

# Pet Burial Trends

## Looking Back & Going Forward

By Coleen Ellis for the *American Cemetery* magazine March 2012

**As I prepared to write this article on pet cemeteries and how these beautiful final resting places for our beloved pets would continue on, I felt that I had to do a bit of research in order to understand where pet cemeteries started in this country, and why. So, I turned to the oldest pet cemetery in the United States, Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory in Hartsdale, N.Y., to learn more about its history. While I don't usually draw a lot of "website verbatim" into my articles, I found this snippet really interesting and definitely worth sharing.**

The Hartsdale Canine Cemetery was founded by Samuel Johnson, a veterinarian. It so happened that Johnson had arranged for himself a style of life common to many people today – he worked in New York City where he maintained a flourishing practice, and he had a retreat in the country in the middle of an apple orchard in the hamlet of Hartsdale, in the town of Greenburgh, Westchester County, N.Y.

One day in 1896, a distressed client of Johnson's paid a call to his office with an urgent problem. Her dog had just died and she wanted to give it a proper burial, but there was no way for this to be accomplished legally in the city of New York. The woman had contemplated trying to find a vacant piece of ground in which to bury the dog, but this would have involved a great deal of subterfuge, even if it had not been against health department laws. And besides, the land would most surely have been built on sooner or later, for the concrete and steel metropolis was burgeoning in all directions.

After considering the problem, the compassionate doctor came up with a solution. If the woman wanted to make the trip up to Hartsdale, he would be pleased to allow her to bury the animal in his apple orchard. The distraught woman gratefully accepted and made the sad journey to the little hamlet in Westchester. This burial was not intended to be the beginning of a pet cemetery, but a short time later Johnson innocently gave impetus to the idea.

One day, while having lunch with a reporter friend, the doctor casually told the story of the woman's plight and the dog's burial. Within a few days, much to Johnson's surprise, the story appeared in print. And to his further

surprise, he soon found himself being contacted by many people who were looking for a place to bury their beloved pets. It was almost as if he had found a cure for a dreaded disease; this was something people deeply wanted and needed – and greeted with great relief. Before long, Johnson had set aside a 3-acre section of the apple orchard and it began to take the look of a cemetery, dotted with markers and flower arrangements identifying the graves of pets.

By 1905, Johnson's orchard had gained enough recognition to be written about in *The New York Times*. On Sept. 3, 1905, a feature story appeared in the paper under the headline "A Canine Cemetery of Three Acres in Which Score of Pets Are Interred – Hundreds of Dollars Spent on Graves and Graves by Their Sorrowing Owners."

This article spoke of dogs being "laid away with deepest regret and strong affection." It also reported that, while the cemetery had started with the burial of dogs, and indeed had – and still has – the word "canine" as part of its name, it was open to cats and other animals.

On May 14, 1914, Johnson – to the great relief of those who had pets at Hartsdale – incorporated the Hartsdale Canine Cemetery. Until that time, there were no guarantees that the cemetery would remain in existence, and whatever attention the graves got depended upon each individual owner. Incorporation meant that burial deeds were issued, and perpetual care and services of a full-time caretaker were provided. It meant that the land would be protected forever as a resting place for the nearly 1,000 pets already there, and for the thousands that would join them in the future.

Today, more than a century later, this beautiful hillside location, known as "The Peaceable Kingdom," is the final resting place for nearly 70,000 pets, including dogs, cats, birds, rabbits and even a lion cub. And although some of the world's most renowned people – from Diana Ross and Mariah Carey to the late Robert Merrill and Kate Smith – have their pets buried at the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, pet lovers from every station of life had had pets buried and cremated there, too. The common thread is that all were special and loved. Generations of pet owners have embraced these pet animals and made them part of their families.

## What can the past teach us?

Remarkably, more than 100 years ago, consumers were interested in dignified treatment and respectful final resting places for the remains of their beloved pets. Newspaper quotes such as “the pet cemetery was something people deeply wanted and needed – and greeted with great relief” and references to dogs being “laid away with deepest regret and strong affection” show that even then people placed incredible value on the relationships shared with pets.

It amazes me that some in funeral service still believe that consumer demand for pet death care is something new. It’s obviously not. What is surprising is the recent rate of increased demand for new products and services in the pet sector – and their innovation inspiration is humanization.” Medical advances in veterinary care now parallel human protocols. Boarding kennels now model children’s day cares in design and daily activity. Many hotels have pet beds that can be delivered to your room along with a pet in-room dining menu. Why should it be surprising that pet death care continues to grow and mirror the human experience?

## Marketing nuggets for a pet cemetery

One statement that breaks my heart is when I hear, “Gosh, I didn’t even know that was an option for me when my pet died. I wish I would’ve known.” As pet loss professionals, it really is our responsibility to make sure that all pet owners in our communities are aware of all of the services that are available. Even if your business provides pet cremations only, as a professional interested in creating a meaningful experience, for a grieving pet parent and their family, you have an obligation to be familiar with the pet cemeteries and human cemeteries with pet sections in your market. You should reach out to understand what their business practices are, and create a working relationship with them.

