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Canadian Cemetery Management

September 2023



NEXT-OF-KIN MEMORIAL AVENUE

National historic site in Saskatoon celebrates 100th anniversary

What's Inside?

Vol. 37 No. 5 • September 2023

2 Cover Story
Next-of-Kin Memorial
Avenue

6 OACFP
Association Update

8 WCCA
Association Update

9 Business Index

Photo courtesy of Terry Hoknes.

Lieutenant-Governor Russ Mirasty speaking at the event after he unveiled the 100th anniversary plaque.



NEXT-OF-KIN MEMORIAL AVENUE

National historic site in Saskatoon celebrates 100th anniversary

By Lisa Johnston

In 1914, over 650,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders left home to join the war effort. Many never returned. They were buried where they fell in countries such as France and Belgium, leaving loved ones back home with no place to mourn. As a result, memorials were erected across Canada. In Saskatoon, the oldest of these is the Next-of-Kin Memorial Avenue of Trees located in Woodlawn Cemetery.

According to City of Saskatoon archivist Jeff O'Brien, two residents started the idea of a Memorial Avenue in 1923 to beautify the city, but it quickly morphed into something much more significant.

"Prior to Memorial Avenue, there were no trees in Woodlawn Cemetery," says O'Brien. "Except for the river valley, Saskatoon in its natural state is bald prairie, tall grass and gophers. However, as Jean Jarvis and Margaret Hanson were both members of the IODE (Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire), the project quickly became a war memorial of living trees, where people could pay a modest sum – \$7 in those days – to have a tree dedicated to an individual soldier. That is what sets us apart from other memorials. It is not a public commemoration, but a personal one dedicated to a loved one who is never coming home again."

On June 17, 1923, in front of a crowd of 8,000 people, the first 266 trees were dedicated on the grounds of Woodlawn Cemetery. Planted at the gates on 33rd Street, the trees run northwards to a paved circle surrounding the Soldiers' Cairn. Through the years, almost annually, more trees have been added. Today, over 1,200 trees currently stand tall in memory of Canada's fallen soldiers.

"The trees are all American elms and were chosen for their elegance, stateliness and longevity," says O'Brien. "It's a living memorial in the sense of being a tree but also in the sense of continuing to be increased every year with the addition of more trees."

Every June, Saskatoon's Decoration Day ceremony takes place on the grounds of Woodlawn Cemetery. This year's event – held June 18, 2023 – was extra special as it was combined with an anniversary celebration to mark the planting of the first 266 trees. All the components came seamlessly together through a joint effort organized by the Next-of-Kin Memorial Avenue Centennial Committee composed of the City of Saskatoon in partnership with the Decoration Day Service Committee, Saskatoon Heritage Society, Parks Canada and the Friends of Forestry Farm House.



Memorial Tree Certificate #130. Photo courtesy Local History Room, Saskatoon Public Library.



Memorial Avenue in the early days. Photo courtesy City of Saskatoon Archives.

Chris Zerebeski, superintendent of cemeteries for the City of Saskatoon, led the centennial planning committee, but says it all started when Peggy Sarjeant, from the Saskatoon Historical Society, went to city hall in early January. “She requested the city form a partnership to celebrate the event and then following the mayor’s directive, we all came together – much like back in 1923 – to plan the centennial celebration in conjunction with our annual Decoration Day.”

Malcolm Young, a veteran who represented both military organizations and the Royal Canadian Legion, played a key role in bringing the anniversary celebration to life. “Following the mayor’s directive, we decided we would hold one event in June with three ceremonial activities. The first was the unveiling of our 100th anniversary plaque to re-dedicate and commemorate what took place on June 17, 1923. The second activity centred around conducting our annual Decoration Day service that happens across Canada every year. Lastly, we unveiled three pedestals at the Soldiers’ Cairn, dedicated to those who served in NATO operations, United Nations operations and the war in Afghanistan.”

Zerebeski notes the ceremony this year also honoured the 4,000-plus indigenous and Métis soldiers who served in the First World War. During the conflict, more than 300 indigenous Canadians were killed while an unknown number of Métis lost their life. Today, memorial trees #3 and #25 commemorate those soldiers from the Saskatoon area.



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Photo 1: Saskatoon Mayor Charlie Clark with veterans unveiling a cairn dedicated to United Nations operations. Photo 2: Anniversary celebrations occurred in conjunction with Decoration Day. Photo 3: Over 400 people attended the historic event.

“Under Chris’ leadership, we went through a consultation with both the indigenous and Métis communities, in terms of their cultural and military representation,” says Young. “That manifested in a couple of ways. We made sure we highlighted the names of the soldiers in both the video we created and during the ceremony. Speaking their names out loud is an important part of their culture.”

While the majority of trees are dedicated to individual soldiers, some have been donated in honour of specific groups. For example, one plaque commemorates all the nurses who lost their lives during the First World War while another is dedicated to the boys from Christ Church Anglican. Every tree has a plaque, containing information such as the soldier’s name, rank, unit, where they died, date of death, and who donated the tree on their behalf. Most of those commemorated are from the Saskatoon area, but others are from across Saskatchewan, Canada and even other countries.

