

Out of This World and Into the Next:  
A Study of Funeral Customs and Mortuaries in Carroll  
County

The following presentation is an outgrowth of conversations in the McCain parlor in the Reed Case Home concerning funeral customs centering on the custom of funerals being held in the home instead of a mortuary establishment and, would you believe—the impressions of visitors to the Victorian hair wreath on the wall in that part of the Case House. These dialogues with visitors prompted me to explore the matter further via this presentation. I hope this is enlightening.

According to James Hervey Stewart's *Recollections of the Settlement of Carroll County*, published in 1872, one of the first passings to occur in Carroll County was that of Robert Mitchell. "Old Robert Mitchell died in the fall of 1826. He was buried at the foot of Front Street, in Delphi, at the section corner. (wonder where that would be today?). Mr. William Sims, who was a new-comer, living near where Logansport was afterward located, got sick up there, and having no one to take care of him, except his brother-in-law, Mr. Young, he was brought to my

home to be cared for. After remaining sick for about two weeks, he died, and was buried at the section corner, near the same place where Mr. Mitchell was buried. This was probably in the fall of 1826. (Daniel Baum, Sr.). Pages forty-two and three of the same volume contain an entire roster of deaths up to 1830.

The person credited with making the first coffin in the county was a John Ballard, whose work contained the remains of Benjamin Angell, father of Doctor Angell. The first maternal passing to occur in the county was that of the mother of a Rev. Beckner, in the region south of Deer Creek. Further accounts of people being called home in this time period involve an accounting of Mrs. Thomas Stirlin who alluded to the passing of a Mr. Luce, the coffin being made by Mordecai Ellis, who fabricated it by splitting a bass-wood tree, dressing the boards with a broad-ax and jack-plane, and painting them black. She also made mention of a passing of a child of a family whose name was Galbraith. This took place on what was later the Milroy farm.

Mordecai Ellis was born November fourteenth of 1799 in Jefferson County Tennessee, and passed away on March fifteenth of 1867 in Carroll or White Counties.

According to the Quaker family page entry on Rootsweb Ellis was a carpenter and millwright and worked his trade and rented his farm about five years. Then he bought farming implements and teams and farmed seven-hundred acres on the Wea plains. In 1837 he bought and sold cattle and hogs which had to be driven to Chicago and Canada. In 1838 they sold the farm and moved to Carroll County, Indiana, then briefly moved back to Wea Plains and then back to Carroll County. The country was wild and thinly settled with Indians and deer abounding plentifully as did the quail, prairie chickens, wild turkeys and wolves. There was very little improvement on their farm—a log cabin with no stable or any outbuildings and only three or four acres of cleared land. They kept clearing until they had a farm of four hundred acres. The farm is noted for its numerous springs which were never known to go dry or freeze over and for the rattlesnake den. In eighteen-thirty-nine there were three-hundred-sixty-five rattlesnakes killed in one day not more than

three hundred feet from where the house now stands. The house which now stands was built in the year eighteen-forty-two and was the first frame house in Jefferson Township.” Thus delineates the life of Mr. Ellis, whose descendants today are numerous in Jefferson and surrounding townships.

A touching account in the *Christian Church and Burrows Station---1843-1896* by John Rinehart p. 48 states:

“In these earliest days there were no churches and no burial grounds. When death entered these early pioneers’ cabins they would do as their ancestors had done so many times before. This was before the advent of the “undertaker” or mortuary profession, so when a person died, the neighbors immediately came in and placed the body on a cooling board for viewing. The community carpenter/casket maker would take measurements, and then proceed to build a wooden casket—usually from black walnut lumber. The casket would be lined with plain white cloth. Friends and neighbors would open the grave and the casket would be placed on a small springboard wagon or sometimes on a

buggy. If the cemetery were close, they would simply carry the casket to the gravesite.

