

Dealing with the dead is a very real part of life, and it's a job which we will gladly turn over to others, but today that is usually at a very high cost.

One of my wife's co-workers, who is also a registered nurse, recently had to deal with her mother's death. She felt that the funeral home routine was very impersonal, costly and simply not what her mother would have wanted. So she decided to prepare the body herself. She held the viewing in her mother's parlor, right in the home mother loved so much, and right where she had raised all her children. She even picked out and decorated a simple unfinished pine casket.

My uncle, who is a pastor, arranged his mother's funeral to be like an artist's painting, designed to showcase the inner beauty of this dear mother and grandmother-- a lady who lived to serve her God and family. Much of her life centered around her simple, but warm, home, where she and her husband raised their kids. As planned, the funeral procession was routed to carry the dear departed's body one last time down her street, past her home.

My wife's friend's experience taught us some stuff we didn't know. For example, embalming is not 'the law' here in Michigan. If the body is not going to be embalmed, the law says that it must be buried in 48 hours. Even in that amount of time, you still have to deal with a strong odor. What works well is stuffing body cavities with herbs, like myrrh.

This ancient art fell out of practice for hundreds of years and did not emerge again until the eighteenth century. The potent essential oils found in the many unguents used in mummification, containing myrrh, sandalwood, attar of roses, and cedar were effective antibacterial agents, and are partly responsible for the remarkable preservation of the corpses. The same properties that make essential oils useful for so many modern purposes were known thousands of years ago by the Egyptians. In other words, the myrrh we employ today in mouthwashes and toothpaste; the same sandalwood we use in perfumes and soap; the same cinnamon we spice cakes and cookies with; the same cedar which lines chests and closets; the same juniper berries which lend their flavor tonics; as well as frankincense, saffron, cardamom, figs, honey, cypress, wine, dock, and calamus, among other herbs and ingredients: all were used in funerary rites as embalming agents.

Before embalming, returned in the early 1900's the original purpose for sitting up with the dead was to watch for signs of life!

Preparing the body involved a bucket of water, a wash rag, shaving razor and a comb. You would simply do the best you could cleaning the body and fixing the hair.

Caskets were usually homemade. Hardware for caskets could be purchased at any general mercantile. Some hardware store owners with a cooling table would come to your house and embalm the body for you. While they were at your home, they would offer additional services, if desired. They would sell you a casket which could run as high as \$100.00 for the fancy units. Also, they would offer transportation to the cemetery or church, and even take care of digging the grave for an additional fee.

A small girl in the 1920's wrote about her experience after her grandfather's death. "They brought Grandpa home from the hospital, and they embalmed him right there. I don't remember much about it, but I do know they spent a lot of time running back and forth to the bathroom with something, and flushing the toilet a lot."

Once the body was prepared it would be displayed by a window for obvious reasons. Friends and family members graced the casket with flowers and cedar, not as offerings so much, but more to conceal the odor.

Early graves were marked with bricks, stones or boards. During the 1800's, it became fashionable to use headstones sold by dealers. Many of the early headstone markers found in our local cemeteries were

purchased mail-order from Sears & Roebuck. The standard 12 X 12 X 4 headstone from Sears cost \$5.10 and their large 16 X 16 X6 cost \$26.70 . . . a lot of money in 1880!

My mother owns a house in Plainwell, just north of the Kalamazoo River on North Main street, which housed, in the 1880s, the Plainwell Marble Factory. I am certain this was where many headstones were made in eastern Allegan County and delivered by buckboard to the surrounding cemeteries of Otsego, Martin, Cooper.