

ONE MAN'S DEMISE IS ANOTHER MAN'S GAIN: THE GROWTH OF THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY ON THE IOWA FRONTIER*

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ABSTRACT

The paper that follows examines changes in funerary procedures and the growth of the undertaking profession in southern Iowa. Funeral arrangements and cost changed over time, and the provision of rudimentary undertaking services moved from the back room of the local store or carpenter shop to premises dedicated in their entirety to the business of dying. This represented a transformation in the way that the funerary arrangements were being conducted. Funerals became more elaborate and there was now made available a choice of accessories to send the departed off in style. And what had been a family affair was by varying degrees being entrusted into the hands of the nascent undertaking profession as dying was becoming a prosperous business.

Cemeteries dot the landscape in rural Iowa as they do in other parts of the country. They appear in the most unexpected places, in farm fields, next to country churches, in a grove of trees, or along a stretch of rural road. Some are neatly kept, others have been ravaged by time and neglect. The stones, though barely legible in many instances, reveal that death came to the frontier with the advent of the earliest settlers. Here given to the care of the earth are the remains of the earliest pioneers and their descendants. When reading the dates inscribed in the simple markers one takes note of those who survived to a ripe old age and comments with sadness at the demise of an infant who never had the chance to experience life. Rarely, though, does one stop to consider the arrangements made to lay the deceased to rest. Though with the dramatic rise in funeral costs in the past decade there is a tendency by some to look back with nostalgia to a time when laying the dearly departed to rest appeared to be more affordable.¹ While funerals may not have been as exorbitant as they appear to be now an examination of available records from 1880 to 1900 and other studies points up that they were by no means cheap.² Indeed, when compared to the cost of consumer items at the same time, the prices charged by undertakers for ancillary items and services provided tended to be much higher.³ This paper focuses on the changes in funerary procedures and the evolution of the undertaking profession in Wapello County, Iowa from 1850 - 1900.

The rituals and practices associated with death are a part of the earliest records of man. Though the practices associated with caring for and disposing of the remains of the deceased varies across cultures and from one society to another, by and large funerary arrangements over the centuries were made either by the immediate family of the deceased with, perhaps, some assistance from members of the community, or the arrange-

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ments were left to priests, shaman, or other religious personages in the community. In Wapello County Iowa, prior to 1885 when the full service funeral became available, undertaking tended to be a community affair. That is family and friends cared for the remains, the coffin was usually constructed by someone with carpentry skills, and the deceased was laid to rest in a ceremony led by either a minister or a spiritual leader of the community. In the days before professionals became involved in the process and embalming was not yet an option, speed was of the essence and funerals usually took place within 2 days of death. The body was kept at home and for obvious reasons near a window. Moreover it was cleaned and kept cool. Until the body was interred relatives, friends, and neighbors would come and keep vigil at the house. This practice continued to be observed well into the 1930s in many rural communities. Those who stayed the long hours of the night were kept awake by coffee and rolls. At one such wake one woman went to the kitchen to make coffee but when she returned she found that the occupant of the casket had turned over and laid on her face. The local physician was summoned to check the supposed deceased for signs of life and when he held a mirror under her nose looked on in disbelief as the glass fogged over. The woman had merely slipped into a coma, and the fact that she had been declared dead makes one wonder how many others had been presumed dead and disposed of within the two day period.⁴ The only time the two day rule for burial was not observed was during the winter when the ground was frozen and graves could not be dug. When this was the case burial would be delayed until warmer temperatures arrived.

In Ormanville, Wapello County one of the people providing partial undertaking services prior to 1885 was Jonathan Heckart, a carpenter. He furnished both coffins and boxes or vaults as they would later be called. In 1857 he provided both items at a total cost of \$8.50 for the funeral of Gideon Harness.⁵ The community could also avail itself of the services of E. E. Harness who conducted business out of the back room of the Thompson General Store. For his troubles he would receive \$25.50. Of this sum \$22.50 was charged for the coffin and the remaining \$3.00 covered the burial robe.⁶ And in the absence of any discussion about digging the grave, the assumption is that this task was performed by able bodied members of the community. At any rate, local merchants and carpenters continued to provide basic undertaking services until the latter part of the 19th century.

