grew up around Fairview. Traffic from nearby Yale Boulevard intrudes upon a hush occasionally interrupted by raucous crows and, on this June day, the hum of a weed whacker.

A dozen residents who care about history—and especially about this place—have gathered with trash bags and yard tools to lay whatever claim they can against the weeds.

Cynthia Schaller, an elementary school

“I’ve always loved history and how it affects our present story,” says Cynthia Schaller. “When I came to this one and saw how bad it is, it touched my heart.”

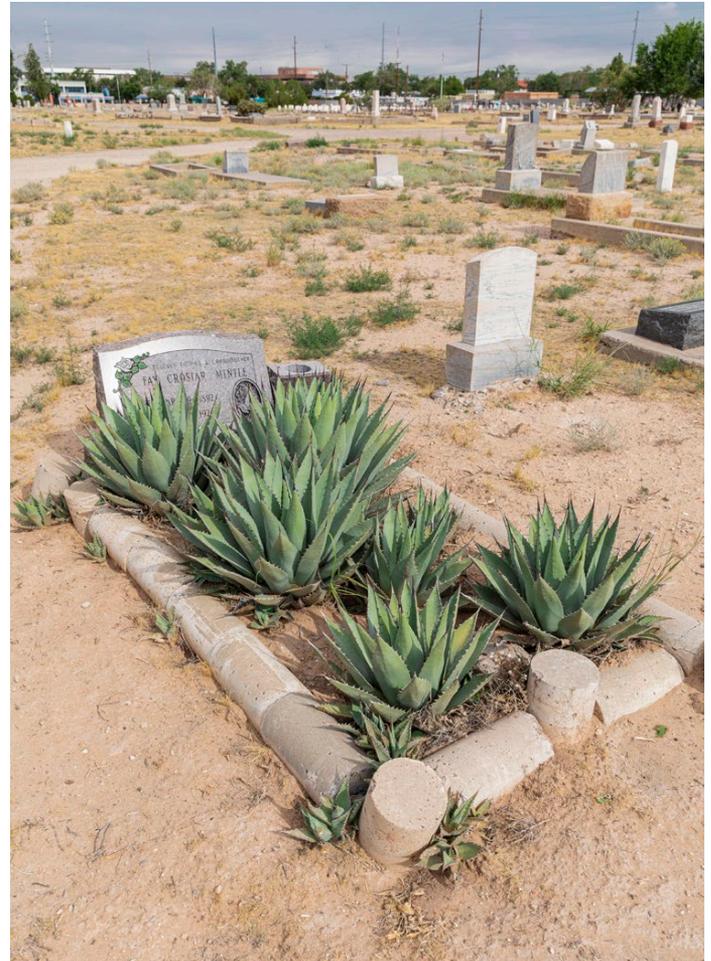
counselor, is one of them. When she moved here from Florida 18 years ago, Schaller explored old cemeteries to learn more about

her new home. “I’ve always loved history and how it affects our present story,” she says. “When I came to this one and saw how bad it is, it touched my heart.”

Anthony Gomez joined Schwartz’s earliest cleanup crews, mostly out of friendship. He had long wondered what happened after his absentee father was murdered in Belén. He had looked for a grave in Valencia County but came up empty.

Schwartz offered to look at Fairview’s records and found it—right there. “I was totally tripped out,” Gomez says.

He spends some time alone at the site during this cleanup but also pays respect to





Top, from left: Visitors leave flowers. A boulder at the McCormick and Simms graves. **Bottom, from facing page:** Woodmen of the World markers, made for members of a fraternal life insurance company. Desert life rises from a grave. A toy car decorates a grave. Lizzie Stauffer's scroll-like slab.



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Gail Rubin (left), president of the Historic Fairview Cemetery Board, prepares to hoist a new flag.

people like Herman Blueher, an agricultural entrepreneur whose onetime home is now the Hacienda del Río Restaurant, in Old Town. “His fields were where the Albuquerque Museum is, and Tiguex Park was his man-made lake,” Gomez says. “I admire so many of the people who are buried here.”

