

Historic Union Cemetery

Bakersfield, California

It was the middle of the 19th century when Col. Thomas Baker, the man for whom Bakersfield is named, moved to Kern County and ultimately settled in what was then known as Kern Island. A prosperous lawyer, politician and businessman, he hand-selected the parcel of land as the place he wanted to “lay my bones.”

Baker’s grave in 1872 marked the beginning of Union Cemetery, which for nearly a century-and-a-half has been the resting place of thousands of pioneers and settlers, Civil War soldiers, prominent local families, cowboys, farmers, bankers and builders, and other remarkable men and women who have shaped the community’s history.

“We were the only cemetery in Bakersfield until 1931, and have 40 people buried here who have streets named after them,” said Dave Hepburn, general manager at Historic Union Cemetery. “We also have a section of 20 acres that we consider our pioneer section; it’s the most famous part of our cemetery ... it’s an amazing walk through history.”

Joining Baker as some of the cemetery’s most famous residents are Jacob Niederaur, the town’s first undertaker; Solomon Jewett, Bakersfield’s first banker; American Civil War soldiers; and Capt. Elisha Stephens, the first person to guide a wagon train safely over the treacherous Sierra Nevada mountains, opening Northern California to overland migration.

But as much as the Historic Union Cemetery has a foot in the past, it continues to look toward the future as it serves the community.

There was no question that over

time, as Bakersfield grew and developed, that the city’s west side experienced the biggest growth. The city’s east side, where Union Cemetery was located, did not.

If there were to be a resurgence on the east side, Union Cemetery would have to be an integral part of the process.

About five years ago, the Union Cemetery Association, the nonprofit organization that owns and has cared for the cemetery since 1904, started working on a plan to bring new life to the cemetery. That plan included bringing in Hepburn, first as a consultant to help with the master-planning, and then as general manager, to help with the transformation.

“The cemetery has also been in good shape, but it really needed to look forward to what families wanted and needed,” Hepburn said. “And because it was such an old cemetery, many people thought that we didn’t have any space left. Of course, that just wasn’t the case.”

In the last two years, there has been a concerted effort by the board of directors, staff and crew of Union Cemetery to restore the property.

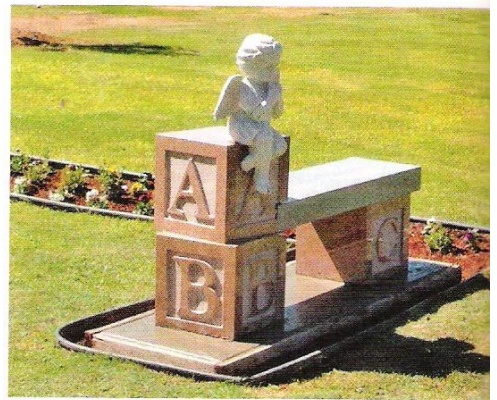
“Our efforts to renew this 142-year-old property serve not only the families whose loved ones rest here today and in the future, but the entire community of Bakersfield,” Hepburn noted. “We regard Historic Union Cemetery as a community resource, a historic treasure and a proud partner in the efforts to elevate the quality of life in the southeast neighborhoods.”

As part of the efforts, the cemetery property experienced a massive cleanup and restoration. New fencing

and landscaping beautified the grounds for visitor enjoyment, while “hidden areas” that once attracted less welcome visitor activity were removed.

The cemetery’s office was also completely redesigned with updated wall graphics, furnishings and new technology. The result ... a comfortable and contemporary customer service experience.

Also in 2012, Union Cemetery began a major rebranding, starting with the addition of “historic” to its name, a nod to the significance of the property. “Our recent advertising campaign has won tremendous local acclaim for its freshness and historic storytelling regarding many



The Garden of Innocence was opened in 2013.

of the individuals buried here,” Hepburn pointed out. “The campaign has brought positive and surprising responses for all areas, including City Hall.”

That positive response from City Hall has resulted in a great working relationship with a city councilman, Hepburn added. “We are partnering with him to improve the surrounding neighborhoods, beginning with new sidewalks installed next to the elementary school across the street,” he said.

The cemetery has also partnered with the neighboring elementary school to provide a tour to the students to introduce them to some of

the cemetery's residents and, at the same time, to learn respect for what a cemetery means within the community.

As a good community neighbor, the Historic Union Cemetery Association's board of directors approved a plan in 2013 to take over the care and management of two Kern County cemeteries for indigents that sat adjacent to Historic Union Cemetery. Locally known as potter's fields, the county-owned cemeteries were unsightly and uncared for. Stepping in, Historic Union Cemetery provided new irrigation, landscaping and maintenance. "They are now respectful and dignified," Hepburn said, "and we will continue to maintain these properties for years to come."

Also in 2013, cemetery management was approached by The Garden of Innocence organization in San Diego to provide Kern County's first burial property for the unclaimed remains of abandoned babies. Hepburn said the cemetery was quick to accept the opportunity, and has been able to create a



beautiful Garden of Innocence property on its grounds. "We want to be able to serve the community and the area any way we can," Hepburn pointed out.

And understanding that the community is increasingly opting for cremation for disposition, in October 2013 the cemetery finished construction on the Heritage Pavilion, a new committal chapel and columbarium. "We know that families

want cremation, and we wanted to give them not only a place to inter the cremated remains, but also a place to memorialize a life."

While it looks forward, the cemetery hasn't forgotten its role of history keeper. Tours are an integral part of the cemetery's events, with the Friends of Historic Union Cemetery volunteer corps providing local residents an opportunity to look back at the city's remarkable and colorful past.

Another major accomplishment for the cemetery came last year when the Historic Pioneer section was designated by the city as a Historic Place. A recognition plaque was installed and a free, self-guided tour map is available for anyone who wants to take a step back in time.

"We're proud of what we've accomplished," Hepburn said. "We've changed our 'little cemetery' from a forgotten burial ground to an invaluable, treasured public resource that is very much alive." •

Top right: The Heritage Pavilion provides a variety of cremation niches and an all-faiths outdoor chapel. Below: The Baker monument in the cemetery's Pioneer section.