By 1885 undertaking services were beginning to be provided by members of the nascent undertaking profession in Ottumwa. Fred Haslach, for example, provided a coffin for \$22.50 and burial clothing for \$3.00 for the Solomon Kirschner funeral in 1888.⁷ The clothing, in this case, though, was not obtained from a supplier catering specifically to undertakers, instead it was purchased from a local clothing store owned and operated by A.D. Moss of Ottumwa. In other areas of the country, especially the northeast, the development of the funeral industry had been well underway for some time, and by the latter part of the 1880s was developing into a full service industry in Wapello County, Iowa. And with the development of undertaking as a business, family involvement in the process changed as well. Families no longer needed to attend to the corpse, it was no longer necessary for families to concern themselves with mak-

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ing preparations at the cemetery, and they no longer needed to worry about procuring or preparing decorations or to provide mementos of the ceremony. These services could be performed by others, and the family could now focus on the appearance of the corpse and its surroundings. In other words the emphasis was on the beautification of death. Along with the changes in procedures and the development of new services, there was an accompanying change in terminology. Undertakers, for example, began to refer to the departed as the body at rest. Coffins began to be termed caskets, and shrouds evolved into robes. Money could now be spent on memorializing the dead and obtaining emotional comfort for the bereaved.⁸ By this time undertakers had, in some parts of the country, developed a specialized knowledge about caring for the remains of the dearly departed. In addition, the availability of an increasing number of accessories made it possible to send the deceased off to the next world in style. The change in funerary practices also had an impact on the role played by community members in the burial of one of their own. They were no longer needed to assist in processing the dead, as this task was increasingly left to members of the clergy, physicians, and undertakers.⁹

By 1890 there were two undertaking establishments in Ottumwa, one owned by Fred Haslach and another operated by Harned & Sullivan.¹⁰ Both proprietors had developed specialized knowledge and both offered a choice of products and services. Undertaking was developing into a full service industry.

The customer was able to select from among a number of accessories and services. Moreover, the remains of the deceased did not have to be moved to the undertaker's facilities. If the family wished, preparations for burial could still be made at home. However, the family had a choice of making the preparations or having the undertaker come to the home and attend to the body there. In cases where death occurred away from home and the family desired a "family style" funeral at home the undertaker would deliver the corpse to the home for a fee based on mileage. Costs for transporting a corpse to the residence of the deceased usually ran about \$1.00. And if it was decided to opt for embalming this service could also be provided in the home. The charge for embalming in the home usually ran higher because of the materials required in the process. The items most frequently mentioned in the records of Harned and Sullivan were cotton, and a rubber or oil cloth on which to lay the corpse for embalming. The actual charges for embalming, whether the service was performed at the undertaker's establishment or at some other location could, depending upon the size of the body, run as high as \$10.00. If the customer chose not to have the remains embalmed then there was a fee for keeping the body in ice, or in a freezer, and if the remains were kept at home the undertaker would provide the necessary materials and instructions for keeping it cooled and clean at home. Usual preparation costs for attending to the corpse at the undertaker's establishment included embalming, washing, shaving, if needed, and laying out the remains. Washing and dressing usually amounted to \$6.00.

Beyond these basic services families had a number of options to choose from when it came to the appearance of the remains. Underclothing costs ran from .50¢ to \$2.00. Shirts could command as much as \$5.50, robes would cost between \$5.00 and \$10.00,

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and if the family decided to outfit the dearly departed with a pair of shoes, the cost would for these usually ranged from \$1.50 - \$2.00. If the family decided that a suit owned by the deceased should serve as the burial garment the undertaker arranged to have it cleaned for a mere \$3.50.¹¹ A good deal of attention was paid to the appearance of the deceased. Clothing and grooming were important in the preparation of body, equally important, though, was the selection of a suitable coffin in which to display the deceased. Again, the bereaved were able to choose from a variety of caskets, the prices of which were determined by the size and material used in its construction.