Not every grave holds a hallowed memory. Going by the dates, one can surmise the waves of smallpox, tuberculosis, and Spanish flu that swept the region. Kiku Honda, a Japanese woman who lived in the city’s red-light district, was murdered in 1896, presumably by a jealous lover. Nineteen-year-old Lizzie Stauffer arrived in Albuquerque in 1882, came down with smallpox, died a week later, and lies beneath an elegant slab engraved with



OLD HAUNTS

Historic cemeteries abound in New Mexico. Many are open to visitors who act respectfully and leave no trace. Here are a few to get started.

FAIRVIEW CEMETERY, SANTA FE, 1884

Burials include Thomas B. Catron, a leader of the Santa Fe Ring that dominated the territory’s politics and economy; Governor Arthur Seligman; and Abraham and Julia Staab, the latter of whom is said to haunt La Posada de Santa Fe Resort and Spa. 1134 Cerrillos Road, fairviewcemetery.santafe.org

KIT CARSON HISTORIC CEMETERY, TAOS, 1847

Burials include controversial frontiersman Kit Carson, arts maven Mabel Dodge Luhan, Padre Antonio José Martínez, and three unnamed *brujas*, or witches. 211 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, nmmag.us/taoscemetery

CEDARVALE CEMETERY, WHITE OAKS, 1880

Burials include the state’s first governor,

William C. McDonald, and cattle queen Susan McSween Barber (her name misspelled “MacSween” on her stone). On NM 349 in the village of White Oaks, near Carrizozo, nmmag.us/cedarvalecemetery

MASONIC, INTERNATIONAL ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS, AND MONTEFIORE CEMETERIES, LAS VEGAS, 1880

This clustered trio includes a section for the first Jewish congregation in New Mexico, Montefiore. Burials within all three include Territorial Governor William J. Mills and Jewish merchant and philanthropist Charles Ilfeld. At Colonias and Romero streets, nmmag.us/lasvegascemetery

BILLY THE KID’S GRAVE, FORT SUMNER, 1881

New Mexico’s most famous boy bandit died at the hands of Sheriff Pat Garrett—or did he? Doubts aside, his marker sits next to the Fort Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial, itself worth a visit to explore the tragic history of the Navajo people’s Long Walk. On Billy the Kid Drive three miles south of US 60/84, nmmag.us/billygrave

“Loved and respected by all who knew thee.”

Several sections hold children’s graves, most of them bearing what were intended as temporary markers—brick-size columns topped by metal nameplates eroding into obscurity. Some say only “Baby Boy” or “Baby Girl.” One reads “John Doe,” and the mystery of that life and death persists today.

Concrete curbs outline family plots. The desert soil besieges them, obscuring the last names stamped upon the path-side faces. Some of the plots were never used and some were barely used, and so it is that “Vernon—Asleep” sleeps alone.

Gail Rubin recently became president of the cemetery board. As part of the June cleanup, she held a small ceremony to replace a tattered flag that flew above one of the two military sections. She hopes to engineer future cleanups, restart occasional walking tours, and hold a Day of the Dead event where actors reenact the lives of some of those buried here.

“This flag-raising,” she says, “is a symbol of refreshing this cemetery and our commitment to this sacred ground.” 

Managing Editor Kate Nelson appreciates “the delicious blend of history, nature, and melancholy” found in old cemeteries.



O'Keeffe from Anywhere

Connect with the Museum online and discover the many facets of Georgia O'Keeffe. Creative activities, online events, O'Keeffe's life and art, and Stories from the O'Keeffe can all be found at gokm.org. Engage with us on Facebook and Instagram, too!

We hope to see you soon.

Tony Vaccaro. *Georgia Caring for Her Herb Seedlings*, 1960. Gelatin silver print, 19 5/8 x 13 1/4 in. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. © Tony Vaccaro. [2007.3.11]

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