

A Kid, Lost and Found

by Gaye Buzbee Jacobs

This is the story of a Kansas farmer's son, a teenager, who ran away from home in 1880. Many rumors about him circulated for decades, and some said they thought he was on his way to California. According to family lore, no one ever knew for sure where he had gone or what had happened to him. His disappearance had been unsolved for over a century, until he was finally found in 2005, in a most unlikely place.

My great-grandfather, Enoch Buzbee, was eight years old at the time, but he clearly remembered that two of his older brothers ran off to California, where they evidently got into some trouble. "The boys got drunk in San Francisco, hijacked a cable car and crashed it! While hiding from the authorities, they were shanghaied on a Chinese merchant ship and they never came home." Enoch never said if he knew it was even true, but it was a pretty preposterous story! Different branches of the Buzbee family heard the same tale about these boys, and through the years it just became one of those old, confounding family legends.

I had forgotten all about this mystery, when I received a very strange phone call from the Community Relations Manager with METRO (the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority.) She reported that in the process of re-routing a street alongside historic Evergreen Cemetery, the excavators had been stopped from removing an underground retaining wall because they found evidence of human skeletal remains. An engraved, remarkably intact stone bearing the name *T.E. Buzbee* was uncovered behind the wall, at the foot of a tall palm tree, near the street.

Evergreen, the oldest secular cemetery still operating in Los Angeles, was established in 1877, as the final resting place of many prominent Californians. An adjacent plot was set aside at that time for a Potters' Field, the public cemetery for indigent residents or for those who had no next of kin. And here, the remains of the teenager, T. E. Buzbee, were found. Finally, would this be my chance to possibly unravel an old tale? Many other odd discoveries set off several years of intensive research, which included METRO staff members, forensic anthropologists, historians, archeologists, genealogists and numerous community volunteers, all trying to ascertain what had happened in this long forgotten corner of Boyle Heights. Surprisingly, many of the remains seemed to be of Chinese origin!

Throughout the 1800's in California, Chinese and Chinese-Americans were strictly prohibited from being interred among whites, citing numerous laws aimed at these settlers, laborers and miners. Most were men who had come to the West in the 1849 Gold Rush, or to find work on the railroads. They faced rampant racism, intimidation, violence and discriminatory restrictions, resulting in the *Exclusion Act of 1882*, which also prohibited Chinese from marrying and owning land. Based purely on discrimination, about 1,400 Chinese, unlike all others who were indigent, were required to pay a steep burial fee of \$10.00 each, (approximately \$300 in 2020.) More than 13,000 records in the nearby crematorium listed people buried in the field, their age, cause of death and ethnic origin, but the locations of individual graves were not recorded, nor were most of those names Asian. However, when all work was stopped and approximately 174 burial sites were excavated, countless Chinese and American artifacts were exposed, including buttons, gold coins, scrolls, rice bowls, porcelain vases, clothing fragments, combs, glasses, coffin hardware, opium pipes and more.

Meanwhile, it was necessary to immediately do two things: devise a comprehensive plan to respectfully deal with this surprising situation, and launch an extensive search to locate descendants who might help identify the century-old remains. The local Chinese-American community became involved, placing notices in the Chinese media both locally and in China, asking people to contact them if they believed they may have had relatives buried here. Unfortunately, finding descendants was mostly unsuccessful, as so many years had passed. Only two relatives were found, plus one relative (with no Chinese heritage) who might possibly identify a grave came forward ... and that was me.

The Metro staff contacted everyone they could find with the fairly uncommon surname of Buzbee. When they eventually reached my brother in Oklahoma, he thought it was all a silly joke and just laughed! He had no idea who this Buzbee was. Luckily, he said "Say! I have a sister in Colorado who knows all that weird family stuff—you should call her." She did call me, and I immediately suspected it was our lost Kansas boy, confirming his full name and date of birth. I also shared the old family story about Thomas, which we all agreed was certainly very colorful, but may or may not have really happened. I told her that despite family genealogists searching over the years, we never knew for sure what had happened to young Thomas.

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So, 122 years later, Thomas' remains were unearthed. *Someone* had known his name and date of birth, placing the tombstone in 1883. But who? Could it have been his brother, after all? Yet exhaustive research following that phone call turned up nothing about a crime in San Francisco or any other clues. I returned to my family research in Kansas where Thomas was born and raised, but that information offered no facts, either. (Much later I finally found Census information about the other brother whom Enoch had mentioned.) Unfortunately, I've found no descendants I could contact to confirm our story.

Since my husband and I were planning to be in California a few months later, we, along with my Uncle Don Buzbee, were invited to stop by the forensic laboratory where the scientists were testing Thomas' few remains. Only a coffin handle and some bits of bone had survived the last century, but I was able to hold in my hand five black porcelain buttons, engraved with tiny anchors! Could they have been buttons from a uniform? Maybe a merchant sailor's uniform of some kind? Amazingly, there were enough bone fragments that proved Thomas had died of meningitis. It made me sad, and in my mind that day I placed young Thomas, sick and dying, among Chinese friends who helped his brother bury him.

Five years after that first phone call from California, I was invited to attend a formal ceremony at Evergreen Cemetery. Beside a beautiful new wall honoring those who had been discovered there, my daughter and I joined the large crowd for the heartfelt Dedication. There were speeches, stories, laughter and a few tears that day, along with a surprising horde of local paparazzi clamoring for comments and interviews, which was fun. We had no idea we would be featured on every Los Angeles television station that evening, telling about our young Thomas being lost and found.

The mystery of a Kansas kid who ran away, never to return, still is not solved. We won't ever know the details of his life and death, but Thomas E. Buzbee is resting amid a silent community of Chinese folks. That lovely afternoon a quite dapper elderly Chinese-American gentleman greeted me personally, respectfully asking how we felt about our boy "resting among the ancestors?" I was touched by his gracious concern and replied, "I like to think he was cared for ... and perhaps blessed at his death with their prayers." He clasped my hands, and said, "we both hope so."



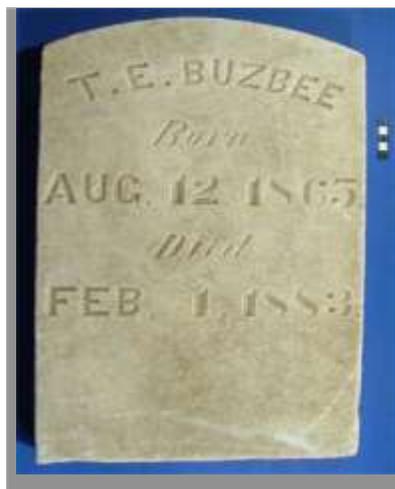
T.E. Buzbee Gravestone
mounted at the left of Memorial Wall



Coffin handle



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March 7, 2010
Evergreen Dedication Ceremony
Gaye Buzbee Jacobs
& daughter Susan Bullock
*Holding a photo of the Buzbee Family in
Silver Plume, Colorado about 1900. Thomas Buzbee
was never actually in Colorado.
He left Kansas in 1880.*