

True and Fascinating Canadian History

The Mystery of A Mountie

Buried Under an Ocean of Stone

by J. J. (Buffalo Joe) Healy



In Memory of O.432,
Superintendent J. J. Atherton



From the beginning of time, all people across all cultures have given special respect to the dead. Significant priority has also been given to the location where the deceased was finally laid to rest whether the place was a grave in a cemetery, a tomb, a cave or a grotto. But, in the Mystery which follows, an Officer was actually buried under a mountain of stone.

Deep in the pyramids, archaeologists have found evidence that the Egyptian deceased were treated with a high degree of honour and dignity. Weapons and jewels were sometimes placed with the deceased for the journey to the afterlife should the need arise.



The New Testament records that after His crucifixion, Christ's body was taken down from the Cross, prepared for burial by His Jewish closest friends and laid in a tomb cut out of the rock. And still today, from all reports, the vast majority of people seem to prefer a peaceful death followed by a decent, respectable and sometimes spiritual burial.

But, modern day burial rituals; the use of cemeteries and an increasing dependency on cremations, in particular, are creating rapid change and new trends not previously seen with burials.

Cemeteries across Canada receive very different upkeep and care depending on revenue sources, their location and the affordability of ground keepers. Most cemeteries, for instance, located in large urban cities are well maintained, whereas many small cemeteries, once used years ago in rural

Canada, have fallen into a state of vandalism or disrepair; broken fences, tilted grave markers and bush and weed over growth. Some cemeteries, once quite active, have actually disappeared.



An old cemetery, in use between 1850 and 1890 was recently discovered in Toronto, ON. Many years ago, about 50 square meters of St. John the Evangelist Cemetery had been paved over for additional car parking. More than 70 forgotten graves were discovered.

And in 2000, all 622 deceased persons in the Elmbank Cemetery on the newly expanded Pearson International Airport in Toronto had to be relocated. In days gone by, no one could foresee the need for an entire cemetery to be moved to a new place.



A steep rise in recent years with cremations have also led to much uncertainty about the final resting place of the deceased. It is not uncommon today for the family of the deceased to spread his or her ashes over the garden at the cottage, over a favorite lake or golf course or to toss the final remains out the window of a weekend rented Cessna aircraft. All of these new behaviours have placed far less need for space in traditional Canadian cemeteries.

But, there are also many other irregularities which make the true identity of the RCMP deceased very questionable. For instance, NWMP Constables James Young, Herbert Robertson Skirving, Patrick Francis Walsh, Donald F. Forbes and Robert Weldon all lie in unmarked graves. The grave of Reg.#1448, James Sandy McDonald is identified by a simple white cross. And, Reg.#945, Sergeant Alfred Allison Meneley was first interred in 1927 at Maple Creek, SK. but, he was disinterred in 1965 and moved to Calgary, AB.



Much uncertainty about the final resting place of the deceased is the main theme behind The Mystery of A Mountie Buried Under an Ocean of Stone. The whole affair has more twists and turns than a pretzel. The strange episode, which involved a senior and respected member of the Force, all began this way.

Many, many years ago a very senior RCMP Officer died after a very long, honourable and successful yet unusual career. The Officer's spouse predeceased him, so he left explicit instructions with his two pals, also senior and retired RCMP Officers, about his wish for a cremation followed by a burial. He had wanted for a very special, but different sort of burial. And, rather than be buried in a cemetery, he wanted his urn to be buried in a very, very different location.

The two Officers complied with the last will and testament of the deceased Officer -- first, he was cremated and then they buried him exactly as he had requested -- in a deep hole dug by themselves

beside his favorite and memorable place which was his RCMP office. It just so happened that the specific location was under the flagpole which stands very prominently in front of Fairmont Barracks in Vancouver, BC. And that's where he rests peacefully even to this very day.



The old flagpole area at
RCMP Fairmont Barracks. Vancouver, BC
A photo by Vancouver, BC Vet Dan Lemieux

The career of O.432 Superintendent J. J. (Joe) Atherton was exciting as well as very unusual. He joined the Force in 1932, and he served most of his long career in drug enforcement and especially on the steamy streets of Vancouver, BC. Here, the world of the police officer is encircled by death by drug overdose as well as the danger and the unpredictable activities of the drug user.

