

Veterans Liberty Cemetery

WE DON'T KNOW THEM ALL BUT WE OWE THEM ALL

“Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude.” Harry S. Truman

SUMMARY

The Veterans Liberty Cemetery (VLC) is home to veterans who served in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Spanish American War, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, the Indian War, and the Philippine Insurrection.

The Fresno County Civil Grand Jury received a written complaint that the Veterans Liberty Cemetery is not being adequately maintained. The complainant stated that the failure to maintain the cemetery is an insult to ALL veterans and their families, particularly those buried there. Staff at surrounding cemeteries received complaints about the unkempt condition of VLC.

The grounds of the cemetery are overgrown with grass and weeds. There are several dead trees and many of the headstones are covered with dirt. Some areas of the VLC are dry, and other areas have standing water. In contrast, the adjacent cemeteries are well-kept and maintained. The complainant stated that VLC is routinely “cleaned up” prior to Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Wreaths Across America (which is held in

December) and other planned events. The remainder of the year, the cemetery is a mixture of dry grass, weeds and unmaintained headstones.

GLOSSARY

VLC	Veterans Liberty Cemetery
G.A.R.	Grand Army of the Republic
ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
DAR	Daughters of the American Revolution
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars
AMVET	American Veterans

BACKGROUND

On November 16, 1896, the Council of the Administration of Atlanta Post 92, Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) spent \$8.80 to buy a 150 foot by 100 foot plot from the County of Fresno. This was the foundation of Veterans Liberty Cemetery. Over the years, adjacent property was donated and added to the original plot of land. In 1918 the development of the cemetery was proposed to accommodate all soldiers who died in war. In June of 1920, the G.A.R. gave ownership of the grounds to the County of Fresno.

The cemetery has approximately 4200 burial plots. As of 1978, there were no plots available for purchase. Burials still take place for those who secured their plots prior to that date. Cemetery maintenance is the responsibility of the Fresno County Parks

Department. The cemetery is funded through the general fund of the Fresno County Public Works and Planning Resources budget under the Parks Department.

There were and are no federal or state funds available to maintain the cemetery because the property is owned by the County of Fresno. The County of Fresno staff recently reached out to state and federal agencies to ask if they would be willing to assume responsibility for VLC and they declined.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed the complainant, numerous County of Fresno employees, and employees from several local Fresno cemeteries. The Grand Jury visited multiple cemeteries to compare the state of their grounds and inquired about their maintenance practices.

DISCUSSION

There are no federal or state funds available to maintain the cemetery because the property is owned by the County of Fresno. The cemetery is maintained by the County of Fresno Parks Department.

On the Grand Jury initial site visit in September 2022, several deficiencies were observed. It was noted that there was a single flagpole at the main entrance of the cemetery with no American flag. After a discussion with County staff, the American flag with solar light was immediately installed.

The wooden street sign indicating VLC had degraded over time to the extent that it was no longer legible. A private entity donated the material and labor to repair the sign.

There was a lack of signage from the adjacent roads making VLC very difficult to locate. Fresno County staff installed signs that provide clear directions to VLC.

One full time groundskeeper is assigned one day per week for VLC maintenance. The maintenance schedule is often impacted by staffing shortages and/or equipment issues. Adult Offender Work Program participants are assigned to assist with maintenance, but the number of participants vary on a weekly basis. One County employee working one day a week cannot adequately maintain VLC, which encompasses five acres and approximately 4200 burial plots. Adjacent cemeteries have daily full time work crews providing maintenance of their grounds. Additionally, the Grand Jury was told that there is a shortage of reliable, updated maintenance equipment for use at VLC.

In 2021, arson destroyed the storage shed that housed equipment necessary to maintain the cemetery. The insurance claim has been recently adjudicated and the rebuilding of the storage shed will soon be underway. Once the storage building is completed, the cemetery maintenance tools can be kept on site in the building.

Currently, the equipment has to be transported from Kearney Park to VLC for use and then returned to Kearney Park.

The restrooms are continually vandalized and are presently boarded up. This restroom building is located in the center of the cemetery and has been recently painted. Other cemeteries in the area do not provide restrooms for the general public.

