

## **A Narrative Tour of the Ghosts of Oak Bay**

**by Sarah L.**

Take a step back with me to visit Oak Bay history's darker, shadow twin—the ghost realm. Stories rich with murder, mayhem and even mass graves lurk just beneath the quaint streets and beautiful scenery.

We'll start our journey with perhaps Oak Bay's most famous ghost story: the sad and mysterious tale of Doris Gravlin. Her ghost is rumoured to haunt the manicured fairways of the Victoria Golf Course. The golf course, founded in 1893 on 1110 Beach Drive, is the oldest 18-hole golf club in Canada in its original location, and the second-oldest golf club in North America. Players flock to the club, renowned in part for a challenging game of golf, but more for the exceptionally gorgeous views overlooking the Juan de Fuca Strait afforded to golfers.

To the casual player or onlooker, there is no sign that a tortured ghost occasionally walks the fairways, forever haunted by a tragic murder. The story of Doris Gravlin starts innocently enough, when the young nurse was out for a late night walk on September 22, 1936 on the seventh fairway of the golf course. It was a pleasant night and she was accompanied by her separated husband Victor Gravlin. Not much is known about Victor, other than the fact that he was a hard-drinking, hard-nosed journalist prone to fits of anger. Some suspect he had lashed out at Doris previously. But in 1936 these speculations were hushed up and troubles between the young couple continued, ultimately leading to their separation. Why they were out walking together that evening, nobody knows.

But we know this: two went for a walk, none came back.

A caddy came upon a gruesome surprise some five days later. Doris's hideously battered and bruised body hidden under logs just off the golf course. She had been beaten badly and strangled to death. This was no accident, just cold-blooded murder. Locals of course talked and assumed her hard-drinking husband had some hand in the nefarious deed, perhaps on the lam now after committing the murder.

But where was Victor Gravlin?

A bloated, kelp-encrusted corpse washed up on the shores of the golf club nearly a month later. Victor made his entrance, and he was no better off than poor Doris. Both were dead, Victor's body badly rotting and decomposed, showing a good length of time spent in the water. His shoes were in his pockets, and to everyone it looked like after the murder of his wife, he had simply walked into the ocean. It was a suicide. But what really happened that night? What drove Victor to first allegedly murder Doris and then to walk straight into the ocean to die? Was it really him, or was he a hapless victim like Doris? How did they curse themselves, the two Gravelins, to an eternity of tormented sightings? Officials closed the case as a murder-suicide, but locals know better.

So many questions remain with the mystery of the Victoria Golf Course ghost. If only we could ask Doris herself, when she makes her appearance on the seventh fairway, one she has been known to favour. Of course, her sightings are also known to be dangerous! Drivers along Beach Drive, which cuts through the

golf course, have been distracted by sudden cold winds moving through their cars, a sense of impending doom, and a ghostly figure dressed in white floating just above the road. Beware the restless spirit!

Speaking of restless spirits, just a short jaunt down the road from the Victoria Golf Course a different type of spooky scene awaits the curious. The Chinese Cemetery, almost hidden from view at Oak Bay's Harling Point, at the corner of Penzance Street and Crescent Road, is the site of a mass grave site and the remains of hundreds of lonely souls.

The cemetery is easily missed by tourists and drivers as they wind along the scenic coastal drive. Maybe this is for the best, as the quiet and eerie site is to be respected and revered. For this is a site of a different type of tragedy, of historical and institutional discrimination that colours Canada's past. The site speaks to us of people hungry for connections to their lost homelands. The Chinese Cemetery is named for the hundreds of Chinese immigrants who were originally interred in this location.

In 1903 the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association purchased 3.5 acres of land at Harling Point and established the Chinese Cemetery. They were not allowed to use municipal burial locations so they had to seek out a special spot, which they found at Harling Point. This was an important location to the Chinese community due to its proximity to land and sea, following Feng Shui principles. The harmony between "wind-water" would allow the souls laid to rest there to be at peace.

The site was designed to temporarily inter Chinese pioneers before they could be returned to their homeland, something many sought. It was general practice for overseas Chinese to exhume the remains after seven years, clean and dry the bones and then ship them back to China for burial. This also allowed the plot to be re-used. This practice had been followed at Ross Bay and continued at the Chinese Cemetery up until 1933, when war in China ended this practice. Instead, the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 disrupted all notions of returning bodies to China and the remains were caught in a kind of limbo. This was a source of great sadness and unrest.

Racism and discrimination affected the Chinese people even after death: the site has the bones of 849 people who could not return to their cherished homeland. Fortunately in 1961, the remains were officially laid to rest at the Chinese Cemetery and the site became a memorial in honour of the Chinese-Canadian immigrants who contributed to building the British Columbia we know today.

According to the District of Oak Bay, burials ended in 1961 but the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association continues to own and maintain the site. In 1994 the Chinese Cemetery at Harling Point was designated a National Historic Site by the Government of Canada.

It is a respectful and dignified way to memorialize the challenge and struggles faced by pioneers who helped shape the province of British Columbia. We can hope that the hungry ghosts who may exist within the site are appeased and at rest.



Photo by author