

Psychic's visions lead to the stories behind the tombstones

By Jennifer Kerr, Associated Press writer

The grieving man in the dark clothes and hat sits slumped over on the wooden cemetery bench, still distraught over the death of his 16-year-old son.

The youth drowned in the Sacramento River 133 years ago.

"He's depressed," says Nancy Matz, pointing to the bench. "He's a nice-looking man."

She invites the men and women gathered around her, staring raptly at the bench, to reach out and gently feel his warm presence.

He didn't mind. He, too, had died -- many years ago.

Ms. Matz is a psychic who leads a popular tour through the Sacramento Old City Cemetery, a historic California burying ground that dates back to 1849 and is the resting place for 25,000 to 30,000 souls, give or take some due to faulty 19th-century records.

The group with Ms. Matz on this hot summer night are people of all ages, but more women than men. Some are clearly believers who eagerly step forward to touch the spirit, while others observe with amused smiles.

Ms. Matz, from Pollock Pines, Calif., worked for a telephone company in an analytical job until six years ago, when she says she accepted her psychic abilities. She says she is an intuitive medium or clairvoyant.

"I spent all my life wondering what in the world was wrong with me," she tells the group. "Why didn't people see what I saw? Now that I've accepted it, I love it."

The Old City Cemetery Committee holds more prosaic tours on most weekends from May through September, but its special tours draw the largest crowds.

Ms. Matz has been leading periodic psychic tours for the committee for three years. She also participates in the committee's Moonlight Tours just before Halloween, when many participants come in costume.

The psychic tours, which cost \$5, are usually sold out. There is a maximum of 150 participants.

Several days before the tours, Ms. Matz walks around the cemetery with John Bettencourt, tour coordinator for the committee. Mr. Bettencourt then hits the books, learning the stories about the spirits Ms. Matz says she senses roaming around the cemetery.

There are many colorful residents. The cemetery was established in 1849, with a donation of 10 acres from John Sutter, the pioneer who built Sutter's Fort and owned the foothills sawmill where gold was discovered in 1848.

His son, John Sutter Jr., who planned much of the city of Sacramento, was buried in the cemetery in 1897.

So was Hardin Bigelow, who built the city's first flood-control levee in 1850. Mr. Bigelow was elected mayor, but died six months later of cholera.

Mark Hopkins, one of the "Big Four" who built the Central Pacific Railroad, is entombed under a 350-ton red granite sarcophagus.

One visitor this night is Lavon, a woman from suburban Antelope, Calif., who says she doesn't have a last name. Why is she taking the tour?

"I had to," she says, "because I'm going to activate John Sutter (Jr.) in his 100-year resurrection."

Ginger, another visitor, says, "I've always been fascinated with cemeteries. I go to ghost tours and cemeteries."

The first stop is the bench where sits the grieving man. As believing members of the group touch his essence, Mr. Bettencourt tells the story of the teen buried beneath a modest marker:

Melchi Cox Gray was one of four children who moved with their parents from Iowa to California in 1849. His mother died in childbirth. His father, the man on the bench, was a circuit-riding preacher.

In June 1864, 16-year-old Melchi, not a good swimmer, tried to cross the Sacramento River. He didn't make it.

Nearby, Ms. Matz says she senses an angry man, balding, about 50-56, who had been killed in a fight.

He was probably Van Curtin Dodge, Mr. Bettencourt says. Mr. Dodge was killed on March 22, 1902, in a gunfight with a younger man on the Yolo-Sacramento railroad bridge. The younger man had impregnated Mr. Dodge's daughter and refused to marry her. Mr. Dodge had lain in wait for the man to try to force him to do the right thing, but lost the gunfight.

Later, Ms. Matz says she senses an accident, with blocks falling down and several people killed.

Mr. Bettencourt points to a tall memorial shaft for Silus Perry, who was one of seven people who died on Nov. 18, 1876, at Moore's Opera House. The opera house -- really a bawdy burlesque theater -- collapsed when overenthusiastic patrons began stomping their feet to get the show started.

Ms. Matz says that on one of her earlier visits she met the ghost of a volunteer firefighter who was decapitated in 1858 when his horse-drawn engine rushed under a low railroad trestle. He was hanging out around his grave, she says, waiting for his wife and children, who were buried elsewhere.

"He was so glad to see someone recognized him," she says.

"I had a serious talk with him. I told him, 'You can't wait around any longer.'

When the latest tour goes past the volunteer fireman's plot, she notices that he is gone.

As an evening breeze comes up, Ms. Matz says she senses more spirits.

"I see children who died, a lot of water everywhere and reeds," she says.

Mr. Bettencourt points to a small double tombstone announcing the deaths of Willie Weaver, 14, and his 11-year-old brother, George. The boys had been picking crops on Aug. 30, 1883, and stopped at the river to cool down.

Willie was caught in a submerged hole. George tried to help him, but both went under.

Throughout the walk, Ms. Matz says she sees random spirits, many of whom appear very interested in particular individuals in the group. She says a blonde girl spirit seemed to like a woman in a long blue dress.

"I felt her earlier," the woman says.

Ms. Matz says one spirit no longer had a humanlike form, but was shaped more like a ball.

"It's almost as though he's forgotten what he looks like," she says.

A woman reaches out to feel. "It's running in all different directions," she says.

"It's in a circle," adds a young woman with black fingernail polish and lipstick.

"Now it's coming to me," says the first woman.

The cemetery tours are a hit. But Ms. Matz says it isn't necessary to go to a cemetery to see spirits.

"The mall is just as spooky," she says.

"The spirits are everywhere. There are things around us that we have a hard time even understanding."