

# After Hours



A sculpture of Sita, a Siamese cat that once was a member of the Johnston family, dominates the Broward County Pet Cemetery.

## Goodbye, Little Tutu

When humans die, we have socially acceptable rituals for acknowledging the event. With pets, it is quite another story.

BY D.B. TIPMORE  
REVIEW STAFF WRITER

**E**VEN the most casual consideration of pet cemeteries requires a certain restraint. Easy to ridicule, easier to sentimentalize, they float on the landscape of South Florida, acre-sized chunks of genuine *kitsch* that drift between the teary and the tasteless.

Typical of the yin-yang attitude with which many people view these age-old institutions is that of Phyllis Wright, director of the Companion Animals Department of the Humane Society's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

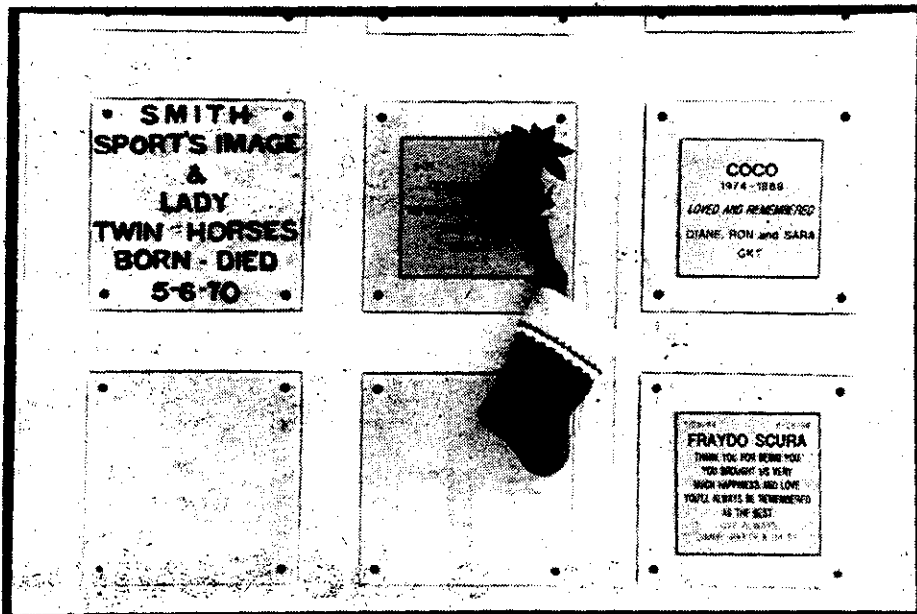
"I'm of two minds about them," she said during a recent telephone interview. "Many people care very deeply for their pets. When one dies, you don't want to just throw it in the garbage. On the other hand, I recently went out to Aspin Hill [Aspin Hill Memorial Park, a pet cemetery in Silver Spring, Md.] and just couldn't understand some of the questions I

was asked. What kind of casket do you want, for instance. I mean, *no*, I didn't need a brass casket. I didn't need one more appropriate for a child. I just wanted a wooden box. That's what I put my cat in when I buried her in 1974 in my back yard. And, when I moved, I just dug her up and put her in my new back yard. Of course, in 1974, they only used to charge \$75 to bury your pet. How things have changed."

Indeed. 1974 was a time, before pet-loss therapy, before animal psychologists, before feline retirement homes and pet diet doctors, before our \$9 billion embrace of a menagerie that includes 57 million cats and 50 million dogs, thousands of parakeets and hamsters.

In 1974, functioning men and women still tended to be more circumspect about grieving over the loss of a pet. And, in 1974, functioning men and women were less inclined to pay hundreds of dollars to lay Fluffy to rest.

"With pet death, there is no established or socially acceptable ritual to follow as there is



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Miami Shores' Katie Brown plans to bury her toy poodle, Suzette No. 2 in a plot at the Dade County Humane Society's pet cemetery.

