

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## **Bodega Bay Cemetery Began As “Seamen’s” Cemetery**

*by Adrianus Boudewyn - 2008*

Some time around 1848-1850, Captain Stephen Smith donated roughly an acre-and-a-half of land from his Mexican land grant to create a burial ground for sailors who drowned at sea. Legend has it that the first burial was of an unknown sailor, who drowned at sea and washed up in the harbor. In the early days it was known as Seamen’s Cemetery, since renamed Bay and then Bodega Bay Cemetery, and it may be one of the oldest in Sonoma County. It is also the cemetery of lost grave markers.

Located at 19933 Heron Drive just as one turns left off of South Harbor Way, the cemetery is situated on scenic high ground overlooking Bodega Bay -- on what was for a time Doran Ranch property and now is within the Bodega Harbor housing development (though not legally part of the subdivision). It is enclosed with a split rail fence, is regularly mowed, and is visible from satellite when viewing Google Maps. The grave markers have long disappeared -- some through vandalism, some disturbed by grazing cows of long ago, and others “rescued for safe keeping.”

Sonoma cemeterian Jeremy Nichols says that the legal record of Bodega Bay Cemetery goes back as far as an 1857 Federal court decision, upholding the legality of the original patents (title) for the larger parcel of land, and is shown on maps of that time. The portion containing the cemetery is referred to as Lot 42”, township 5 north, Range 10 west, located at latitude – longitude (also known as lat-long or GPS coordinates) N 38.31742 and W - 123.02556. It shows up on early maps describing the Doran holdings.



## SEAMEN'S CEMETERY

Until just recently, title of the cemetery land had remained on the books in the name of Manuela Torres Smith, wife of Capt. Smith, and her children, Stephen, Manuela, and James. In 2004, legal proceedings were started to petition updating ownership of the property and in June 2005, the Superior Court of Sonoma County awarded title of the cemetery to Arthur Charles (Tooch) Colombo, a family descendant -- great great grand nephew of William Smith, the half brother of Tom Smith -- with California Indian Legal Services acting as attorneys for the plaintiff.

Early burial records were secured by a variety of people and groups -- some official records, others records from family bibles. Serious efforts were undertaken by Edith W. Merritt, chair of Genealogical Records for the Santa Rosa Chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution, in the 1920s and 1930s; Tom Chapman of Occidental, whose grandmother was Josephine Doran, only daughter of William and Sarah Doran -- the family which owned the Doran Ranch (now Bodega Harbor) on which the cemetery was sited -- various records kept by pioneer families, and by Ruth Burke.

Note: Prior to 1905 the procedure for filing death certificates was up to local jurisdictions and very often they were only a line entry in a ledger. After 1905 most death certificates indicated which cemetery the individual was buried in.

In writing about his family's history, Tom Chapman recalled "Tom Smith was buried in the old cemetery in the summer of 1934. I didn't attend the funeral, but I can remember going to look at the grave. There were quite a few grave stones there in those days, and little fences around some of the graves. No one ever kept up the cemetery and the cows grazing there frequently knocked things over."

On another occasion, at a 1990 program of the Rancho Bodega Historical Society, Mrs. Amos Marion Simpson (grand daughter of William and Sarah Doran), then 79, recalled how she and her daughters would walk to the cemetery and read all the tombstones. "And there was a sailor from a Scandinavian country who was buried there. And they would make up stories about them, you know."

Over the years, various groups have sought to preserve and respect the burial grounds, including the Sea Gals, the Bodega Harbor women's group. Late in 1999, a group of UC Berkeley archaeogeophysicists spent a day at the site with a gradiometer and other appropriate equipment to detect hardware associated with coffins, such as nails, screws, or handles, or the disturbed soil of the grave shafts themselves. However, upon their return to the Berkeley lab, they found the data inconclusive -- live utility boxes on Heron Drive had interfered with the sensing equipment. They did recommend future exploration through the use of an aerial survey at low altitude (200-500 feet) in the spring from which a skilled photograph interpreter might be able to discern the location of the grave shafts (disturbed soil often holds slightly more moisture than the surrounding soil and can cause denser or greener vegetation in that area).

On another occasion, a biologist from the University of Massachusetts followed up on a landscape designer's observation that there were a number of rather rare native plants growing amidst the poison oak at the cemetery. Although the property is not part of the Bodega Harbour Development, their maintenance staff sprayed vigorously to tame the poison oak so that investigation could begin. The findings: 18 native plants, 14 non-natives, and 3 or 4 plants which might be either depending on the species.

It was about this time that the late Helen Fulton (part of the leadership of Rancho Bodega Historical Society), felt the society should take an interest in the historical significance of the cemetery by arranging



for some of its upkeep (i.e., mending fences and clearing weeds and brush). She also envisioned an X shaped walking path (stretching to all four corners) of pea gravel and to place new grave markers designed by local school children.

This idea came about, because Helen was also active as a volunteer at the Bodega Bay Elementary School. There, she had shared the story of the cemetery and the people interred with students in the higher fourth and fifth grades being taught by teacher Jim McElroy (1982-2000). Jim was a good choice, because he had an interest for anything geological and archaeological and shared that with his students -- even taking them on field trips to archaeological sites, including overnights to Fort Ross. And Jim was handy with wood projects and taught shop.

