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— Enrique Morones, Gente Unida



JULIA WOOCK / STAFF

REMEMBERING THE FORGOTTEN — Enrique Morones and Gente Unida volunteers place handmade crosses at the unmarked graves of unidentified migrants.

ACRES OF THE DEAD

AMERICA'S SECRET CEMETERY OF THE UNKNOWN

BY JULIA WOOCK
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HOLTVILLE, CA — Holtville keeps a terrible secret.

Death is underfoot.

Even most of its 6,700 citizens are unaware that this hardscrabble town near the Arizona border is the final resting place of almost 1,000 nameless people buried in pauper's graves in anonymous acres of rust-tinted Imperial Valley dust. Unlucky migrants who drown in the filthy New River, withered under the relentless desert sun, froze during frigid mountain nights or starved ambling toward an American agricultural oasis will spend eternity unmarked, unwatched and unaccounted for in this unkempt depository of the unwanted.

Except for one day each year.

It is *Día de los Muertos* in Holtville, and Enrique Morones has summoned the volunteers of Gente Unida to the chain link fence separating the paid customers of the verdant Terrace Park Cemetery from *los inmigrantes* who never expected to end up there. As the gate creaked open visitors entered an unknown world of the dead before them in a sprawling horizon of nothing.

Nothing on the surface.

La tragedia, said Morones, is what is beneath the desiccated soil that collects like chocolate powder on the boots of the mourners.

"It's a cemetery where people that don't have the money to be buried are buried," he said. "When I first came here in 2002 there were like 20 undocumented people buried in this place. Now there are hundreds. These bodies were found out here in Imperial Valley by the sheriff or the border patrol. If they cannot be identified they are buried with no ceremony or anything. It's truly sad. Every life is equally important."

Terrace Park Cemetery is privately owned, Morones said, and the area where the unidentified migrants lie is a pauper's grave that is not kept up save an occasional dragging to knock down spring weeds. It is the largest non-military graveyard of



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FINAL IGNOMINY — Desperately poor in life, anonymous migrants and refugees are buried nameless in pauper's graves in lonely Holtville.

unidentified bodies in the United States.

No newly deceased will be buried again in Terrace Park Cemetery.

It is closed because it is full.

Unidentified bodies are now cremated by the INS without consideration to the victim's religious beliefs. Otherwise, Morones said, Holtville's acres of the nameless dead would extend even further into the relentless desert.

"I'm upset they still don't have grass and even in death they are kept separately," he said. "It's important that we honor them and pay our respects."

Once a year Gente Unida generates a religious burial service for the dead of Holtville. A Catholic priest offers blessings while volunteers evoke the traditions of ancient Aztecs and other indigenous people of Mexico.

Mourners pay tribute to the forgotten residents of the cemetery by placing handmade wooden crosses and *flores de cempasúchil* (marigolds) by dirt-encrusted chipped bricks stamped with John or Jane Doe. *Las flores de cempasúchil* are a staple on *Día de los Muertos* altars and graves. Flowers rooted in *Náhuatl* mysticism, they are cherished for their powerful scent that guides spirits home to commune with family.

Hospice chaplain Frank Modic led prayers in English, and gave his blessing.

"People do care," he said to the departed, "even if we do not know your names."

Then a moment of grace and beauty.

Mourners released painted lady butterflies which pranced and bobbed in the warming morning air, carrying the hopes and dreams of the departed Heavenward.

Butterflies are a metaphor for transformation and rebirth, Modic said. Releasing *las mariposas* honors those who have gone ahead and extends hope to those left behind. Fragile and delicate like life itself, butterflies are a strong connection between the earth and the flower heaven of the Aztecs, he said.

Modic said Native American tradition dictates people should make a wish when releasing winged creatures because they take our hopes to the creator. Butterflies, he said, represent divine grace.

"A butterfly is a universal symbol of being set free," he said. "There's an old saying that just when the caterpillar thought its life was over, it began to fly."

While the butterflies spread out over the grave sites, Morones said America needs to do more to remember who is in the ground at Holtville. He said he would like to enlist forensic anthropologists to help identify remains and repatriate them.

Money is an obstacle, so are arguments about which governments should pay.

"We don't know if they are all Mexican," said Morones. "Then the excuse is: what if they're Central (American)? I say regardless, we should find out who these people are. The U.S. government has the money to pay for it. They are people who died in the United States and there could be Americans here, too."

Gente Unida Vice President Ari Honarvar, an Iranian refugee, said she could relate to the unfortunate immigrants in Holtville.

"I had to leave Iran at the age of 14 when people were getting killed by the bombs (of the Iran-Iraq War) and government oppression," she said. "We couldn't get out. The smugglers would tell people to run in zig zags so when the authorities shoot at you, you might have a chance to survive as you cross the border. Others would marry their daughters at the age of 12, 13, 14 to someone who could get them out. This is how difficult it was."

Love is the answer, she said.

"We have to open our hearts and with our hearts we open the borders."