By the later part of the 19th century caskets were built in standard sizes ranging from 2'0" to 6'0". Though most adult size caskets tended to be 5'9". A simple casket cost about \$20.00 whereas a metallic casket would run about \$135.00. If the body was attended to at home, there was a \$1.00 fee for delivering the casket to the home. The final price of the casket, though, was affected by the type of material used to line the

	White Casket	\$20.00
	Walnut	\$30.00
5'9"	Coffin	\$32.00
	Rosewood Casket	\$35.00
5'9"	White Beach	\$65.00
	Grey Casket	\$65.00
	Metallic	\$135.00
4'6"	Children's Coffin	\$20.00
3'6"	Children's coffin	\$20.00
2'0"	Children's coffin, white	\$20.00

casket. Customers had a choice of crape texture, velvet texture and moleskin, a thin gray cloth fiber. Beyond this there was the cost of the outside box, or vault as it is termed today. The cost of the box could run as high as \$10.00 and was determined by the size and type of material used and whether or not handles were included. Woods commonly used for the construction of the outside box were Pine, Chestnut, Oak, or Cedar and could be lined with zinc.

In addition to these services undertakers would, for a fee of \$1.00, place a death notice in the local paper; provide flowers, the cost of which was determined by the type and quantity requested. Undertakers also provide chairs and crape if desired for a home funeral or at the cemetery, again the fee for this service was determined by the quantity of chairs required and the distance they were to be transported. Chairs, unlike the body were brought back to the undertaker's parlor after the funeral. At any rate, the chairs rented for about \$1.00 per dozen. The use of crape for the door amounted to \$1.00. Other costs were those related to the actual burial itself. Arrangements at the cemetery were made by the undertaker, these included digging the grave, filling the grave, sodding the grave, and marking the grave. Digging and filling ranged from \$5.00 to \$7.00, sodding cost about \$6.50 and marking the grave cost .50¢. There was also a fee for outfitting pallbearers with gloves, and this could range from .50¢ to \$1.00 or more. Finally, there were the charges for transporting the body, the family, and pallbearers to the cemetery. The hearse, depending on mileage, normally cost \$5.00. The

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charge for the horse and buggy in which the immediate family was conveyed amounted to \$2.50, and the use of a carriage to transport the pall bearers to the grave site netted a fee of \$3.00.¹²

Where once one could count on spending, perhaps, no more than \$25.00 for a simple funeral, the price by the end of the 19th century could exceed \$200.00. In some cases the cost of funerals did not matter to the bereaved. Fred Bachman's widow, for example, spared no expense. For her husband's burial she ordered a walnut casket which cost \$30.00. She also purchased a robe for \$5.50 and shoes for \$1.75.¹³ Solomon Blystone's funeral was arranged by Harned and Sullivan. His estate was charged \$35.00 for the casket and the vault; \$10.00 for a burial suit; \$2.75 for slippers and socks; \$1.50 for the use of the carriage; and \$10.00 for the care of the body.

The only instance in which an undertaker was restricted in what he could charge for his services was when it involved the burial of an indigent person. In such case fees were borne by the county in which the death occurred. The state, for example, had made provisions for the burial of honorably discharged soldiers, sailors, and marines who by life's end had become indigent. The Code, in this case, stipulated that the burial cost could not exceed \$35.00, that internment could not take place in a cemetery or section of a cemetery set aside for burial of the pauper dead, and that a headstone, not to exceed \$15.00 be provided to mark the grave.¹⁴ The Iowa Code also allowed for cremation, but there is no evidence that this provision of was taken advantage of during the latter part of the 19th century in southern Iowa.¹⁵ Aside from these provisions and the provisions for proper disposal of the body. The profession was not regulated during the 19th century.

The upshot is that a wide range of services was available by the turn of the century. An examination of the records at Harned and Sullivan points up that the firm provided a range of services with prices ranging from \$10.00 to over \$200.00. Harry Peck's funeral, for example, cost a mere \$10.00. the family opted for only the bare necessities.

2'0" white coffin	\$6.00
Carriages to the cemetery	\$4.00
Flowers	.50¢

The family of Vincent Smith opted for a home funeral with only a few services provided by the undertaker. The cost to the family was \$66.00.

Rosewood Casket	\$35.00
Gloves	.50¢
Marker	.50¢
Washing	\$ 5.00
Cemetery charges	\$ 5.00
Carriages to the cemetery	\$ 4.00
Flowers	\$ 3.00
Pall bearers carriage	\$ 3.00
Cotton/rubber to wrap body	\$ 3.25
Clothing	\$ 3.40

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The John Fisher Funeral, a full service funeral, cost \$228.00, and is the most expensive funeral recorded in the Harned and Sullivan Records prior to the turn of the century. An examination of the account points out that it was a full service home funeral.

