

Pet Cemetery bears witness to bond between man and animals

By Kay Fisher, The Oshawa Times, Feb.20, 1990

A hard layer of ice and snow obscures the flat grave marker, but a new wreath of pink, paper flowers with an inscribed banner proclaims the name of the loved one below- Fluffy.

The grave is covered with love trinkets for the dear departed- two blue and pink china cats, a plastic mouse wearing a Santa cap, a weathered-looking toy cat.

"This lady comes every Saturday from Mississauga," says Wolf Klose, proprietor of the Havelberg Pet Cemetery, located on the grounds of his zoo, Exotic Cat World in Orono. "Even if it's a snowstorm, she comes, sometimes with her grandchildren."

Fluffy is one of 1,135 much-loved pets buried in the pet cemetery. Some of the graves have expensive, engraved granite markers. Many of them are decorated with shrubs, trees, flower beds, and little borders made of wood, stones, posts and chain, even knee-high wrought-iron fences.

Most of the shrubs have been carefully bagged in burlap for winter. Someone has hung some Christmas ornaments on a burlap covering. Another grave is covered with a wreath and two bouquets of plastic flowers, with a large rawhide bone in the centre of each. Another grave bears two candles in glass containers. Others have little toy doggie statues.

"You should see it in the summer; it's like a rose garden," says Wolf. They make it nicer than a people cemetery."

Three statues overlook the cemetery, one of a lord and his faithful dog, two of sitting dogs.

Wolf Klose, a dog trainer who developed champion obedience dogs for movie roles, originally built the cemetery to honor his prize German Shepherds when they died.

"When my dog, Axel von Havelberg, died, he had all the obedience records in North America," says Wolf, sitting in a cluttered office he shares with an iguana, parrots, cockatoos, and a 13-foot Burmese python. "I didn't want to just dump him in the garbage."

Wolf says he never intended to make the cemetery public. "But I didn't know that everybody would want to come bury their pets. Friends came to me and said, "Man that's a good idea." They started encouraging me. They said that nobody else is doing this. Then vets started calling me. But I wasn't too keen on it."

Eventually, Wolf had brochures made up and distributed to local vets, and advertised in the yellow pages. The cemetery opened to the public in 1976. Burials cost between \$100 and \$350 depending on the size of the animal, and include a concrete marker and engraved plaque. The internees are mostly cats and dogs, but there are also a few rabbits, horses, and even a pet chicken.

"At first I figure that the people make a joke. But luckily I made no comment. It really was a pet chicken," says Wolf. "But I don't take horses anymore," he adds. "It's too much of a problem. You have to rent a backhoe."

"It's not like you can make a living at this. It helps pay the land taxes, but I don't know if I would do it again, because I have tied that land up. It's a service for people," he adds.

Wolf says there's no religious connotation to the burials, "It's just a matter of honor and respect. You don't throw something you loved away."

But religious symbols have a way of cropping up in the decorations on the graves and markers- a praying figurine enclosed in glass, cross-shaped wreaths, granite markers bearing crosses and the Star of David. It seems comforting for bereaved pet owners to believe that two-legged creatures don't have exclusive rights to the afterlife.

Despite the great number of pets buried in the cemetery, believed to be the only one in Ontario, Wolf is surprised more people don't make the effort to bury their pets properly. Some people regard pet cemeteries as evidence of a modern neurosis. But pet burial has a long history, Wolf says. The Romans erected great monuments to their war horses "because the horses essentially saved their lives." Egyptian pharaohs built cat cemeteries. Early Chinese emperors had a cemetery for dogs in Beijing. For many centuries, Paris maintained a large pet cemetery on an island in the Seine River.

In Orono, in 1990, the age-old bond between humans and animals still endures. People have laid their beloved companions to rest wrapped carefully in their favorite blankets. Some come to watch the burial; a few become so distraught "they can hardly control themselves," says Wolf. Others prefer to visit the grave after the pet has been buried.

"Some people want to get it off their conscience, especially in front of the kids. Some people came from Bowmanville yesterday with five kids who wanted to be present when their cat was buried, a 21-year-old cat."

The graves are marked with tender inscriptions- "**Michelle 1966-1982 She loved us - We loved her**", "**Pink Panther 1973-1985 I fell in love for the rest of my days, with Siamese cats and their heavenly ways. Til we meet again**", "**Love understands love. Love needs no talk.**" Some of the large granite markers even bear photographs of the late pet. One gravestone displays oval photographs of three departed dachshunds. Another bears an inscription in Chinese and English.

"We get people from all over coming here, from Barrie, Oshawa, Toronto, Peterborough and from every nationality, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Polish, Hungarian, Portuguese, South American. "It's amazing," says Wolf. People are all the same when it comes to feelings. As amusing as pet cemeteries may seem to some of us, love is not to be faulted. Rather we chuckle at a pet cemetery than wince at the sight of an abused animal.