Young references one such tree dedicated by Canon Frederick Scott in memory of his son, Henry, killed in the line of duty during the First World War. While the renowned chaplain and poet was not from Saskatoon, nor was his son, he still wanted to purchase a tree at Woodlawn Cemetery. “I can only assume he did this for one of two reasons,” notes Young, “the project in Saskatoon was one of the largest of its kind and it was well supported by the community.”

In 1994, the Next-of-Kin Memorial Avenue received special recognition when it was designated a national historic site – the only one of its kind in Canada.

“Our Memorial Avenue of trees is unique, but that wasn’t always the case,” says O’Brien. “Several such avenues were created in the 1920s across Canada but have fallen victim to indifference, public apathy or a failure to remember. If a city built their Memorial Avenue on a street somewhere, well one day, they probably decided they needed to widen the street and as a result took down the trees. Our is in the middle of a cemetery – a place dedicated to memory. Those two concepts piggyback on each other to ensure our Memorial Avenue still exists exactly like it did 100 years ago.”

Saskatoon’s Next-of-Kin Memorial Avenue is a unique memorial that has stood the test of time, honouring soldiers from all Canadian conflicts. The words from the IODE letter sent out to encourage people to purchase a tree back in 1923 sums it up best: “A tree is a thing of beauty and inspiration. A living token of the wonder and glory of nature, and a symbol of service. For the life of a tree is a life of service. Even the end of life is not the end of a tree’s service. Therefore, is not a tree a fitting symbol for those valiant men who gave their lives for the service of their country, and who died that humanity might continue to live in civilization, in culture, and in happiness?” **N**

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Allan Job



OACFP

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF CEMETERY
AND FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS

ASSOCIATION UPDATE

The Retention Conundrum

By Allan Job, President, Board of Directors

A previous boss of mine would often say “Everything is great ... until it isn’t.” This statement was meant to relate to situations that we take for granted when things are going well, but where we might also anticipate problems should conditions change.

The current labour market and our sector’s challenge to produce licensed funeral directors is exactly one of these situations.

While mass retirements have created labour shortages in most sectors, the bereavement sector is unique in that at the same time as we are facing labour challenges, we are also facing a tsunami of deaths that will occur as the baby boom generation nears their final years.

Simply put, replenishing our aging workforce is not keeping pace with increased service demand. Recently, the Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO) reported that the province has experienced a decrease of 272 (or 9.8 per cent) of funeral director licences between March 2017 and March 2023.

When discussing this issue, OACFP is often asked about our role in mitigating this problem. As a trade association, OACFP has three key responsibilities:

- To provide broad awareness of sector issues that affect members’ ability to do business.
- To provide valuable education for our members.
- To lobby government, guaranteeing our members’ voices are heard.

Awareness: For almost two years, OACFP has been discussing our labour concerns with anyone willing to listen. For over a year, OACFP has been discussing this issue directly with the BAO. Additionally, we have written about it in trade magazines and journals, all in the hope of making sure this issue is top of mind for all stakeholders.

Education: OACFP’s strength is in the quality of the education we provide. Following is a small list of the educational endeavours put together by OACFP to specifically target recruitment and retention within the sector.

- Multi-year NSERC research project in partnership with Collège Boréal to study the post-pandemic attitudes toward the provision of bereavement sector offerings, resilience and the public sentiment regarding the services we provide.
- Enrolment in ChatterHigh, an award-winning platform that engages thousands of students across Ontario, promoting the bereavement sector as a possible future career path.
- The creation of an online survey designed for any member of the public to evaluate their suitability for a career in the bereavement sector.
- Multiple sessions on resilience, recruitment and retention during educational events such as our Women’s Symposium, front-line training events and the upcoming conference.
- Presentation of a special webinar this fall specifically on the topic of burnout as it relates to retention.

- Understanding the increased importance of the role of an FDA, OACFP has now created, for the first time, a front-line FDA training event.

Lobbying Government: For the past 12 months, OACFP has been actively engaged in lobbying government on behalf of its members. Our lobbying efforts have included the management of excess soil for cemeteries, cremation emission standards and priority of persons legislation. More recently, we have engaged with the ministry on red tape reduction, requesting sensible change to how licensure is awarded in Ontario. The following items were included in that engagement.

• **Apprenticeship Programs** – Currently, the BAO approves two educational institutions for funeral service education: Humber College in Toronto and Collège Boréal in Sudbury. The existing educational system creates obstacles and limits those individuals who desire to enter a funeral service career. Individuals in northern Ontario, individuals for whom funeral service is a second career and individuals currently employed face barriers related to the associated costs of travel to attend training in another city, tuition fees and lack of income.

Proposed Solution: To create a new pathway to licensing and increase new entrants into our profession, we are suggesting that Ontario adopt an apprenticeship training model.

Such programs create flexible training options, improve the recruitment and development of a skilled workforce, and increase retention during and following the apprenticeship. Additionally, both students and employers receive tuition and employer benefits that currently are not accessible to those attending funeral service programs that are recognized by the BAO.

The ability to “learn and earn” is an attractive component of an apprenticeship program when recruiting and growing the workforce.

