



Picnic Like it's 1899

Look deep into your memory, and picture a cool, beautiful fall day. Blue skies overhead, trees turning color, green grass under your feet, and the scent of fresh foliage gently wafting through the air. You spread a quilt on the ground and unpack your cute little picnic basket, smiling as you see your kids frolicking about with their relatives.

Except the relatives are dead, and your kids are running around their headstones. You're having a picnic in a cemetery.

Wait. What?!

Historically, this would have seemed perfectly normal. As noted in 'Funeral Industry News', "Beginning in the late 1800s, cemeteries were prime picnic spots. After the Civil War – in an age of rampant cholera and yellow fever – cities needed large new cemeteries. Family farms or sacred churchyards were no longer the only spots for burial grounds. These new cemeteries were more like public parks than spooky graveyards, with landscaping, winding paths, ponds, and pavilions."

Often, families just wanted to continue their tradition of enjoying a meal with the family – in spite of the fact that some of those family members were deceased. A January 1885 article in the *Fort Scott (Kansas) Daily Tribune* describes a family's Thanksgiving celebration in the cemetery. "We are going to keep Thanksgivin' with our father as was live and hearty this day last year," a son told the carriage driver in the story, "and we've brought somethin' to eat and a spirit-lamp to boil coffee."

However, as more public parks were established in cities, and the death rate began to decline in the early 20th century, 'cemetery picnics' lost their appeal. With additional cleanup issues from over-enthusiastic picnic-goers, cemeteries began discouraging the practice, and the fad gradually died out – pun possibly intended.

But in recent years some cemeteries have begun to revive the tradition in a slightly different format, as an annual family picnic. One like this has been held since 2008 in Elmwood Cemetery in Kansas City, Missouri, and attracts hundreds of people every year.

We at EUCA think this is a great idea! We would like to invite the Manteca/Lathrop community to our first annual "Picnic Like it's 1899", on Saturday, October 30, 2021. If you have a family member interred here – or would just like to honor and remember your family – please come out and join us. Bring your picnic, blankets, and chairs, and find a place near a relative to relax and eat. It would be a great time to share stories with your family about their ancestors, and help form those bonds that help connect our past, present, and future.

To quote a Mrs. Burgess from the late 1800's: "The dead are less to be feared than the living, and I do not worry about ghosts." Neither do we, Mrs. Burgess – neither do we.