

As the Living Fled, a Race to Save the Dead at an Altadena Cemetery

Workers at the Mountain View cemetery had unique concerns the night the Eaton fire broke out. The 55-acre expanse may also have spared some homes from the flames.



By Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs
Reporting from Altadena, Calif.

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As she drove to work, Genevieve Alba could see the flames churning through the mountains above Altadena. They looked far off, and with a funeral the next day, there was still plenty to do.

A woman needed to be prepared for the service, a careful embalming task that Ms. Alba began around 3:30 a.m. in a windowless room at the Mountain View Mortuary and Cemetery. The smell of smoke was getting worse and worse, but Ms. Alba thought little of it as she focused intently on bathing the woman and setting her features.

Then, as the sun began to rise, her boss flew into the room in a panic. The town, he told her, was on fire. They rushed outside and saw home after home consumed by flames.

“The sky was just red and there were explosions everywhere,” recalled Ms. Alba, 30.

At a cemetery, there is a lot to consider when flames are upon you. Employees thought of their own safety, yes, but also felt a duty to those who entrusted them with their recently departed loved ones.

In the moment, the employees' first thought was of the formaldehyde. They began loading boxes of the flammable embalming chemical into a van, and an employee drove it to the center of the cemetery, away from any buildings or people, like getting rid of a grenade.



The fire burned parts of the cemetery's work yard as it approached a large gas line that powers its crematory. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Then there was the handwritten book that maps out the sites of each grave — both a piece of history and a family heirloom. That was quickly stashed in a concrete vault in the basement.

But what about the bodies?

As the fire raged, a horrible fear flashed through Ms. Alba's mind: What if the bodies that she took so much care to treat with dignity were cremated in a wildfire? What about the families who were still grieving the recent deaths of their loved ones?

Between the preparation room and the storage refrigerator outside, there were about 50 bodies in all, people who had died over the holidays or in the first days of the new year.

The Mountain View cemetery, on the southwest end of Altadena, is an oasis of nature. Palm trees and pines stand tall, casting shadows on the grass and graves below. Bird calls replace the droning sounds of a Los Angeles suburb, and coyotes can sometimes be spotted strolling between headstones.

It turns out that this suburban expanse of nature, with granite markers, well-spaced trees and manicured grass covering about 55 acres, may also have deprived the Eaton fire of fuel and protected homes to the south.

Together, the cemetery and its two mausoleums are the final resting place for about 142,000 people, more than three times the population of Altadena. It finds its origin in the death of one young woman, 143 years ago. When Laura Giddings died of tuberculosis in her early 20s, her father, seeking a proper place to bury her, founded the cemetery in 1882. He laid her body to rest beneath a small marker, and a family legacy was born.



Keith Brown, the cemetery's operations manager, dusts off the grave of Charles Richter, the inventor of the Richter scale, after the fire. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Each generation passed down the cemetery, and Keith Brown, the great-great-great-grandson of the founder, is now the operations manager. One morning this week, Mr. Brown brushed leaves off Ms. Giddings's grave as he thought back on the time he spent here as a child.

He learned how to drive a car on the wide road that cuts between plots of graves, and, over the years, the cemetery also taught him something about loss, and even love. Many days, Mr. Brown, 34, remembers the World War II veteran who came each Saturday to pay respects to his wife — often flashing a picture of her and recounting their love story — until he was buried with her in the same grave.

Mr. Brown has worked just about every job at the cemetery, including cleaning the grounds, handling funeral services and embalming. He lives in one of two apartments above the mortuary — right next to the cemetery — and knows his

phone could ring at any time with a family in need.

The cemetery expanded over time, absorbing a mausoleum next door that was designed by an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright. As it grew, it became the final home of many recognizable names: Octavia Butler, the science-fiction author; Charles Richter, the seismologist; and George Reeves, the actor most famous for his role as Superman. There are also Civil War veterans, a member of the Black Panthers, a former California governor and generations of Altadenans who lived, died and were buried in the shadow of the San Gabriel Mountains.

Less than an hour from Hollywood, the cemetery has also served as a set for films and television shows, including “Kill Bill: Volume 2” and “Sons of Anarchy.” A fake grave sits near the center of the cemetery just for use by film crews.

Among the famous people buried at Mountain View is Octavia Butler, the science-fiction author who was born in neighboring Pasadena. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

No one at Mountain View could recall the winds blowing as strongly as they did last week, nor had they heard of such a weather event in the cemetery's long history. Gusts knocked down branches and burst through the apartment window of Nate Rucker, 66, an employee who lives above the mortuary and across the hall from Mr. Brown.

In the wee hours of Wednesday morning, the inferno raced toward the cemetery, picking off buildings left and right.

Oh no, he thought. This is it.

He and other employees began dousing the roof and shrubs with water until the hose ran dry. Eventually, Mr. Brown decided that the flames were just too close. He told his employees it was time to go.

Everyone got in their cars and left, driving through smoke and embers and feeling sick over the possibility that the bodies in their care might be lost to flames.



The fire consumed homes on three edges of the cemetery early in the morning, turning the sky orange and red. Keith Brown

Mr. Rucker, a pastor, a motorcyclist and a funeral specialist, said he made it about a mile before he felt compelled to return, giving in to a command he said had come from the Holy Spirit. He got back to his apartment at the mortuary and packed his most important possessions in his car, including his wife's ashes, in case he had to leave again.

As the flames moved even closer, he got to work, grabbing eight fire extinguishers from around the building and trying to douse the flames, which had reached a line of hedges just feet from an outdoor refrigerator room where dozens of bodies were stored. The flames were also dangerously close to a large gas line that powers the crematory.

Mr. Brown and other employees also returned later, alongside a group of people from neighboring mortuaries. They banded together, using shovels and drums of water to extinguish hot embers while others hustled bodies into vans to take them to safety.

When their work was done, all of the bodies had been saved.

"Everybody at the mortuary is accounted for, living and dead," Mr. Rucker said.

When the winds calmed later that morning and the smoke lifted, the destruction of the town became apparent. To the east, west and north of Mountain View, thousands of homes had been turned to rubble.

But the cemetery, to everyone's amazement, was almost entirely spared. Some equipment had been destroyed, but most of the grass was green and almost every grave was unscathed.



Ash from the Eaton fire coated several gravestones, but most were otherwise unharmed. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Mr. Brown and his father, Jay, the current owner, think the cemetery may have created a fire break. Kept tidy by its employees, it lacked the fuel of densely packed blocks of homes.

A damage map shows the fire's footprint, and how it halted at the cemetery's upper edge. The cemetery appears as a notch in the path of destruction through Altadena, with homes to the south spared.

Mr. Brown knows that there is more pain to come. Recovery, rebuilding, funerals, tears. He knows, too, that some of the fire's 17 victims may be buried on the grounds.

But it is possible, on the night flames tore through Altadena, that the cemetery spared homes and residents from more destruction.

“North of us, blocks and blocks are just gone,” Mr. Brown said. “And then it just stopped.”

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