In 2002 there were 20 undocumented people buried in this place. Now there are hundreds … If they cannot be identified they are buried with no ceremony or anything. It’s truly sad.

— Enrique Morones, Gente Unida

ACRES OF THE DEAD

AMERICA’S SECRET CEMETERY OF THE UNKNOWN

BY JULIA WOOCK

HOLTVILLE, CA — Holtville keeps a terrible secret. Death is underfoot.

Every life is equally important.”

“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 20 undocumented people who never expected to end up there. As the gate opened volunteers removed an unknown world of the dead before them in a sprawling horizon of rust-tinted Imperial Valley dust. Unlucky migrants who drowned in the filthy New River, withered under the relentless desert sun, or starved ambling toward an American agricultural oasis will spend eternity here forever, 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 Americans? 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 born, 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 riggers when the authorities caught us, you might have a chance to survive as you cross the border. Others would marry their daughters at the age of 12, 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.”