

A Unique Visit to the Hacienda Cemetery

By Veronica Jordan

Back in April, our Pioneers' Hacienda Cemetery in New Almaden was once again full of people, but not for a funeral. The last known burial in the now defunct cemetery was in 1920. No, this time a dog accompanied each human and it was a good thing! Lisa Lee, a team coordinator for the Institute for Canine Forensics (ICF) asked the Pioneers if we would allow a team of canine handlers to visit the cemetery (owned by the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County and located on Bertram Road in San Jose) to train their dogs in detecting historic burials. Would we?!

With only 69 known burials in a cemetery that was in use for nearly three quarters of a century, it's always been a safe bet to assume the land held many more graves than those that are known. There are several "cribs" (white picket fences) around plots with no tombstones and large open spaces where others might lie in their final resting places.

Unfortunately, we will probably never know the names of the many whose wooden markers were either stolen or worn down by the elements. The cemetery was free to anyone in the Hacienda Village who wanted to use it and no records were kept of the burials. So, for the Pioneers Board, a visit by the ICF dogs was a welcome chance to learn more.

Training day arrived on April 11th. Before the dogs began the search, a cemetery next-door-neighbor, Eric Johns, asked if one of the dogs could sniff a pile of bones he had on his porch--part of his back yard is on cemetery land and he found several bones he believed to be human.

According to Kayle, one of several border collie detectives on site that day, Eric was right. Kayle confirmed four out of five to be human, after her handler, John, placed each bone distanced from one another on Eric's porch.

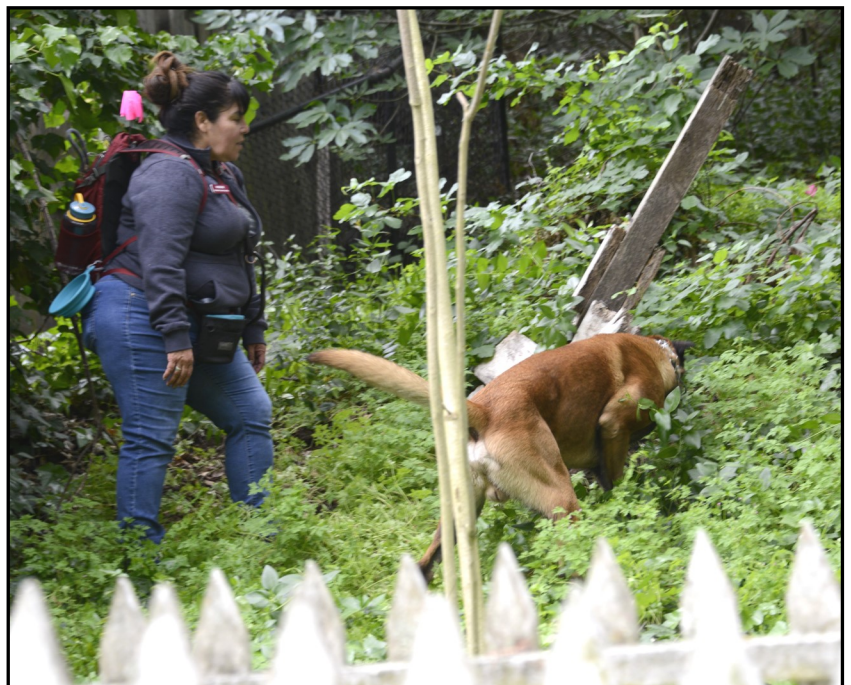
And then they were off! With handlers in tow, three Labrador Retrievers, three Border Collies (a fourth held in reserve) and a very large Belgian Malinois began their quest by working the kinks out after a long drive in their travel cages.

