



*Mitchell Family Funeral Home
Museum of Funeral Customs*

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This booklet is a guide to some of the artifacts we have on display. Funeral service has a long and colorful history that we like to share with our friends in the public and profession. We hope this visit to our little museum will open the doors to our foundation that has been a part of every culture, in every society, in every place in the world. Many of the items you will see came from local funeral homes and families as well as online auctions.

Metal burial vault sample



This is a vintage metal burial vault sample. These were quite prevalent prior to WWII since metal was available and somewhat into the 1950's, until concrete became the preference of many families. This piece is probably from the 1930's and was located in eastern Nebraska. The funeral provider would fill the tub (white section) with water, lower the burial vault in (copper colored part) and show the technique of an "air seal." It is the same principle of placing a glass upside-down in water- the air holds the water out. After family approval, the water would perhaps be drained or left for another demonstration.

This individual piece still does work and has the original cloth-covered casket to show how it remained dry in the demonstration. All of the mechanics still work on this vault sample.

The only part missing from this display is the company whose vault it displays. Some prominent vault companies of the 30's were Clark, National and American.

J.J. Meany Casket



This casket was manufactured by the J.J. Meany Casket Company of Waterloo, Iowa. The company, now located on the north edge of Traer, Iowa, serves a select clientele of families in the United States. Each casket is handmade, both in material and finishing. This casket is made of solid copper and has a velvet interior. It originally was constructed for a funeral home in LaPorte City, until it became part of our collection in 2008. The craftsmanship on these caskets is so precise, that a piece of paper will not fit between the metal of the casket and the hardware. Many of these caskets are used in east coast funeral homes and sometimes run in the \$40,000 to \$50,000 range.

Presidential funeral collections

These frames contain some of our Presidential funeral collections. Above represents the funeral of George Washington in 1799. It contains a part of his original casket and a lock of his hair.

The bottom is from the Lincoln funeral. It too has a lock of his hair as well as a fragment of the funeral flags used for the ceremonies. Still even today, the United States has not seen a funeral to the caliber of Lincoln's. It took 20 days and covered several hundred's of miles between cities. Each city trying to outdo the one before.



Five-gallon stoneware crock



This piece, a five gallon stoneware crock, was used in the early 1900's to transport larger volumes of embalming fluid to undertakers/embalmers in the US. Many times, it was concentrated and then diluted for usage. At the turn of the 20th Century, Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck all sold embalming fluid in their catalogs. This is an

extremely rare piece since most were destroyed in shipping or used for “target practice” by the owner’s children.

This stoneware crock is from the Durfee Embalming Fluid Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Springfield Metallic Burial Casket



Below our Meany Casket is this silver model, a Springfield Metallic Burial Casket. It is constructed of lead coated steel and has a glass liner – all of which make this casket extremely heavy. Its unique features include the ability to show a deceased with the full lid up, just glass, half-couch or small panel (hinge-cap). This silver colored casket has a white crepe interior with a deep burgundy trim making a very unique style. This casket, probably from the post WWII era, was located in the Walker-Merrick Funeral Home in Clarinda, Iowa., and later owned by Lowell Coburn of the Watts Vault Company in Des Moines.

Wrought iron and glass casket



This is the oldest burial piece the funeral home museum has, and is one of the rarest. It was built in 1865 of wrought iron and glass. Glass was used so that the casket would seal. The interior is original as is the hardware. The caps which would remove for viewing are made of wood. This casket came from Bucyrus, Ohio and was a part of the Crestline Museum. We found it online and had it brought here (well-packed) in 2007. Because people were smaller then, so is the casket. Even though it is small, its weight is grand because of the wrought iron used.

The north wall

The north wall of the museum includes a collection of funeral prints, casket plates, pallbearer ribbons – all items that were used in funerals in the past. In the upper right is a hair wreath obtained from the Peak family of Marshalltown- who owned Marshalltown Electric/KFJB, etc. It was for their grandmother. On the bottom right is a portable organ taken to homes for funerals in house.



Along the left are two small, glass-windowed children's caskets from the funeral home in Montezuma, Iowa. Unfortunately, the death of a child was prevalent years ago, and the use of a glass viewing window was necessary because of contagious diseases.