• **Licence Class** – Currently, there are two classes of licences for funeral directors. Class 1 (embalming) and Class 2 (non-embalming). Both allow funeral directors to contract funeral services and supplies as well as arrange and direct funeral rites and ceremonies on behalf of funeral establishments.

Proposed Solution: To attract more individuals to this profession, non-embalming licensing should be made broader and more accessible. We suggest exploring the possibility of establishing a Class FD2 licence in a purely online environment. While our focus has been on recruitment, the issue of employee retention has come to the forefront. Statistics are being used to highlight the number of newly graduated individuals who decide to leave the sector, five to 10 years after graduation.

In general, isolated statistics are very difficult to use to properly evaluate the true situation. Maybe individuals are leaving the sector in greater numbers compared with past experience,

but to evaluate this, don't we need to know how our sector compares against other similar service-oriented professions? How do we compare against the retention statistics for teachers, nurses, hairdressers, etc.? Does today's youth change careers equally across many different professions? Might these retention statistics be the new normal?

Having had the opportunity to speak with many business leaders, it seems to me that everyone is working diligently to create the best possible work-life balance for their employees in what is a demanding yet truly rewarding profession.

Is it possible that our system of licensure, which was adequate in the past, is now under stress because of a massive post-pandemic push to retirement, an increased need for our services, and a dramatic shift in the nature of those services? Let me elaborate. Currently, the process to get a funeral director's licence in Ontario consists of an eight-month formal education program and a one-year internship. In other words, 60 per cent of the education is provided by private businesses (under direction from the colleges) while 40 per cent of the education is held at an educational institution.

Businesses today are facing many challenges, and most are trying to survive by doing more with less. The additional burden of taking on and training an intern is a bridge too far, for some. This, combined with the fact there are fewer funeral homes today, means there are simply fewer internships available.

Educational institutions have often cited the challenge of finding internships as a limiting factor in their ability to increase enrolment.

If the internship portion of the licensure process was reduced to six months, what would happen? Here is what I think is possible:

- Businesses who currently budget to take a certain number of interns could take more interns for the same cost.
- Smaller businesses that could not manage the responsibility of a year-long internship may be open to reconsider a six-month internship.
- Educational institutions could then increase enrolment because of the increased capacity for internships.

So, what does this have to do with retention? Recruitment and retention are inextricably linked. Whenever businesses have little choice over who they hire, retention will be negatively affected. Having an increased talent pool to choose from will ultimately lead to businesses being able to select individuals who have the “right fit” for their organizations which will lead to greater retention.

What do you think? Let us know at info@oacfp.com, or directly online at: Funeral Licence Employee Retention & Recruitment (www.surveymonkey.com/r/GS7HYXW). **N**



Ken Munday



ASSOCIATION UPDATE

By Ken Munday, WCCA President

As I write this article, our annual conference is shaping up to be the best one in many years. Thanks to all the hard work from our board, sponsors and, of course, WCCA administrator Lorraine Piller, we have a very exciting list of speakers and a great tour scheduled. We already have more registrations (both delegates and suppliers) this year than we had last year! It's great to see so many people attending conferences again.

While we are seeing an increased attendance for our conference this year, we are finding some cemeteries are still recovering from the financial impact of COVID-19. We have had a few cemeteries reach out to let us know they cannot attend and we look forward to seeing them next year.

It certainly is no longer a hot news topic, but COVID continues impacting people and businesses. I rarely see anyone wearing a mask these days, even at the airport and on a plane. Don't get me wrong, I'm really happy to see people getting back to almost what life was like pre-COVID, but I do hope people continue to understand that there are those who need to be extra cautious and will continue to wear a mask.

However, it does seem like we have turned the corner and the worst of COVID is behind us (knock on wood). What I am finding most interesting now is watching what changes appear here to stay and what will revert to the way it used to be at both funeral homes and cemeteries. Positive changes such as streaming services (which became popular during COVID) appear to be here to stay with more and more families taking advantage of this type of service. That really isn't surprising though. Streaming was around before the pandemic; it just took off when no one was able to attend services in person. What is surprising, though, is that I am still coming across cemeteries that are closed to the public or open for appointments only.

Please consider joining the WCCA board. This is not only a great way to give back to the association, but an opportunity to grow both professionally and personally.

For those cemeteries boasting regular hours, partitions are often still in place. I'm beginning to wonder if they will ever come down. It will be interesting to hear from cemeteries on what changes are permanent. Maybe this will be a topic for a future webinar or conference.

For now, I look forward to seeing everyone in Edmonton from September 6-8, 2023 for our annual conference! If you happen to read this prior to the event and have not registered, please reach out to Lorraine Piller at administration@westerncemetery.com.

At our annual general meeting, we will be looking for new WCCA directors. Please consider joining the WCCA board. This is not only a great way to give back to the association, but an opportunity to grow both professionally and personally. I have certainly learned a lot throughout my time on the board. I look forward to having you join us and working together to help grow and strengthen WCCA.

If you have any questions about the association or would like more information, please visit our website at westerncemetery.com or send us an email.

Have a great rest of the summer and I look forward to seeing everyone again soon! **N**

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