Later some congregations adopted the practice of tolling the church bell until casket reached the gravesite. (I might add that the church bell now mounted in the tower at Ball Hill is equipped with a “toller” attachment which can be used to toll the years of the person’s life or other significance.) Many times the gravesite would be on some peaceful knoll in the shade of a giant tree near their cabin door. There are many such locations throughout our countryside—all completely forgotten and ignored today. As a child, I played in the ruins of the foundation of an early homestead and drank from a spring piped out of the hillside near this foundation. I have always wondered if the small mound of dirt located about a hundred feet north of the east end of this foundation was such a burial plot. The old road had been vacated before I was born, but its path is still visible past this area today. This site, which was known as ‘Scott’s pasture’, is located at about 460 S 730W in Cass County, just west of land owned by my parents.” My hearers should know that there was a fair amount of exchange

between Clinton Township of Cass County and what became Liberty Township of Carroll. Page 96 of the same publication refers to a David Johnsonbaugh as serving as a local wagon maker, carpenter, and casket maker having a shop on the second floor of the building on lot 82 in the town of Burrows.

Aston Brown's documentation in this book supplies a rich itemization of his caskets he made for the various citizenries in that part of Carroll County between the years of 1855 to 1892. Aston was the local casket maker who lived about two miles southwest of Burrows. Aston kept a detailed diary that he called "A Record of Coffins Made and Funerals Attended by A.L. Brown from July 1855." Mr. Brown would make a coffin, place it on his shoulders and trudge through the woods for miles to the home of the deceased where the family was assembled. They would place the body in the coffin and proceed to return it to the earth from whence it came. His son George Brown was a timber buyer in the Deer Creek area. When George's son John H. Brown (Aston's grandson) died in 1977 and was buried at Deer Creek Cemetery, Aston's diary was made available to the

Carroll County Historical Society. Mrs. Nancy Ringer has used this in updating her records.

An additional coffin-maker was that of Thomas W. Barnes, who was born in Green County, Ohio on June twenty-seventh of 1814 and who passed away on February fourth of 1890 of pneumonia. His burial took place at the Seceder Cemetery in Adams Township, and his spiritual persuasion was that of the United Presbyterian Church at Idaville. His marriage was to Cynthia Ginn in 1840. Her death took place in 1868. In 1814 he and his family moved to Indiana and settled near Vincennes. In 1816, they moved to Fort Harrison north of Terre Haute, later to Parke County where his father died. In 1831 his mother and children moved to Lockport. His grandfather John Barnes came from Ulster, Ireland to America before the War of the Revolution. His father, Alexander Barnes, held a commission in the war of 1812 under General Hull when he surrendered at Detroit. Records of his coffin making are to be found in the Adams Township Cemetery Transcription Binder at the Museum.

Whiteley Hatfield concludes the list. Hatfield was born December fifteenth of 1775 in Fredericka, Delaware and his passing occurred March thirteenth of 1854. His skills in casket making which were renown in his home town of Centerville, Ohio were utilized here according to his descendant Gail Baker Seest who states that he was often left money in the wills of Carroll County deceased for crafting the coffins of the deceased. Whiteley was laid to rest at the Robinson-Baum Cemetery.

The skill of embalming, which I realize is today somewhat controversial as to whether it is even necessary, was invented during the Civil War. The very first military casualty to be so treated was a Colonel Ephraim Ellsworth(1837-1861) who when Union troops entered Alexandria, Virginia sent his men to take over the railroad station while he went to remove a Confederate flag of the Marshall House Hotel and was killed on his way down the stairs. Dr. Thomas Holmes (1817-1900), who had trained and worked as a coroner's physician in New York in the 1850's, had begun experimenting with embalming methods used by the French. Due to the closeness of Ellsworth and the Lincoln



family, his remains were treated in this still-novel fashion and his burial occurred in his hometown of Mechanicsville, New York. They were dressed in the typical Zouave uniform of the day, and placed in a metallic coffin, the lid of which was so arranged that through a glass cover the face and breast could be seen.

Ellsworth reportedly somewhat resembled his former self during this process despite his demise.