Sample of a glass casket



Another rare but small piece is this- a salesman sample of a glass casket. The Consolidated Glass Casket Company was founded in Oklahoma in the 1920's and had a short lifetime ending in bankruptcy. There are only a few of these pieces in existence and a full-sized one that we know of in Houston, Texas. This piece has the small metal handles and is fully lined inside. Glass was preferred by many because it could seal. However, unless a good vault was used to withhold the weight of the earth, it was useless because the glass would simply break.

The National Tomb



The National Tomb would be a choice of burial vault for an elite few. Constructed of high density steel with a lead coating, this vault was made to withstand ravishes of time and elements. This model is from the 1930's and is electric. The vault would be lowered into the glass tank of water to show the air-seal principle and then come back up to show the contents are dry.

This piece was from a private collection auctioned by the Van Metre Auction Company in Marshalltown.

Hairwreath



This is a closer view of the hairwreath mentioned before. It was commonplace in the Victorian Era to maintain the hair of the deceased and sometimes have it professionally preserved, designed and framed into a wreath shape. This is one of two that we have. The other is from the family of a young man from Cedar Rapids that has the hair in the shape of “x’s and o’s” for hugs and kisses. Much unlike today’s standards, these framed memorials were present in many homes. If you have seen the movie “Black Sheep” with Chris Farley, the scene at the cabin has a hairwreath hanging on the wall.

Silver Casket Plate



This is a silver casket plate from 1888 and came to our collection from an antique shop in Jackson, Michigan. It was very common, primarily East Coast, to have an engraved casket plate present with the body for the funeral and viewing. At the cemetery, it could stay for burial or come off for a memorial to the family. This one is engraved with the deceased's name, dates and designs and was framed for a keepsake. Many were buried to assure identity of the deceased. In the book "Gone With the Wind", the southerners talk about the disrespect of northern soldiers when they would violate cemeteries and steal the silver handles and plates of the caskets.

A pair of wooden casket stands



A pair of wooden casket stands...these were a staple item of every undertaker. They were used to take to the home for the casket to be presented. They would fold up for ease of carrying and fold out for placement. They many times also had a riser on them for smaller children's caskets. Since most funerals or viewings were at the home, these were a necessity, as

were rugs and chairs. Many large homes at turn of the century had a double set of French doors- nicknamed "coffin doors" since they were wide enough for a casket to be there. Services at that time, following the death, were to contact the undertaker of choice, the body was embalmed at the home, coffin or casket was delivered, body placed in the casket, laid in state and the family funeral at the house. Many times the public funeral was at the church.

Mourning cards or memorial cards



These items, done in black for adults and white for children, were professionally printed following a death. Since many families were distant, they could not attend the funeral, so these were presented to them as a remembrance. Some were large enough to hang on a wall. The only local company that we have found was the Nonpareil Card Company of Des Moines at the turn of the

century; otherwise most were printed in Ohio by mail order.

Post mortem photography



Post mortem photography was commonplace and desired by many in generations past. There were professional photographers that did only this type of art. They tried to capture the entire memory picture of what was present at the time- flowers, casket, religious artifacts, etc. Sometimes even the family would pose with the deceased. Multiples of these photos would be shared amongst family members near or far so they could have a chance to grieve if they were unable to attend the funeral. These photos were often taken at the home, funeral parlor, church or cemetery. Most rare are double funerals or African-American.

Casket catalogues



Casket catalogs were the “internet” of that time. The family would often pick one out of a book if they did not desire one that was already at the funeral parlor. They selected the shell, the interior design and the

handles and ornamentations all separate. The undertaker would then assemble the pieces of the casket. Most large cities had a casket company. In central Iowa, Des Moines had a few including Iowa Casket, Root Casket and The Iowa Casket Company amongst smaller other ones. The casket or coffin would be ordered by telegram and shipped by train. A family could also order funeral flowers the same way. This catalog is from the Root Casket Company of Des Moines.