Adjacent to the restrooms is a cinder block wall that surrounds equipment for the well. This wall has been damaged and may become a hazard if it is not repaired. Interviews conducted by the Grand Jury provided different opinions about how the damage was

done. No insurance claim was filed for the damage and the Grand Jury was unable to ascertain the source of the damage.

Currently, a well supplies the irrigation for the cemetery. The irrigation system isn't sufficient to keep the entire cemetery watered. The system is antiquated. Buried lines are broken, valves are not functioning and sprinkler heads are missing and/or broken. Some areas of the cemetery receive adequate water and other areas receive little to no water. Water usage has been reduced at the cemetery because of drought conditions. The County of Fresno Board of Supervisors recently approved the use of reclaimed water for VLC. This project is estimated to be concluded in late 2023 or early 2024 and should improve the water capabilities of the irrigation system. The project will include a new watering system that will be designed to provide water to the cemetery without damaging the existing grave sites. The well will continue to provide water service to the storage shed once it is rebuilt.

Numerous cemeteries, including veterans cemeteries, are now converting to rocks and/or pebbles in place of grass to reduce maintenance and to conserve water.

Volunteer groups such as the DAR, VFW Post 8900, AmVets and the American Legion Auxiliary Unit 509 may be interested in assisting with some of the needs of VLC. The DAR has been active in planting trees and installing monuments. There is no liaison at the County Parks Department for volunteers to contact.

Grand Jury Interviews with County employees yielded conflicting information. This made it difficult to evaluate some of the ongoing issues at the cemetery.

PHOTO #1

Veterans Liberty Cemetery Entry Marker

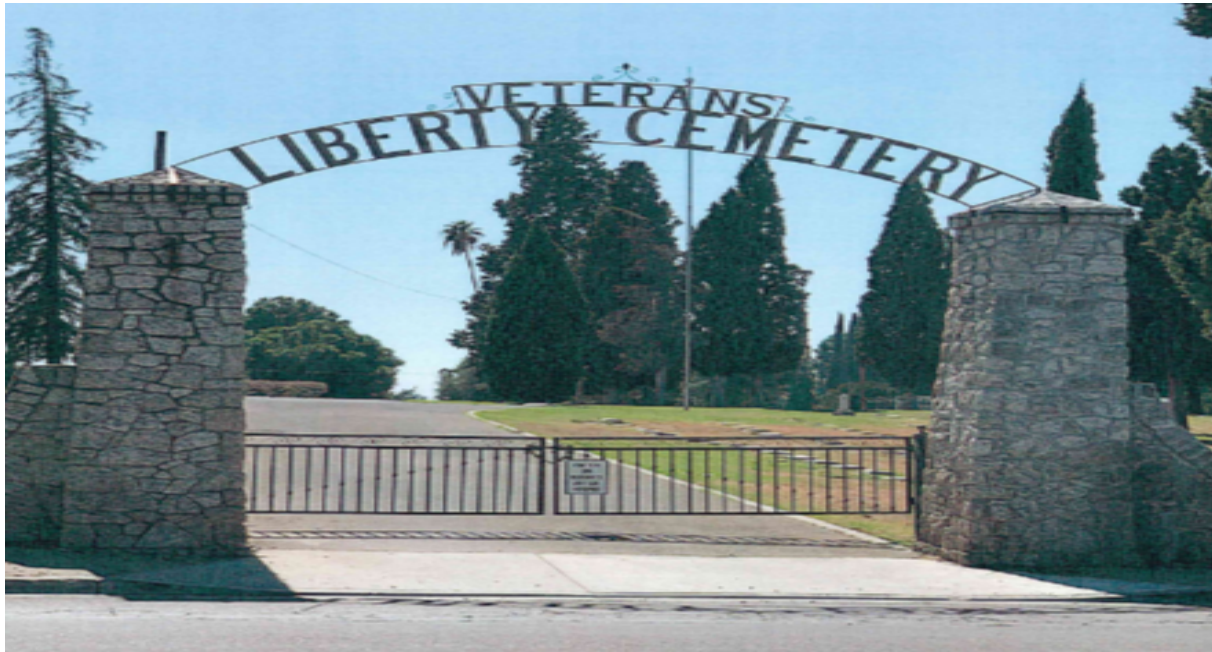
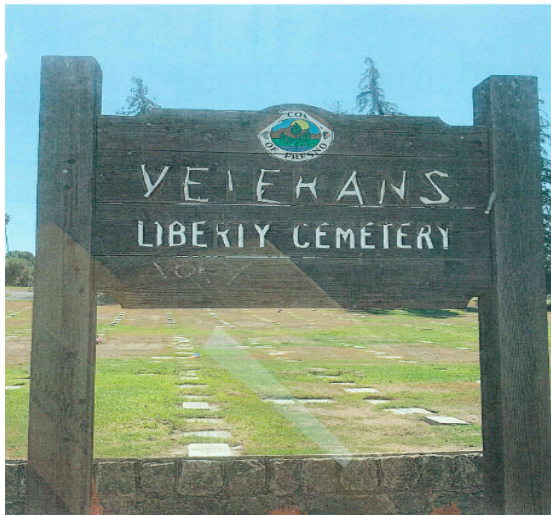


