

COLMA IN THE EARLY 1900S

By Jacquelyne Kious

The town of Lawndale was incorporated as a necropolis in 1924. How did the town become known as the city of the dead and why a necropolis?

Like SSF, Lawndale (now Colma) was originally part of Jose Antonio Sanchez's land grant know as Rancho Buri Buri. Following the gold rush, San Francisco's population went from 1,000 residents to 25,000 speculators in just two years. People came from all over the world to strike it rich. Few, though, attained that goal and many became ill from the long journey and died. With no government in place and certainly no health care, bodies were literally buried where they dropped or taken to what is now Ocean Beach as sand was easier to dig in than hard clay soil.

As San Francisco's population continued to grow exponentially, city fathers struggled with what was becoming a huge problem - body disposal. Cemeteries started popping up on the outskirts of town but as the city grew cemeteries continued to be pushed further out. In 1898 an ordinance was passed forbidding any further burials and demanding that all those buried be moved to another site, but where?

The Catholic Church was among the first to purchase land outside the city limits in a move that would put what is now the town of Colma on the map. By that time, the tiny farming community, settled by Italian and Irish immigrants, was already a stop on Southern Pacific's mainline built in 1861 to connect San Francisco and San Jose.

As cemeteries began moving out of San Francisco, Southern Pacific Railroad began daily train service to Colma. Funeral trains, as they were known, transported bodies as well as mourners. Baggage cars carried the caskets while mourners rode in luxuriously appointed rail cars for the 30 minute trip.

In 1912, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to evict all cemeteries from the city calling them, "a nuisance and a menace and detriment to the health and welfare of residents." (*M. Svanevic, City of Souls.*) Cemetery operators that had already relocated took notice. Could they one day be forced out by such unpredictable acts of government? Efforts soon began to incorporate, but it would take another 12 years before the town was incorporated as a necropolis to prevent what had occurred in San Francisco happening in Lawndale. Cemetery operators named the town Lawndale, but in 1941 the Postal Service required the name be changed as there was a Lawndale in Southern California. No one is really sure where the name Colma came from.