But, the exciting street career of J. J. Atherton was unusual for another distinct reason -- he was very proud that all his promotions from 3/Cst to RCMP Superintendent were achieved in Vancouver Sub Division. Superintendent Atherton attributed his successful career to his long life in Vancouver but he also nurtured a special place in his heart to his workplace -- which was RCMP Fairmont Barracks. Years ago, he once mused to his pals, "I have spent my entire career at Fairmont, why not be buried under the flagpole here at Fairmont Barracks?"



(R) Retired Deputy Commissioner Don Wilson
(L) & J. J. Healy discuss the merits of moving
J. J. Atherton's urn from Fairmont Barracks
to another more suitable resting place or to
leave his urn under the stone work and the flagpole.
White Rock, BC. October. 2015

The story of Superintendent Atherton and his very unique place of burial first came to light by Ottawa RCMP Vet Pat Cummins. Pat called me and said, "Joe, years ago, I recall some talk around the Officer's Mess in Vancouver that an Officer was once buried under the flagpole, can you check it out and determine if it's true?" Pat continued, "maybe retired 'E' Division CO Don Wilson might be able to shed some more light on this mystery."

Retired Deputy Commissioner Don Wilson was first interviewed by phone. Don recalled that Superintendent Atherton died and then he was cremated. One day in 1988, two of Joe Atherton's pals, Al Cart and Jack Duggan arrived in Don Wilson's office to say that they intended to bury Joe under the flagpole. And, that's exactly what they did. At the time, Fairmont Barracks was occupied (1988) and under the control of the RCMP

Fairmont was built in 1912 to serve as a private boy's school. The Federal Government purchased it in 1918 to use as a Military Hospital and in 1920, the RCMP began to occupy it for "E" Division HQ.

But, over the years the Mystery took on a spooky turn -- a twist which Joe Atherton's pals had never, never expected. No one could foresee that the RCMP would vacate Fairmont Barracks and move to a new location in Surrey, BC. And Fairmont Barracks would be sold -- and, the sale of Fairmont Barracks gave rise to the real possibility that Joe Atherton's burial site under the flagpole might be subject to the backhoe and construction in preparation for new condos.



O.432, Superintendent J. J. Atherton's urn under the flagpole at Fairmont Barracks, Vancouver, BC is presently covered by an ocean or stone.

October4, 2015

In reality though, it now appears that Joe Atherton's urn has been given a reprieve. Fairmont Barracks and its surrounding property has been designated as a provincial historical site. Presently, the building is occupied by employees of the BC Provincial Government.

There was a time when a few Vancouver RCMP Vets including Don Wilson and me had intended to seek permission to reinter Joe Atherton's urn and rebury him at another location -- perhaps with his wife or possibly in the cemetery at 'Depot' Div.

It had been intended to keep the Joe's reinternment very dignified and the Memorial Service would have included the RCMP Chaplain, Jim Turner. However, the once grassy area where the flagpole was originally located in front of Fairmont Barracks is today covered by an ocean of stone work, plants and bushes.



The October 2015 view of the flagpole area at
RCMP Fairmont Barracks. Vancouver, BC



Retired D/Comm'r. Don Wilson at
his home south of Vancouver, BC.
October, 2015



The location at Vancouver, BC Fairmont Barracks --
under the flagpole and an ocean of stone where
Superintendent J. J. (Joe) Atherton's urn is buried.

An October 2015 photo. J. J. (Joe) Healy). Supt. (R'td)

I guess that it is best to leave J. J. Atherton's urn under the flagpole. Fairmont Barracks was Joe's favorite place of work. It's only right that he be with his memories and that he be left to rest under Fairmont's flagpole.

In the future, Don Wilson and I intend to purchase a suitable plaque for Joe Atherton and have it mounted on the flagpole.

Reporting from the Fort,
J.J.(BuffaloJoe)Healy
October 1, 2015