PHOTO #2

Veterans Liberty Cemetery Marker
September 2022



February 2023



PHOTO #3

Veterans Liberty Cemetery Flag Display

September 2022



March 2023



PHOTO #4 (Array)

Veterans Liberty Cemetery: Grounds Upkeep

September 2022



PHOTO #5

Veterans Liberty Cemetery: Restroom

September 2022



February 2023



PHOTO #6

Veterans Liberty Cemetery: Cinder Block Wall

February 2023



September 2022



PHOTO #7 (Array)

Veterans Liberty Cemetery: Wreaths Across America, December 2022



Photo #8 (Array)
Calvary Cemetery, Fresno (Rock/Pebble Cemetery Surface)

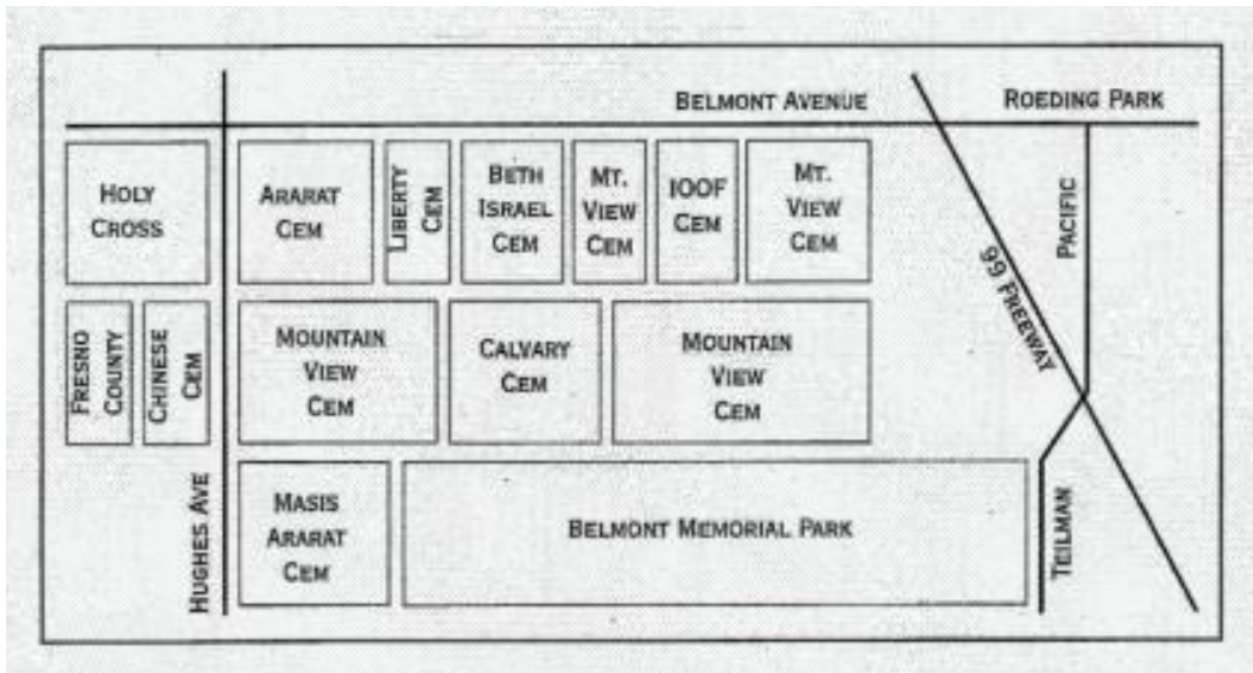


Photo #9 (Array)
National Cemetery, Bakersfield, CA



PHOTO #10

Veterans Liberty Cemetery:
Cemeteries Located Southeast
of Belmont Avenue and Hughes Avenue, Fresno, CA



FINDINGS:

- F1. There are insufficient tools, equipment and employees available to maintain the cemetery. This has caused the cemetery to become neglected, which is disrespectful to the veterans who are buried there.
- F2. The irrigation system is not adequate to provide consistent water to the entire cemetery. This should be resolved when the reclaimed water irrigation system is installed in 2023/2024.
- F3. There are no funds allocated specifically for VLC in the Fresno County budget.
- F4. The locked restrooms are repeatedly vandalized. The restrooms have been boarded up and there is no access available.
- F5. The cinder block wall surrounding the water tank is in disrepair. This is unsightly and hazardous.
- F6. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors recently approved the use of ARPA funds for reclaimed water for VLC. After the Grand Jury initiated this investigation, this funding was approved.
- F7. There appears to be no consistent coordination between Fresno County Parks Department and organizations who are interested in donating time and/or funds to VLC.
- F8. Several dead trees along the cemetery walkways were hazardous to people who visit the cemetery; this has been rectified by removal of the trees by the Fresno County tree crews.
- F9. There was a lack of adequate signage directing visitors to VLC. This has been corrected, the signs are now updated, and there are plans to provide more

directional signs from Hwy 99.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors should approve one-time funding for the improvements necessary at VLC by December 31, 2023. (F2)
