



Wednesday » January
30 » 2008

Natural funerals an act of kindness to Mother Earth

Expenses go towards preserving natural spaces set aside as burial preserves

Melanie Collison

Freelance

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

EDMONTON - The natural burial movement is to the established funeral industry as the hospice movement is to hospital palliative care of the dying.

It is evolving as part of a holistic philosophy adhered to by people who find society's institutions just don't work for them.

Much as hospice attends to the person with the aim of sustaining the quality of remaining life, natural burial has sustainability of the Earth at its heart.

It is not being practised in Alberta yet, but growing interest may make it inevitable that natural areas can be registered as cemeteries.

"Our website had 130,000 visitors last month," says Joe Sehee, founder of the Green Burial Council, a not-for-profit organization that encourages ethical and environmentally sustainable burial practices as part of caring for natural areas.

"People are lining up to get their mind around this issue. Wanting to befriend death is more important than buying a casket."

A natural burial is an environmentally sustainable alternative to traditional funeral; it's the ultimate in recycling. The expense of your funeral goes instead towards preserving natural spaces set aside as burial preserves.

There's no embalming because formaldehyde used in embalming fluids is toxic to the people using it, the soil you're buried in, and any groundwater the chemical might leak into.

The body wrap is a shroud of biodegradable fibres such as linen or cotton -- preferably organically grown to avoid heavy use of pesticides on the crops.

Instead of a richly lined casket of exotic wood like mahogany, you have one of newspaper, cornstarch or a soft wood such as pine, poplar or ash. It is assembled with environmentally friendly glue and wood dowels, and finished with natural oils and pigments.

Your body is placed gently in the earth after techniques are used to prevent mixing of the soils while digging the grave. There is no need for the concrete outer box required in city cemeteries to support the weight of grounds maintenance machinery.

Rather than a monument with your name sandblasted in quarried marble or granite, you'll be by a tree or perhaps an outcropping of rock undisturbed as a natural landmark.

Ideally, you'd be buried, not cremated, because crematoria use fossil fuels to fire ovens at high temperature. Opponents to cremation object to emissions of carbon dioxide and toxins such as mercury from dental fillings.

About 60 per cent of people in Alberta choose cremation. Should cremation be necessary, for some reason, for a person seeking the greenest path, Alberta regulations require a body be delivered to the crematorium on a readily combustible firm surface, completely covered out of sensitivity to the workers, and with handles to carry it. It could be as simple as a softwood box you make yourself.

Your ashes would then be scattered or buried in a garden, or placed in a biodegradable urn for burial.

Interest in natural burial has been spreading around the world since its emergence in the United Kingdom about 15 years ago. There are already two dozen preserves in England and Scotland. The U.S. has eight, with another five under development.

Sehee established the Green Burial Council in Santa Fe, N.M., in 2002 to ensure that standards of professional integrity and environmental stewardship guide the fledgling green burial industry in North America.

The council is building a network of land trusts, cemetery operators and funeral directors, and is developing a certification system that requires reporting and auditing systems, and stewardship of the land.

"This is exciting," Sehee says, "an opportunity to create a model where we can do something that provides lasting change and benefits the Earth, yet doesn't demonize or destroy the death care industry."

In Canada, there's the Natural Burial Co-operative Inc., founded on Earth Day 2006 with the goal of establishing natural burial cemeteries across the country to preserve green spaces and provide a dignified and environmentally responsible burial option. People are invited to become members at www.naturalburial.coop.

The co-operative is looking for land located within a short drive from a populated area. It prefers a cleared or open field adjacent to an existing forest or green space, between four and 20 hectares for interment set within a larger tract of land.

"What people are connecting to is that their last act can contribute towards a conservation effort," Sehee says. "The (natural burial site) has to be set in place as a conservation effort. That means doing geological, hydrological and biological resource survey work. There are some areas that are just too fragile where burials should not take place.

"A tree atop a grave won't work in a desert or a meadow. I've seen some (natural cemeteries) that resemble a bad hair transplant. To create a more natural environment, you would build a trail system about existing memorial features instead of introducing new things that don't belong."

Amendments to Alberta's Cemeteries Act are being discussed, with implementation anticipated for 2009.

For now at least, there is nothing in the act to prevent natural burials because each individual cemetery makes its own rules about things like concrete vaults, according to Service Alberta policy adviser Karen Carruthers.

"They would still have to occur in a registered cemetery," she says. As for cremation, "There's no rule for a scattering garden except to get permission of whoever owns

the property."

Scattering is usually permitted on Crown and other publicly owned lands, although in national parks, scattering over water is prohibited. In provincial parks, forests and wilderness areas, scattering is allowed anywhere, but permission is required to scatter remains over rivers and lakes.

EVERGREEN

www.greenburialcouncil.org -- a U.S. organization working to establish a network of land stewards, and funeral and cemetery professionals to promote ethical natural burials

www.naturalburial.coop -- an organization intending to work nationally in Canada to find suitable sites for natural burial preserves

www.naturalburial.coop/UK -- the associated organization in the country where the movement started

www.naturalburialassoc.ca/ -- a not-for-profit association promoting natural burials in Canada through advocacy, education and standards

© The Edmonton Journal 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.