(Continued pg. 5)



*Fionnlagh, handler
Lisa's fourth
detection dog,
gets started by
sniffing at a
known burial.
Her "tell" is to
lie down
where she
smells human
decomposition.
The small flag
in front of her
signals her
"find."*

*Below,
Nadene's dog
Bodie makes
an excited
romp through
the thick
ground cover
before settling
down to
business.*

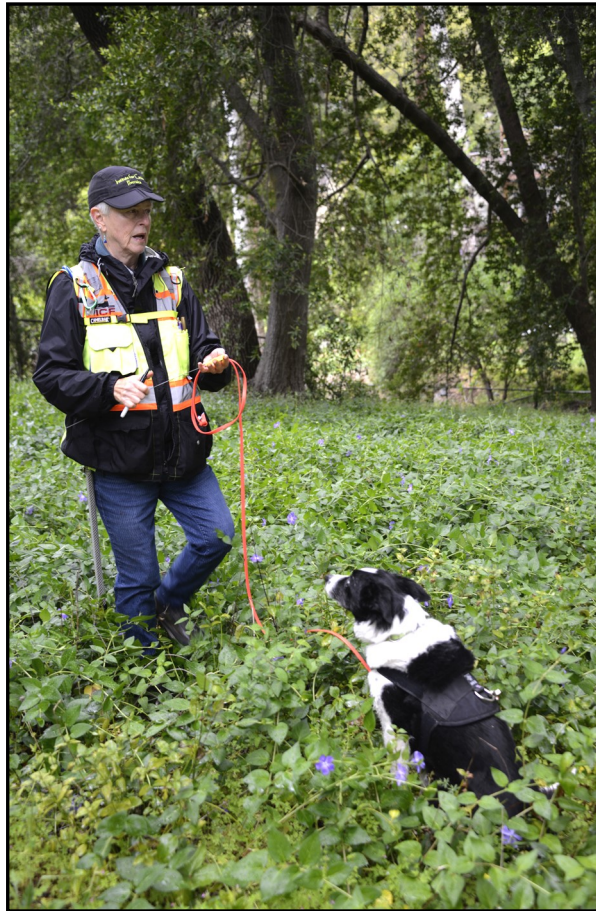


Hacienda Cemetery (Continued)

Happy and energized dogs frolicked through the vinca minor vines that cover much of the cemetery. (The trainee dogs were perhaps a bit rowdier than those who were older and already certified). They had a good run, but the snout patrol quickly settled to business. The terrain wasn't ideal; the thick vinca made it trickier for the dogs to get their noses right down in the dirt, but the Good Boys! and Good Girls! soldiered on and, in the end, made more than a dozen finds.

Despite the dense vinca minor vines, Piper, a thirteen year old veteran, gives Lynn the signal that someone else is buried in the empty space between two graves.

Below, Joseph & Clíodhna discover a hitherto unknown burial under the road that runs through the cemetery.



One crib near the creek had until recently a very large tree growing out of it. This past winter, a large branch broke off, just missing a neighbor's house. The tree had to go, and someone postulated that there probably never was a grave there. Wrong! Sophie, a yellow Lab, quickly laid herself next to the stump at the center of the crib, a sign to handler Dana that she smelled decomposition (decomp).

Searching for historical burials by detecting the odor of human decomposition is an inexact science for sure, and not because they use animal snouts instead of mechanical equipment to do it. John, Kayle's handler, explained that the scent of "decomp" from historical burials is a different smell entirely than that wafting from "fresh dead" that law enforcement-trained "cadaver dogs" detect. It's not just a "walk in the park" for the dogs either; their noses must vacuum the ground for the faintest whiff that travels up from below the earth through the easiest paths possible, like a ground squirrel run or a gopher hole or cracks in the soil. Because of this, the site where a dog detects decomposition isn't necessarily exactly where a body is buried but can easily be several yards away. The trace amount of smell emanating from old interments requires the dog to focus intensely while really working its nose to detect scent pools. Dogs that are easily distracted, say by the random squirrel or cat, are not good candidates for certification in human decomposition detection.

The most finds were made by Piper, a thirteen year-old border collie who didn't bother with a pre-romp like the amateurs. She proved herself a true "working dog" as she and her owner Lynne wasted no time beginning the investigation. Her hard work paid off; the small green construction flags denoting Piper's finds seemed to be everywhere, dotting the open spaces and between known graves.

The sections that received the most intent pooch interest were on the hill at the top of the cemetery and down near the bottom along the creek, where the vinca matts most thickly. All the dogs raced back and forth along the cemetery borders, and while they made a few finds, it will take cutting the vines back for further revelations. But a glorious day was had by all, and we were delighted while watching the dogs at work. We hope to welcome them back soon! ❖

(Photos: Tim Peddy)