- R2. The Director of Public Works and Planning should obtain bids for outsourcing the maintenance of VLC by December 31, 2023. The Grand Jury feels that outsourcing could be a cost saving measure. (F1)
- R3. The Director of Public Works and Planning should explore the option of replacing cemetery sod with low maintenance pebble/rock by September 30, 2023. The Grand Jury feels that this could be a cost saving measure because it would reduce the need for full time maintenance and reduce the use of water. (F1) (F2) (F3).
- R4. The Director of Public Works and Planning should assign sufficient staff to adequately maintain the cemetery on a consistent basis by December 31, 2023. (F1).
- R5. The Director of Public Works and Planning should have the outdoor restrooms removed due to ongoing vandalism by December 31, 2023. (F4)
- R6. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors should adopt a separate annual budget for the VLC by December 31, 2023. (F1)(F3)
- R7. The Director of Public Works and Planning should have staff purchase the necessary tools and equipment specific to the needs of VLC. These tools should be maintained in working order and stored at the cemetery by December 31, 2023. (F1)

- R8. The Director of Public Works and Planning or the Fresno County Board of Supervisors should have the cinder block wall repaired by July 31, 2023. (F5)
- R9. The Director of Public Works and Planning should appoint a current employee to be a liaison with volunteer groups who are interested in supporting VLC by July 31, 2023. (F7)

Request for Responses:

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933.05 the 2022-2023 Fresno County Civil Grand Jury requests responses to each of the specific findings and recommendations. Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933(c), it is required that responses from elected County officers or agency heads are due within 60 days of receipt of this report and 90 days from the governing body of a public agency.

Required Respondents:

Fresno County Board of Supervisors (F2, F3, F5, F6) and (R1, R6, R8)

Invited Respondents:

Director of Fresno County Public Works and Planning (F1, F4, F5, F7, F8, F9) and (R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, R8, R9)

Disclaimer

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.