Dr. Holmes was subsequently awarded a substantial contract for embalming the corpses of deceased Union officers in order that they might be shipped home for burial. After all, when Junior passed away on the battlefield in Chickamauga, his condition might not be the best after being shipped via rail north or anywhere else for that matter. (my verbiage). Dr. Holmes was accredited with embalming as many as 4,000 Union soldiers and also created a fluid that could be used for embalming and sold it to other physicians for \$3 a gallon. The chemicals were a mixture of arsenic, zinc, and mercuric chlorides, creosote, turpentine, and alcohol. Formaldehyde didn't enter the picture until the post-Civil War era. Upon his assassination, President Lincoln's

remains were also treated in the same way as were his subordinate soldiers and an embalmer traveled on the funeral train. Upon his arrival in Springfield his remains were perfectly preserved. (Keep in mind that this was April)

The embalming art passed from the scene until the early nineteen-hundreds when actual embalming schools entered the scene. State licensing became normal in the 1930's. Even though the skill of embalming was pioneered during the Civil War, only 40, 000 of the 650,000 soldiers were actually treated in this way.

It should be mentioned here that in the early days of the funeral industry when embalming was the norm the procedure was performed in the home of the deceased with no mechanical pump and gravity doing the work. The casket or coffin would be procured from the local furniture store and the deceased would be placed in it. Calling (or visitation---or—"the wake") was held at home also. As late as the middle nineteen-forties my wife's grandfather's visitation was held in the home now owned by my brother-in-law along Rock Creek.

In transition between the furniture store/coffin maker of the past and the current contemporary mortuary were merchants such as the Cullers, John and Jacob to be exact, who advertised in the Delphi Weekly Times to the effect that “By reference to an advertisement it will be seen that John Culler has retired from business, and that his son Jacob Culler takes his place at the old stand. The Culler Furniture Store is the oldest business house in the city; Mr. Culler having commenced operations in the year 1837, 33 years ago. By industry and close attention to business, Mr. Culler now retires feeling grateful that his labors here have not been unrewarded. Amongst the characterization of this house is honesty and industry, by which Mr. Culler has gained the confidence and esteem of all who know him, and we bespeak to the new proprietor the same qualities, and hope he may receive the same liberal patronage from the community that has heretofore extended to his father.” In a subsequent publicity Jacob Culler is seen offering both furniture and undertaking. The advertisement states that “all county coffins are made here.” This was located two doors east of the A.H.

Bowen Building. The date on the ad was that of January 14<sup>th</sup> of 1870.

Another such establishment offering embalming was that of a Mr. F.R. McFail of the Delphi Undertaking Company, who was a graduate of the Clark school of Embalming of Springfield, Illinois. He also had in his possession a certificate from the state board of health. He came to Delphi from Richmond, Indiana. A new black funeral car was available. This was at the “Old Bragunier and Whitaker stand, office phone 73.” (May thirteenth, 1899). By 1904 McFail announced in the February twenty-fourth 1900 *Citizen* that he was engaging in “A New Furniture Firm . . . . And that he . . .” will embark in the furniture trade in connection with his business. An addition will be built to the room he now occupies, which will give him a frontage of thirty-eight feet and two stories high. A plate-glass front will be put in the room and other conveniences that will make the new room one of the most commodious in this part of the country.”

The two most well-known mortuary establishments in the city of Delphi were those of Adam Grimm and James Blythe, who followed a similar path of dealing in

both caskets and furniture. I shall spare my hearers the vast enumeration of proprietors of both of those establishments from their debut to the present.

The predecessor of the Abbott funeral home was the Grimm family, represented by Adam Grimm, who was born in Baden, Germany on September twenty-fourth of 1857 and immigrated to the United States in 1879, settling in Indianapolis as a cabinetmaker. In 1892 he moved to Rossville, and there established a furniture and undertaking business until 1906. Coming to Delphi in 1907 he purchased the small undertaking business of Mr. Wiley, and four years later he moved to quarters on West Main. In 1931 he moved to the former grand home of the late Congressman Charles B. Landis on East Main. Grimm's two sons, Lorenz and Edward, bought a half interest in the Grimm home on E. Main, and continued in the embalming business, thus vacating the store on W. Main. The Grimm family legacy ceased in 1944 with the retirement of Ed, and the funeral home was later occupied by Melvin Jackson until his retirement in 1979. This is the ancestor of the Abbott Funeral Home today.