# Gone but not forgotten

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with human death," writes veterinarian Tony Venn in his article, "Feline Death: The Human Response." "In the past, many of us worried that our family or friends wouldn't understand our need to ritualize a cat's passing. We thought people would make fun of us."

How things have changed. In 1990, there are over 1,000 national members of the Delta Society, busily promoting the "human-animal bond." There are hundreds of "pet-loss" counselors assisting pet owners through periods of mourning, hundreds of men and women writing books and giving lectures on such topics as "Blessings and Burials: The Meaning and Conduct of Ceremonies for Animal Companions."

And there are thousands of sentient Americans willing to pay, as they do at Aspin Hill, \$400 to \$600 for caskets and plots and markers, or \$300 for cremation.

Among those on the institutional level nursing along this costly interest in interring our four-legged friends is the International Association of Pet Cemeteries, whose 145 members are drawn from almost 500 pet cemetery owners in the United States.

"Of course only 200-300 cemeteries among that total are bona fide," asserts Wendell Morse, D.M.V., and executive director of the IAPC. "Our organization is concerned that a lot of people are merely operating burial plots and not real pet cemeteries. That's why we ask people interested in joining the IAPC to take our "Prospective Cemeterian" seminar to make sure they realize that being a pet cemeterian is a profession and not just a do-it-yourself business."

Although Dr. Morse was reluctant to reveal what one actually learned in the seminar, he did mention that the cost of the course was "\$350, plus a materials fee." And the cost of membership? "\$100 for initiation and \$110 yearly dues."

These dues, these memberships, this professionalization, this archly serious self-image of what was once considered literally a dead-end job, is very much what Evelyn Waugh was lampooning when he wrote "The Loved One" about Hollywood, Calif.'s extravagant burial ground, Forest Lawn. He also found amusing — and odious — the filigree of salesmanship laced around the edges of American pet death. The "options" for cremations (\$70 for ashes in box, \$45 extra for urn at the Boca Raton Humane

Society's pet cemetery). The deluxe bronze coffins for \$1,200. The \$25 vases of flowers and \$125 continual gravesite care charges and the "home viewing" rooms with piped-in music and optional prayer services.

Going in for "the whole schmeer," as Phyllis Wright calls it, is sometimes difficult to understand for those people whose budgets and sentimentalities are strapped to less loving facts of life than pets — things like mortgage payments and children's braces.

But for others, such as Miami Shores' Katie Brown, the extensive, and expensive, rituals surrounding modern pet burial are much more comprehensible.

### Basic needs

Brown, a single woman in her 80s, buried Suzette, a miniature poodle, in 1977 in the Miami Humane Society's pet cemetery in northwest Miami.

"The total came to \$254," she recalls. "That was for the coffin and the burial plot and a marker which gives the dates of her birth and death and her name. It also cost \$30 for three years' worth of contin-

ual care. Of course it will probably cost me a lot more in the near future, when I bury Suzette No. 2."

Brown is right on the money. According to the Humane Society's Denise Marcello, Suzette No. 2's interment will cost "\$350 for plot, coffin and pickup."

But then mark-ups such as these are not the point for Brown or any of the thousands of similarly idle and companionless South Florida elderly for whom pets mean something beyond mere companionship and costs. And it is they who make the area such fertile ground for pet cemeteries.

For instance, one of Broward County's two animal burial sites, the Humane Society's mausoleum, has been full for "five or six years," according to the Society's Joanne Roman.

"Many of our clients are older," she says, "and they have a very close relationship with their pets. And you know another special characteristic about South Florida? Many people want the pet's remains back because the area is so transient. Of course we have a cedar urn for just that purpose."



Cindi DiBernardo, far right, watches as friends lower her dog's casket into the ground at Pet Heaven.

Of course. More difficult for South Florida's pet cemetery owners to accommodate than its residents' transiency, however, is the shallow layer of topsoil that causes nightmares for gravediggers.

"Any owner of a domestic animal," reads Chapter 823.041 ("Public Nuisances") of the statutes of the state of Florida, "upon death of such animal, shall dispose of carcasses of such animals at least two feet below the surface of the ground."

