

Japanese pioneers honoured

By Sean McIntyre on July 11, 2013



Warren Langley, left, joins Rose and Richard Murakami in providing gravestones for Salt Spring's Japanese pioneers.

Sean McIntyre | Driftwood Gulf Islands Media

Eight gravestones hewn from black granite were erected in a section of Salt Spring's Central Cemetery on Sunday afternoon to commemorate the legacy of the island's Japanese-Canadian pioneers.

"I just feel that they have a right to be remembered," said Rose Murakami. "One of the other reasons that Richard and I did this was because we're not going to live forever."

Rose and her brother Richard have been wanting to install the headstones for years to ensure the island's Japanese-Canadian pioneers are not forgotten.

Although descendants of many original Japanese-Canadian settlers returned to place stones for their ancestors, eight graves remained marked by solitary cedar posts inscribed with names of the deceased.

Rose said her family installed the posts in the cemetery more than 50 years ago, soon after they were allowed to return to the island from World War II internment camps.

"When our parents, Katsuyori and Kumiko Murakami, brought the family back to Salt Spring in 1954 after being expelled in 1942, the first place we visited was the cemetery," she said. "In the 12 years in which we had lived in exile, we found that terrible things had been done to the Japanese-Canadian graves. Not only were the markers destroyed, but our cemetery was used as a garbage dump."

Rose and her family visited the cemetery regularly during her youth to remove garbage and restore the site.

Because the family had very little money upon its return, Rose said her father installed the understated cedar posts to mark the final resting places of their former Japanese-Canadian neighbours.

"If we didn't come back to the island, the people may not have been ever acknowledged," Rose said.

Rose and Richard were at the cemetery on Sunday afternoon to witness the final stage of a job that began more than five decades ago as sign maker Warren Langley put the final touches on the stones, which now sit alongside those original cedar posts.

“I’ve known the Murakamis for years and they found out that I did headstones, which I don’t normally advertise,” he said.

Although Langley is known across the island for his custom cedar signs, he’s worked on tombstones for islanders and their pets for 25 years.

“I’m not really far removed between this and sign making; it’s basically a different substrate, instead of cedar I’ve got granite,” he said.

Since a sluggish economy has meant fewer orders for cedar signs, Langley said he’s been fortunate to diversify.

“You can not want to buy a sign for your store, but everybody needs a headstone,” he said.

Names of the deceased along with the dates of birth and death have been inscribed on the tombstones when such information is known. In many cases birth dates and names have been left blank. Stones that mark the graves of unknown pioneers have been marked with a simple inscription that reads: “Japanese-Canadian pioneer.”

The Murakamis contributed \$7,500 to complete the project. The National Association of Japanese Canadians contributed an additional \$2,500.