The predecessor of the current Davidson Funeral Home was that of James Blythe who came from Hawick, Roxburghshire, Scotland where he was born on March thirteenth of 1828 and entered the business scene where his passing occurred in 1903. Following a residence in Lafayette, his marriage was to Mary Emma Bradshaw on December sixteenth of 1868. His son was James Harry Blythe, whose birth occurred in 1873; his grandson was Leonard James Blythe who was born on November fifth of 1905, and whose passing occurred on November first of 1955. Patriarch James was well-known for both fine furniture and funerals, having dealt with the “mortal remains of 4, 500 people.” —obit. In an ad of January eighth, 1897 their fine “undertaker’s vehicles are promoted, as well as a “delivery wagon” for the purpose of delivering funeral goods and undertaker’s paraphernalia. Their original establishment was according to James’ obit of February twelfth of 1903 was where Harry Baum’s blacksmith shop is presently, or, to orient my listeners, where the new fire district quarters is today (James Shaffer’s Station). In 1927 they transferred their base of operations to a home at the corner of Union and Monroe which provided a welcome change from

their location on E. Main, the structure of which is now undergoing a renovation under the Stellar Program. This home endured a conflagration which involved the remains of Father Clifford Reid and those of Mrs. Ida Childers, who were removed to the Margowski home on the corner. The Blythes rented the Burr Rooms on the north side of the square until their facility could be repaired, then held a grand opening on November thirteenth from two until five on Saturday afternoon and from seven until nine o'clock and on Sunday from ten until twelve in the morning and from five until seven in the afternoon in their facility constructed to replace the one damaged by fire. The Blythes were no strangers to fires, having experienced one in October of 1892 which cost the firm a grand total of \$2, 500. In 1960 the funeral home and the furniture store were sold to Mr. and Mrs. Richard Eikenberry, who passed the reins to Mr. and Mrs. Richard Cornell in November of 1963. In similar fashion to the Abbott funeral home this establishment, has witnessed several owners. The site is currently occupied by Terry Davidson. The furniture store location was formerly owned by the Fowler family. Another one of Blythe's earlier enterprises was at Bringhurst in 1878

where he placed an Andrew Henderson in charge(Delphi Times, 1878). In both cases, homes of notables were repurposed as mortuaries. The present Davidson Funeral Home was that of David Rogers Harley, great-great-grandfather of Dan McCain, and the Abbott funeral home was originally that of Congressman and Newspaper publisher Charles B. Landis.

The newest development in the mortuary industry in the Delphi scene is that of the Hippensteel Tribute Center, which was given permission to operate according to the Carroll County Comet of July thirtieth, 2014. This is presently in the former Church of Christ edifice in what was known at one time as Mortonville.

At Camden, the mortuary scene was dominated by the Baker family (no relation to Robert) the predecessor of which hailed from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania following the Civil War. The patriarch of the family was Peter who was a funeral director and undertaker until his death. Peter purchased the business from a Mr. Charles Wood who was a cabinetmaker and undertaker at that location. (Lee Appleton). He was succeeded by his son, Charles E.



Baker who in 1937 was continuing to serve the families of Camden and a large surrounding territory and towns. (Camden Record News, Thursday, December twenty-second, 1937). Charles was married to Blanche Sieber in 1895. (Appleton, p. 22). That edition of that publication (Camden Record) proudly announced that Harold Baker was awarded his Embalmer's license. In 1939 their operation was sold to a Victor Smith of Bruce Lake. The article from the Camden Record News of Thursday, June first of 1929 also stated that patriarch Peter also managed the hardware store of Ray and Rice, who were his uncles. Charles also managed the Ray and Rice hardware store for twenty-two years. (Lee Appleton) This establishment was the forerunner of the Cree Funeral home of present. The predecessor of the present funeral home was moved to the southwest corner of Water and Washington Street and a new house was built on the corner of Main and Monroe. (Lee Appleton, *This Was Camden*, pp. 22-23) This edifice was remodeled in 1968(*This Was Camden—1832-1982*).