Trying to fit a 50-pound doberman into a grave deep enough to satisfy the state of Florida and yet shallow enough to accommodate the area's high water table is not an easy task, but then it is exactly the type of odd job in which those who work in pet cemeteries are expert. Digging graves in the face of high water tables. Painting the toe-nails of dead poodles an exact shade of purple at the owner's request. Getting a "special usage" zoning variance to operate the cemetery. Maintaining the crematorium at 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. And making sure Little Tutu is properly bagged before being placed in the freezer.

### Day-to-day death

"If you had told me I was going to be the owner of a pet cemetery when I grew up, I would have laughed out loud," says Candy Santos, co-owner of Dade County's 22-year-old Pet Heaven Memorial Park. "I remember the day my father came home — I was still in high school — and said, 'Guess what, kids? I just bought a pet cemetery!'"

After the initial shock, Candy started working at Pet Heaven to help pay her way through school. At that time the main cemetery building was without its present waiting room, and "the office" consisted of doing the books at home.

"I started in the crematorium," she continues, sitting with her husband, Sergio, whom she met when he was driving the cemetery van on pick-ups. "At first it was kind of weird — the touch of dead animals — but, after a while, I got used to the grooming and the bathing and the cremating. And 90 percent of our business is cremation. I myself want to be cremated. I think it's the most reasonable solution."

"It took me a while to get used to the sight of the dead animals," Sergio adds. "But after that, it was just a matter of adapting."

Both Candy and Sergio admit that Pet Heaven is not a terribly profitable business.

"Our overhead — mostly from running

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the crematorium — is about \$250,000 a year," Candy says. "Sometimes we do six or seven cremations a week, and sometimes we don't do any. The same goes for visitors. Some weeks we get a handful; others, 50. But it's not a real profitable business."

If not very profitable, Pet Heaven is

Among the residents at Miami's Pet Heaven are a former mascot of Coral Park High School, Meyer Lansky's Lhasa apsos, and one dog owner who asked to be buried beside her poodle.

rich in atmosphere. To walk around its 2.5 acres of topiary bushes, flowering dogwood and tall pines, the wind whispering through a stillness only slightly disturbed by the traffic from the Farm Store across the street, is to get a gist of that eternal peace its approximately 3,000

residents have already entered. Among these residents are three monkeys and a ram, formerly the mascot of Miami's Coral Park High School; Bruzzer and Tiger, Meyer Lansky's two Lhasa apsos, on whose grave-marker is written "too well loved to ever be forgotten," and one deceased dog owner who asked in her will that she be buried beside her poodle.

"When I tell people what I do, I get two reactions," Sergio remarks while strolling through the grounds and seeing that Juan, the gravedigger, has the precise location in which to bury a dachshund. "Everybody always says, 'Oh, really?' After that, some people look at me as if I am absolutely crazy. And others, the ones who've lived with animals, tell me it's a nice thing to do. And I agree."

As he says this, puffs of black smoke from the crematorium drift through the ventilator duct and out into the sky. As the breeze carries them along, a certain smell fills the air.

Noticing it, Sergio pauses beside a memorial wreath of gardenias over a marker that reads, "To Sunshine. Your memory and love lingers soft and warm in our heart."

"But basically," he adds, "people don't want to deal with pet cemeteries until they have to."



Sergio and Candy Santos, co-owners of Dade County's Pet Heaven.

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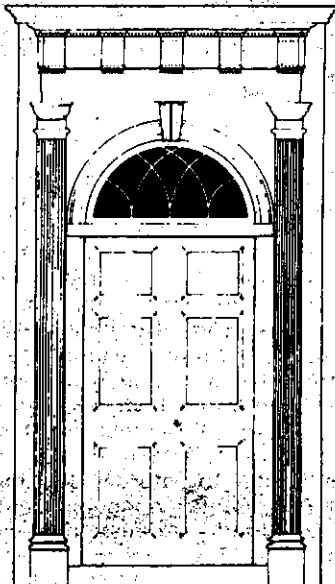
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