

The Little Cemetery on the Hillside

A small, ivy-covered pioneer cemetery borders a well-kept lawn in an ordinary garden in Whonnock. Access is through private property, and the wooden crosses that once marked the graves are long gone. The existence of the little graveyard, invisible, on top of a steep slope where Byrnes Road crosses Cooks Creek, is not even known to most of the neighbours.

An 1889 sketch shows a right-of-way leading straight up to the little graveyard from the home of Robert Robertson on River Road. For many years family members would have had to climb that steep path to visit the graves of their loved ones or to put to rest another from along their midst. From the cemetery there was a commanding view of the river, Crescent Island, and behind, the valley and majestic Mount Baker.

Robert Robertson was a Shetlander by birth; in 1852, as a 21-year-old lad, he was employed by the Hudson's Bay Company and for five years he served in the Northern Department of the Company. Shortly after his contract ended he settled close to the village of the Whonnock tribe on the shore of the Fraser with Tselatsetenate, his Sto:lo wife from the Nicomen area. Robert was a skilful carpenter, and he earned a living by rowing people and freight up and down and across the river. His service as "boatman" for the Rev. Alexander Dunn is particularly well documented.

Robert and Tselatsetenate had many children. Surviving in 1881 were three sons and five daughters. We know that in 1870s two daugh-



The photograph is believed to show Robert Robertson and his wife and an unnamed infant taken in the S.J. Thompson studio in New Westminster. Many other Fraser Valley pioneers had their portrait taken here. (Photo courtesy Lyn Ross)

ters named Celestine and Mary died, but infant mortality was high and the little cemetery was probably established in the early 1860s. In the spring of 1884 William Robert Robertson, a 22-year old son, was hanged in New Westminster for a murder he witnessed but possibly did not commit. Old-timers thought that he lies buried in the family cemetery too. A couple of years later Robert's wife died of tuberculosis; so did their son Andrew in 1888 and their daughter Andrina in 1896. Grandchildren were laid to rest here as well. We know of little five-year old Jennie Elizabeth and Pearl, an infant, who both died in 1900. William Henry Garner, a son-in-law killed in a brawl in the Nicomen area, was buried here

in 1910. He left his wife Barbara Christine destitute. She cleaned houses to earn a meagre living, taking care of her own and her late sister Andrina's children as well as her ageing father. Robert Robertson died in 1912, about 80 years of age. He was the last known to be buried in the little cemetery. Ten years later all Robertson's descendants had left Whonnock.

As from 1884, when Robert Robertson received a Crown Grant for the core of present-day Whonnock on the river, the family's cemetery was marked in the records of the Land Titles Office. A sketch map of 1916, tracing the route of present day Byrnes Road, still shows the property as a "private cemetery." Today's Land Title records and Municipal records don't show this property as a cemetery any more, and I am concerned that future generations will not remember or respect the peace of these pioneers any longer. To protect the graves from sale and development in years to come all the Municipality needs to do is write a letter to Land Titles confirming that Lot SK21/277 is a cemetery and arrange the return of the annotation "cemetery" to the records of this small piece of land. That does not seem easy; I've asked for this for the last ten years explaining that this is not a matter of "heritage" or "heritage conservation" but of common decency.

It seems that my requests are resting peacefully.

Fred Braches

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