At Flora, there were several such establishments at various time periods during the centuries. The

forerunner of the present Wheeler Funeral Home was that of Mark Carter, who was the son of Lloyd and Cora Briggs Carter, born in Bringham. He was graduated from the Askin School of Embalming in 1932, apprenticing with the Grimm Funeral Home for three years. He purchased equipment and started in business for himself in the former Cutler Bank building, subsequently moving to the Bonebrake home in Cutler. This is presently the home of Clayton and Alena Hutson. In 1940 the funeral home at 204 S. Center Street was purchased from Mrs. Area Landis. This house had been built by Dr. Peters, and had cost him \$10,000 to erect. That price was equivalent to a 200 acre farm at that time. Mark and his wife Mary Catherine(Bordner) reared two children there, those being Mark Richard and Elisabeth Ann. Mark's death occurred in 1973, and the purchase of the funeral home by Robert C. Baker was noted in the Thursday, January twenty-fourth 1974 Hoosier Democrat. (*Carroll County Indiana Legacy 1824-2005* was used for the remnant of the article.) The Carter Funeral Home was the sole establishment not claiming a furniture store or similar establishment as its direct ancestor.

The present-day Genda Funeral home was initiated with an ad in the Saturday, April fourteenth Hoosier Democrat stating that “William J. Leiter accepts position with Dora B. Myer. According to an entry in the 2005 Legacy Book by Jerry Reinke the Myer establishment was in the Eikenberry Furniture store building. In the same entry Jerry states that “the majority of funerals were held in residences or church buildings. For the year 1903 the average funeral cost was just over \$56. Funeral costs ranged from \$8 for a child’s funeral, to the most expensive funeral that year--\$163. Of the 44 funerals performed that year, 17 were for children under the age of ten. Leiter’s obituary which was recorded in the Delphi, Indiana Journal-Citizen states that “Leiter was born at Leiter’s Ford on August fifteenth of 1882, the son of Rodney K. and Mary Overmyer Leiter. His marriage on November twenty-fifth of 1909 to Polly Snider, whose death occurred April 21, 1961. He worked for Dora Myer as an undertaker and clerk in a furniture store from 1902 until 1908 before going to Star City and Winamac where he worked in the same business. In 1922 Mr. Leiter purchased a half interest in the Dora Myer business and returned to Flora. Ten years later he devoted full time to

the Leiter Funeral Home where he retired in 1966 after more than 60 years as a funeral director.” At one time the establishment was known as the Leiter and Myer Funeral Home. Leiter purchased full interest in said business in 1927 and in 1930 he purchased the home.

C. Richard Leiter, William’s nephew, was taken into the business in the late nineteen-thirties. In 1968 the home became known as the Leiter-Reinke Funeral Home with the incorporation filing noted in the July eleventh, 1968 Journal-Citizen. In 1975, the name was changed to the Reinke Funeral Home. In 1992 Jerry and Cindy Reinke joined the business, purchasing interest in the business in 1994. Jerry and Cindy purchased the entire interest in 2004. I gave my hearers that entire series of purchases only to inform you that at present Jerry and Cindy are involved in a totally different enterprise—that of a shrimp farm—Big Barn Shrimp Farm, on the outskirts of Flora. Quite a difference I would say.

An additional mortician on the Flora scene was a J. M. Koonsman whose ad appeared in the Hoosier Democrat of January twenty-seventh, 1913. The ad stated that “J. M. Koonsman, the funeral director, with

goods of better quality. Our cheap medium and fine goods all bear the same standard of quality. Calls far or near promptly answered. Yours to please, J.M.

Koonsman, State License, 126. Eva N. Koonsman, ass't embalmer, State license 1375. Phones—Office, 201; Res. 136.

Not to be omitted is the mortuary of James Neptune at Burlington which was operated by him for forty-six years, James having worked in funeral service since 1954, moving to Burlington in 1962. James semi-retired in 2008, selling his establishment to Jeff Stout of Stout and Son to carry on the work. Neptune's passing was noted in the September twenty-ninth 2010 Carroll County Comet. The present mortuary is the Stout Mortuary.

As an additional remark I will inform my hearers that the records of the Melvin Jackson, Baker (Camden), Cree, Baker-Horn and Leiter-Reinke, 1984-2002(one volume), and Richard Eikenberry Funeral Homes are available in the Museum.

To conclude, I have in one evening taken you from the early days of primitive wooden coffins fabricated

from the very forests in which the pioneers resided to  
modern technology, chemistry, and the business world  
Of the final moments of one's life.