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Desecration of graves robs Snoqualmie Tribe of history

By **Louis T. Corsaletti**

Seattle Times Eastside bureau

GRAVE ROBBERS plunder a sacred burial site, and members of the Snoqualmie Tribe grieve over their ancestors and worry about the fate of similar sites in the area.

In a wooded glade not far from the western lip of the Sammamish Plateau, in a site surrounded on three sides by suburban houses, is a private Indian cemetery - the final resting place for between 50 and 75 Native Americans buried there since the 1700s and probably long before that.

It is here where the grave robbers struck.

Working with a backhoe, someone dug up more than 20 graves, stealing the contents and leaving behind a hurt that may never heal, said Andy de los Angeles, former Snoqualmie tribal chairman, who discovered the desecration.

A descendant of the family buried in the cemetery, de los Angeles visited it occasionally. He was shocked by what he found there one day last year.

"As soon as I got to that first cluster I knew right away what I was seeing," de los Angeles said on a recent trip back to the cemetery. "I tried to mark the areas as much as I could, but I had a hard time because it was raining and I was crying so hard I could hardly see."

Small mounds of dirt in ones, twos and threes, some covered with leaves and other forest debris, mark the spots of the desecrated graves. Swaying in the breeze are small pieces of colored ribbon de los Angeles attached to tree limbs or bushes, marking each empty grave.

"It was several months before I could bring myself to tell the family about the graveyard," de los Angeles said. "Today, we are still trying to heal from this."

Members of the tribe are so protective about revealing the location of the grave sites that they've never contacted law-enforcement authorities about the theft, and they have no plans to bring in the police.

De los Angeles said he is making the theft public now only because he wants people to be aware of what can happen when there is disregard for sacred Native American sites and the state law that protects them. And he worries that as growth continues in King County, so does the possibility that more grave sites will be unearthed.

Astrida Blukis-Onat, a Seattle archaeologist familiar with Indian sites, visited the cemetery to review the damage.

"I've never seen anything like it," she said. ". . . I presume they took the cedar boxes (holding the bodies) and all, because cedar from those days would have lasted a long time."

There is an underground market for Native American skulls and large bones, said Blukis-Onat, who supervised a dig at an 8,000-year-old Snoqualmie village site near the city of Seattle's Tolt River filtration plant last year. The remains are sold to private collectors, although it is less common in the Northwest than in other parts of the country, she said.

"I don't know if this particular event was part of that. I can't say what exactly happened. . . . It's baffling."

De los Angeles said he has since learned that about six months before he made his discovery, two men apparently drove a backhoe into the woods and dug up the graves.

He said a man who was having a new home built nearby and was not aware of the cemetery told him the men said they were digging percolation-test holes for septic systems.

The only remaining headstone is on the grave of Thomas Zackuse, de los Angeles' grandfather, the last family member buried there, in 1944.

De los Angeles' discovery came at a time of turbulence and joy for the tribe. In October, after decades of lobbying by the Snoqualmies, the federal government finally granted it tribal status.

The federal recognition means the tribe is now eligible for federal programs including housing, health care and education. It is also exploring the purchase of reservation land.

But as the tribe plans for its future, it is mindful of its past. In addition to the cemetery that was desecrated, several more ancient, unmarked burial sites are scattered along the Upper and Lower Snoqualmie Valley. Also unmarked here are a number of ancient graves of past tribal chiefs and subchiefs.

Mary Anne Hinzman, Tribal Council vice chairwoman, said in the past that bodies were placed in cedar boxes in a shallow grave. and then soil was mounded over the graves.