6'0" Metallic coffin	\$228.00
Zinc line box	\$10.00
Double lid	\$ 1.00
Rubber for body	\$ 2.00
Outside box	.50¢
Cleaning suit	\$ 3.50
Gloves for Bearers	\$ 1.00
Chairs	\$ 1.50
Cemetery charge	\$ 5.00
Washing	\$ 1.00
Flowers	\$ 8.00
Advertising	\$ 1.00
Crape for the door	\$ 1.00
Hearse	\$ 5.00
Express charge (candles)	\$ 2.50

What had been a process of providing the rudimentary services for the dearly departed from the back room of the local store or carpenter shop now witnessed the arrival of establishments and a subsidiary industry dedicated in their entirety to the business of dying. This represented a transformation in the way that the funerary arrangements were being conducted. Funerals now became more elaborate and the bereaved were no longer limited to interring their dearly departed in simple coffins constructed from soft pine lumber and placed in a wooden box (vault). Instead they could be laid to rest in sturdier and more elaborate coffins. Nor were they remanded into the care of the almighty in a sentimental piece of clothing that had served the departed well in life. There was made available a choice of accessories: burial suit; slippers, socks; the use of a carriage. Finally, the body of the deceased could be moved to and properly attended to in the undertaker's establishment, or it could be attended to by the undertaker in the home of the departed. Though, records show that by the end of the century only one in eight funerals were conducted in the home of the deceased. The upshot is that what had been a process carried out primarily in the home of the deceased, by the family, was now by varying degrees being entrusted into the hands of the nascent undertaking profession. Dying was becoming a prosperous business.

Though it is doubtful whether anyone gained anything from Levi Orman's death, for the latter had made arrangements for his own funeral. When he died in 1907 he was laid to rest in a homemade coffin, constructed of lumber which he provided. He had kept the lumber for a number of years with this purpose in mind. Orman was a simple man and requested no preaching or services at the home other than that a few of his old neighbors sing a few hymns. His request was honored and his body was taken to the cemetery in an ordinary wagon. His coffin was placed in the ground and covered with rough boards. Over this there was placed a covering of straw and finally the earth.

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The obituary at the time noted that "it will be just an old fashioned burying," and indeed it was.¹⁶

Notes

1. Miriam Horn, "The Deathcare Business: the Goliaths of the funeral industry are making lots of money off your grief," *U.S. News on line*, March 23, 1998.
2. This study examines in part the records of the Harned & Sullivan Funeral Home in Ottumwa, Iowa and probate records in the Wapello County Court House in Ottumwa, Iowa.
3. Store ledgers such as that of Tom Hamilton and itemized bills left behind in probate records indicate that funeral costs tended to be higher than "normal" consumer items.
4. Silvano A. Wueschner, *Ormanville: Life on the Iowa Frontier, 1850 – 1900*, (Ottumwa, Ia: St. Andrews. Press, 1993) pp. 108 – 109.
5. Wapello County Clerk of Court, Probate Records, Gideon Harness.
6. Wapello County Clerk of Court, Probate Records, Box 54 3-240
7. Wapello County Clerk of Court, Probate Records, Solomon Kirschner
8. Records point up that the amount of money spent on funerals bore no relation to the gender of the deceased but depended primarily upon the socio-economic status of the deceased, and the capacity of his estate to defray the expenses of the funeral.
9. Charles O. Jackson, *Passing, The Vision of Death in America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977) pp. 301-304.
10. Ottumwa City Directory, 1885 – 1900.
11. These figures were gleaned from the records of the Harned and Sullivan Funeral Home in Ottumwa, Ia. The current owner is in possession of the original records beginning in 1885.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Wapello County Clerk of Court, Probate Records.
14. *Code of Iowa* 1897, Sec. 433, 434.
15. *Ibid.* Sec. 697
16. *Ottumwa Courier*, 1907.

* *The author is indebted to Douglas Robertson, the owner of the Robertson-Jay Funeral Home in Ottumwa for his willingness to share his knowledge, give of his time and allow the author access to the Sullivan records.*

