



Day three of a project and Jasper is looking a little tired. He is getting a ride in Larry and Karen's truck back to his car after finishing an assignment. He will take a nap in his car before he works his next assignment. The good news about his new GPS collar is he does not even notice it anymore.



San Mateo County Hospital and Poor Farm

December 2001 was my first visit to a local historic poor farm. This "find" was like a gold mine for us, a mostly unmarked historic cemetery, the perfect training ground for our dogs. At that time I only found a few wooden markers that were hidden in the thick weeds. Like so many of our historic places, a fire destroyed most of the wooden markers. I started doing research to learn more about its history so I could find out how many graves it might contain. I started off at the county historical museum archives and then went to the local historical society. I found two volumes of records that listed grave numbers and the names and dates of the deceased. The starting date was July 1876 and the last burial listed was April 1939, a total of 542 burials were recorded. When we surveyed the cemetery we found a few markers starting with 6 so we assume later records were missing.

The Poor Farm cemetery was connected with the county hospital. The hospital was a grim place where the poor, sick and dying went. Documentation showed it had a large population of patients with tuberculosis. Indigents, homeless and the poor were considered inmates and had to work at the hospital, growing food and taking care of animals used for food for the hospital. When inmates or

other poor people died and had no other place to go they were buried at the poor farm cemetery. They were given a wooden marker with a number on it and the information was logged in a book.



2002, Marker number 402, we could not find it on our last visit.

The older book gave the original country the people came from, principally Ireland, Sweden, France, Germany and Scotland. Most of the burials were men, but included 11 women and 7 babies. Most of the men were between 50 and 70 years old. As I read more of the log book I saw more and more "death by train" listed as cause of death. I later learned that this was a common way destitute poor people with no hope ended their life.

We worked the cemetery for several years, exploring and discovering many graves. We learned about adobe soils and how they can get to the saturation point and stop scent from being released from the soil and how difficult it was to re-find graves in the dry summer months. This location was basically one of our foundation stones for learning how to locate old burials.



2002, Joseph trying to read a now mostly covered marker.



2002 , Adela and Eva flagged long rows of alerts from our dogs.

In a future article I will tell my woeful story about a great idea that did not come to fruition. In 2003 we had big plans, the goal was to do a paper about the work the dogs were doing locating the graves in this abandoned cemetery. This was going to be the piece of evidence we could present to the archaeological world to show that our dogs can find burials. Lets just say it was complicated and the results were confusing and not understood. Does anyone have experience with redwood coffins and it disintegrating the bones? I am sure I am not alone at having high hopes, only to be deflated by the results.

My hopes were so destroyed and I was so frustrated that I did not go back to the poor farm until April this year 2021, 18 years later. Most of my teammates had never been to this location and were excited that we had such a great location nearby to train in.



2021, Jasper alerts near one of the wooden grave markers.



2021, Piper alerts near one of the wooden markers.

On our trip in April I did not see any markers where you could still read the numbers. This poor farm is not maintained but left to be taken over by nature. I find it sad that some of our history is neglected. The story of our local poor farm is about so many immigrants coming to the new world to find their place in this country only to die poor and are remembered only in a book of names with a wooden grave marker. Fragments of only very few wooden markers are left and the numbers are now gone.

This site is not maintained so we cannot work it in the summer because of the dried foxtails. We will return in the winter when conditions are better.

~Adela~



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We are happy to talk with you about your project and
how our dogs might help locate human remains or burials.

Call, email, or check out our website.

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