Let’s look at some great marketing opportunities for a pet cemetery. First, ask yourself these simple questions:

- Is your pet cemetery clean of debris?
- Are the grounds manicured and trimmed?
- Are all markers set appropriately?
- Are buildings on the property clean?
- Are there comfortable areas for families to relax and reflect?

If not, fix those first. Without these basics in place, all of the marketing in the world will not produce an in-

crease in burials. Today’s consumers want value for the dollars they are spending and will scrutinize final resting places with watchful eyes.

If you’re not sure how your pet cemetery or pet section is being perceived by pet parents in your community, gather a group of them together, guide them through your cemetery and ask questions. As a business owner, you don’t need to spend thousands of dollars on a formally facilitated focus group – conduct your own! Ask the group questions such as:

- Would you bring your pet here for burial? Why or why not?
- What could we do better to make our cemetery more appealing?
- How would you like to hear about the services offered at our pet cemetery?
- What programs would you like to have our cemetery offer throughout the year to honor and memorialize pets?

As professionals, we should always be asking for feedback from our target customers.

There are numerous programs that you could be offering throughout the year to increase the community’s awareness of your pet burial options. After all, for pet parents to want to do business with you and your cemetery establishment, they will want to be comfortable with you, the property, and know that you care about them and their pets. Here are a few examples:

**Pet Blessings:** While Oct. 4 is known as the feast day for St. Francis of Assisi, the entire month of October is widely recognized as the feast month of St. Francis, the patron saint of the animals and the environment. During October, collaborate with local ministers and priests to hold pet blessings on the cemetery grounds. Take this time to not only bless the living animals that attend the session but to also pay tribute to those who have died.

**National Pet Memorial Day:** The second Sunday in September has been set aside as National Pet Memorial Day. For 2012, this date is Sept. 9. Have an open house at your cemetery with a memorial service to honor the pets that have died.

**Monthly Memorial Services:** As a service to pet parents who need or want a place to go to honor their pets that have died, providing them a place to go for this service is incredibly valuable. This may also take on the feel of a pet loss support group. Again, pet parents search for places they can go where they feel safe to grieve and mourn for their beloved pets. Provide that

place for them.

### **Educational seminars for pet care professionals:**

Pet care professionals are also looking for places they can go to get educated on the topic of pet loss. Providing pet loss educational sessions (with continuing education credits is a bigger plus!) will assist in driving other professionals to the cemetery so that they can also tell the story of a credible pet cemetery operation and feel more comfortable in recommending your services.

**Preneed Services:** Educating pet parents, as well as other pet care professionals, on the benefits of planning ahead will create a more peaceful experience for a family wanting to honor their pet. From being educated on the process of pet burial to the art of creating a memorial marker, families will appreciate having this information before the need is imminent.

**Group Presentations on Planning Ahead:** A family wants information on what their options are for the loss of their pet. In fact, veterinarians in a focus group conducted a few years ago also said that they want families to have this information ahead of time, as it makes the process much easier when the time of death comes. Get with a local attorney who is familiar with pet trusts, and take this time to educate the group on the options at your cemetery. This type of presentation is especially powerful if you also have a human cemetery. What a great way to expose attendees to a full range of services provided by your operation. This process will create a fabulous list of families to follow up with later for a much more robust in-home presentation on all of the offerings from your company.

**General Brand Awareness Marketing:** You might want to do an annual direct mail piece to your trade market area. By doing this, you will be able to market to those families that are new to your area and let them know about your operation. Mailing list companies will be able to segment a mailing list according to whatever specifications you give them.

Also, if you are considering running ads for your business, run those ads in publications that are designed for pet lovers. Every community has either pet specific publications or periodically will run pet sections in the town newspaper. Direct your message to the group that will need your services – you will realize a better return on your investment.

**E-newsletters:** Many pet parents just want to know that they are not crazy for feeling the way that they do when a pet dies. They also want to know that they are

not crazy for wanting to do something to honor their pets when they die. A monthly e-newsletter allows you to share information about your services as well as what other pet parents are doing to honor their pets. From interesting marker ideas to rituals that families have at the cemetery, families will appreciate the information.

**A must for every marketing campaign:** With every marketing campaign that's conducted, it's imperative that a call to action is a part of the message. This call to action could be "Call us for more information" or "Go to our website to request your free Guide to Planning Ahead."

Furthermore, when families request information, ask how they heard of you and your services. If you are going to conduct these fabulous marketing programs, they are all for naught if you don't know where the leads have come from so that you can repeat successful promotions.

## **Summary**

Marketing opportunities are endless! As a pet care professional, get your services and offerings to the pet parent, the end consumer. It's your business – therefore, it's *your* responsibility. To have our pet cemeteries die off because pet parents aren't aware of all of their options would be a tragedy.