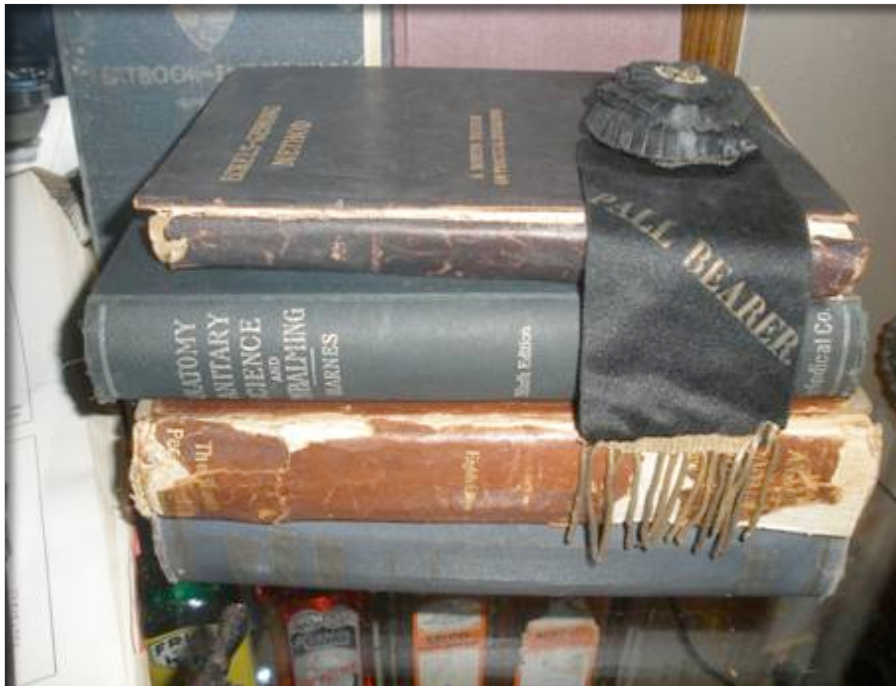


Patent Model for “Burial Vault”



This is one example of truly “one-of-a-kind” funeral artifacts that we have. It was obtained from the United States Patent Office in Washington, D.C. and is the patent model for “Burial Vault.” The original paperwork is with it and dated 1873. This is the model that all burial vaults are based on. The original purpose of the vault was to protect the body from thievery – medical schools- that would use them for dissection. Later came protection from the elements such as water and soil and weight of the earth. One of the first burial vaults presented to the public was in Iowa in the early 1900’s. It was submerged in the creek running through the Iowa State Fairgrounds several months prior to the State Fair. During the fair, it was removed and opened, showing everyone the inside was dry. The product instantly caught on.

Embalming textbooks



Embalming textbooks were produced for and by many colleges. One of the oldest and most respected mortuary/embalming colleges was in Iowa until prior to WWII when it moved to St. Louis. The Hohenschuh-Carpenter School of Embalming was instrumental with the education of Iowa funeral directors. Sometimes because of location, textbook study was all a student could achieve and later took State boards at whatever State he/she lived in.

Terminology also changed over the years: undertaker- this was the person who “undertook” such a job – to Mortician- a play on the Latin “mort” for death and adding it to physician and later funeral director.

1941 Oldsmobile Meteor



One of two of our largest antiques- this is a 1941 Oldsmobile Meteor combination hearse/ambulance. Purchased new in September of 1941, by a funeral home in College Springs, Iowa, it was used until the 1960's, when it was placed in storage. When the funeral home closed, it became part of the new owner- Tom Merrick of the Walker-Merrick Funeral Home in Clarinda, Iowa. His funeral home restored it, rechromed it, and fully reconditioned it in 1988. In the spring of 2006, it came home with us and has been a proud part of our funeral home ever since. We use it when requested for any family as long as weather is in our favor. Our other is an 1888 Rock Falls horse drawn hearse we found in Atlantic, Iowa, and will soon be on display.

1887 Six Panel Horse-Drawn Hearse



The second of our largest antiques is this 1887 Rock Falls Manufacturing (Illinois) six panel horse-drawn hearse. It has the original curtains, leather seating and finial on the top. We had a shelter built for it in the summer of 2009, so it's home is now on the west edge of the funeral home.

Terminology

Some of the terminology that was and still is used:

A *coffin* was the anthropoid shaped box that the body was placed in. It was designed to follow the shape of the body, was simple and is nicknamed “toe-pincher.”

A *casket* is four sided, can be simple or ornamental, and has an upholstered lining. They can be made of wood, bronze, copper, stainless steel, steel, plastics, veneers and even aluminum or other products.

Southern Confederate State soldiers are buried under white marble stones just like the northern ones, except they have pitched or pointed tops making a triangle shape. This was done so “no damn Yankee” would rest on their stones in combat.