That resulted in the 14 students getting involved in a project to letter the names of those buried onto tiles which were then affixed to miniature hooded redwood shelters designed and crafted by Jim. That was one tile per student and Jim devised a lesson plan around the project. The finished markers were to become part of the cemetery at the highway side, symbolic of the grave markers that once were in place.

Alas, the project was premature. It came to a sudden halt one day when the proposed walkway (already staked out, ready for pea gravel) met with some local resistance and a possible legal challenge. With the project stopped, the hooded redwood grave markers ended up in storage.

The Rancho Bodega Historical Society is working with the Smith Family and Graton Rancheria to recognize and honor Native Americans and early settlers by respectfully marking a historic plot of land (about 1 acre) on Heron Drive in Bodega Harbour. Formerly owned by the Smith Family, Graton Rancheria holds the title to the burial ground overlooking the sea and Bodega Bay on one side. The other side overlooks the valley where Highway One winds among the steep hills and canyons of our Coastal Prairie below.

Known earlier as Bodega Bay Cemetery, Smith's Cemetery and the Seaman's Cemetery, the land was donated to the community around 1849 by Captain Stephen Smith.

Captain Smith had been granted Rancho Bodega in 1844, the land between the Russian River and the Americano Estero (now the Marin County border).

Captain Smith and Tsupu, a Miwok woman, had a son called William. His (secret) Miwok name, Yole Tamal, translates to "West Bay." Until we had a Post Office, our town's name was simply "Bay", William's Miwok namesake.

The influence of the Smith family on our community is strong. The Smiths began and grew our prosperous fishing industry. Today's Post Office on Smith Brothers Road, is across the street from the Smith Brothers' fishery and Bodega Harbour's Club House is on the site now. Even today, descendants of the Smith family think of Bodega Bay as their ancestral and importantly, their spiritual home. They are our founders.

In one RBHS document, Captain Smith's son William was described as "a very old Indian (sic) who lived near." He told us that the cemetery "was for people washed overboard."



RBHS believes this marker holds the power of supporting the true bedrock of our community by solidifying Bodega Bay as a historic coastal village that respects and honors fishermen, unknown sailors who died at sea, today's living descendants of the Coast Miwok and indigenous people at-large, as well as the brave pioneers, such as the Joy Family, who helped establish Rancho Bodega and are also buried in this community burial ground.



Despite its original name, most of the early burials at Bodega Bay Cemetery were of children of early settlers. Also buried there is the first school teacher of Bodega Bay (then known as Bay). The last burial was in 1934, for Coast Miwok Tom Smith.

However, given the period in history when this cemetery was created, we can never be absolutely sure this is a complete list of those buried there. Population was sparse, the site remote and some distance to reach, and the roads that existed were less traveled. Here is the complete list (surnames first) as we know it today:

Cope, John, who died about 1854;

Hellenstjern, Gustaf, native of Sweden who died Nov. 3, 1866, at 33. (He was mate on the Schooner Euphemia, which hauled lumber in these parts from 1866 to 1877. Its captain, Jim Gregory, erected a monument: "Sacred to the memory of Gustaf Hellenstjern, a native of Sweden, died November 3, 1866, age 33." Information provided by E. H. Cheney;

Oats, Samuel, native of Ireland, who died in 1869. He was the first school teacher at the Bay and came by ship. Information provided by E. H. Cheney.

The following names were provided by Annie Joy and brother Ben Joy, secured from the family bible:

Joy, James William, son of Benjamin and Elizabeth Joy. He was born at Provo City, Utah Territory, and died at Bodega Dec. 7, 1852 at 1 year, 4 months

Joy, Alice Ann, daughter of Benjamin and Elizabeth Joy, born at Bodega, August 14, 1853, and died January 11, 1856;

Joy, Phyllis Charlotte, daughter of Benjamin and Elizabeth Joy, born at Bodega, August 27, 1855, died November 10, 1856;

Joy, Elizabeth Emily, daughter of Benjamin and Elizabeth Joborn at Bodega, June 29, 1867, died Sept. 8, 1868, aged 1 year, one month, and 9 days;

Swan, Elizabeth, 11, native of Brentford, England, born December 1, 1851, died at Bodega, December 19, 1861, a niece of Benjamin and Elizabeth Joy:

McCready, a child, no date.

William Lowery, died 1867, age 56;

A child of William Doran, born 1864, died 1877;

The bible of Josephine Doran Simpson, only daughter of William and Sarah Doran, listed the following additional burials at the cemetery:

Doran, John Alexander, born July 14, 1873, and died August 30, 1873;

Owen, Charlie K., died November 2, 1865, age 3 years, 2 months, 12 days.

Antone, Harold. Born 1903, died February 7, 1917, at the age of 14. Son of Peter and Andeline (San Diego) Antone. Buried February 8, 1917. Information provided by Jeremy Dwight Nichols.

Tom Smith, widely known as spiritual elder of area Indians, died July 29, 1934