

Cemetery that never was

Some time ago I was talking with a friend about the burial site of the Robertson family on Byrnes Road when he said, “You know that there is another unrecognized cemetery on the right-hand side of 272nd Street, uphill after 110th Avenue?”

I was familiar with that story and the site, a one-acre piece of land, now covered densely with fir trees. For instance, in an interview in 1985 Teddy Lee, a descendant of Norwegian pioneers suggested that one or two unnamed Norwegians could have been buried there. Was he right?

Before the coming of the railroad in 1885 there were two confirmed burial places in the Whonnock-Ruskin area. The first was the Roman Catholic cemetery on the Whonnock Reserve and the second that private place on Byrnes Road where family members of Shetlander Robert Robertson were buried.

The transcontinental railway brought a steady stream of settlers, but since there was no public burial place in Whonnock or Ruskin, the newcomers buried their loved ones in cemeteries in other communities. Those who could not afford to buy a cemetery plot somewhere else dug graves on their own property. Only a few of those graves are known today.

The one-acre lot on 272nd Street that is thought to be such a burial place was part of a quarter section (160 acres) of land granted around 1888 to the Norwegian pioneer Johan Christian Nelson. Chris Nelson, a fisherman, was just forty years old when he died in 1891, leaving behind his wife Anna and seven children. The oldest, a daughter, had married, but still at home were six children: the oldest a boy of 16 and the youngest still an infant.

After Chris Nelson’s death his brother Ole acquired the greater part of the original 160 acres. Chris Nelson’s widow kept the part along 272nd Street until 1900, when she sold her land to a third party, with the exception of one acre, which the Norwegian Lutheran congregation of Whonnock purchased to be used as a cemetery. It was on a fine location on the edge of the hill overlooking the lower part of Whonnock towards Mount Baker.

Interestingly Ole Nelson, Chris Nelson’s brother, was not buried in this graveyard when he died in 1902 but in the Fraser Cemetery in New Westminster.

Two years later, in 1904, the congregation lost interest in the one-acre parcel on 272nd Street and opted instead for property on 96th Avenue—now part of the municipal cemetery. They wanted a church on their cemetery, and for most members of the congregation, living closer to the river, it would have been a long walk to the property on 272nd Street. The Lutheran congregation had not bothered to acquire title to the land on 272nd Street and now did not sell it—it seems that it was just abandoned.

The property should have been listed in the tax assessment even if it had been exempted from property tax, but for many years it does not show up. Perhaps the municipality just did not realize that it was no longer part of the larger surrounding property and no one noticed. The lot only started appearing separately in the tax records as from 1917, showing the first titleholder, the late Chris Nelson, as taxpayer. Ownership was obviously unclear. The heirs of Chris Nelson would have been the legal owners of the land, but apparently none of them took steps to claim the property and pay the taxes. In due course the land reverted to the municipality.

Teddy Lee and others may have thought differently, but the municipality did not and still does not recognize the 272nd Street property as a place where people are buried. Indeed, why would the Nelsons have abandoned the graves of their parents or siblings? Or is it likely that the Lutheran congregation would have ignored the presence of the graves of Norwegians when they gave up the property in favour of land on 96th Avenue? The answer is no to both questions. Still, *where else would Chris Nelson have been buried?*

What made me doubt that this is a pioneer cemetery is the burial of Ole Nelson, Chris Nelson's brother, in the Fraser Cemetery in New Westminster eleven years after Christian's death. Why would his family have decided not to bury Ole next to his own brother in Whonnock? I found the answer not long ago when I received confirmation that Chris Nelson's unmarked grave is in the Fraser Cemetery next to that of his oldest daughter Johanna who died a year before him. Nearby are also the graves of other Norwegian Nelsons, including that of his brother Ole.

For me it is clear now that although it was intended to be the cemetery for the Norwegian Lutherans, the lot on 272nd Street was never a burial place for the Nelsons or anyone else.

It is a cemetery that never was.