

Cabinets to caskets

The historical connection between furniture stores and funeral parlours

BY DON RICKERS
Special to the VOICE

It may seem incongruous today, but several generations ago, hardware stores and furniture retailers often dispensed funerals along with tools and stools. But the combination is not really that odd when you think about it.

Many early furniture makers built coffins as a side-line business, and hardware proprietors had wood, hinges, screws and nails. Some of these enterprising businessmen realized that in addition to caskets, they could expand their service to provide funeral services to families.

One of the local examples is the Lampman family, which opened a funeral home and hardware store in 1911 in Wellandport, relocating to Canboro Road in Fenwick in the late 1940s. To this day they offer a showroom with 25,000 square feet of home furnishings and appliances, while funeral services are handled next door.

Glenn Muir, co-owner of Lampman's and the great-grandson of founder John Lampman, said that



Lampman Funeral to the east, Lampman Furniture to the west, on Canboro Rd. in Fenwick, where the company moved in the late 1940s

DAVE BURKET

back in the day, the family patriarch was a craftsman who built caskets when business was slow. Today has its own challenges.

"In the last ten years, I've seen three or four Niagara furniture stores close their doors," said Muir. "It's a tough business nowadays, with competition from the big box stores."

He characterized their funeral operation as "consistent." Five generations of the family have been active in the business.

Pre-dating the Lampman operation was a furniture maker and undertaker's shop at 53 East Main Street in Welland, opened in 1857 by Bavarian immigrant Franz Sauter. His son Edward inherited

the business, and sold it to Alfred Lawrence in 1899, who continued to operate it in the same tradition, with furniture sales on the main floor, and undertaking services on the second level. Lawrence took on future mayor George Sutherland as a partner in 1903. Subsequently, Sutherland acquired sole ownership in 1907 and ran the business

with his son Frank, until Frank bought his father out in 1918. The business split into two distinct entities in the mid-1930s, and was eventually purchased by a corporation in the late 1940s. Furniture sales under various banners continued until 1999 at the East Main

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Street location, once earning the business the distinction of being the longest-operating retail establishment in Welland.

Meanwhile, in Wellington County, Christian Dreisinger purchased an undertaking business from Charles Ruppel in 1905, who had been offering furniture and burial services since 1878. In 1906, Dreisinger moved his undertaking business to a downtown corner in Elmira, and established a retail furniture store. The building was modernized over the years, and by 1940 he had the first funeral chapel in the region. Four generations of Dreisingers worked in the family business, which was sold in 1977 and still operates today with significant renovations.

Until the 20th century, “do-it yourself” funerals were the norm, usually held at home, with the body buried in a family plot or even the backyard. There wasn’t much government paperwork to fill out, and no need to contact a mortician, since embalming was rare. The only outsider called upon would be the local carpenter, who would prepare a simple coffin for the deceased.

As villages grew into cities, the funeral profession grew with them. Rural homes were traditionally built with large living rooms, or parlours, where it was common to hold the funeral service. As more people became urbanized, homes were built smaller, and it became necessary to find a location

outside the home for visitation and burial ceremonies. Funeral homes were established to relieve the family of the logistical problems presented by a death, undertaking responsibility for the funeral arrangements—hence the term “undertaker.”

The process of embalming the dead grew in popularity in the USA in the mid-1860s. The practice became popular during the last years of the Civil War, as soldiers killed in battle would be infused with fluids to preserve their bodies for the trip home for burial.

In earlier eras, morticians would come to the family home and embalm the body, usually in the kitchen. Gradually, cabinet makers decided to attend specialized schools in the art and science of embalming.

There are still some rural communities where funeral homes and hardware or furniture stores are entwined, but for the most part, the funeral home is now its own entity.

Like most businesses, the funeral industry has undergone an evolution.

Handmade wooden coffins gradually evolved into caskets. In the 1950s, some 700 companies manufactured caskets in the USA out of cloth-covered wood and cardboard. Metal caskets were gaining in popularity, and today represent over half of the industry. Because the process of manufacturing metal caskets is very capital-intensive, only a few companies control most of the market share.

Funeral homes have traditionally been small, fam-

ily-owned businesses, passed down to successive generations. But starting in the 1960s, a consolidation occurred, with large companies acquiring family operations.

Death is big business in Canada, an annual \$1.6 billion industry which employs some 10,000 staff at over 1700 funeral homes. With approximately 269,000 deaths every year in this country and an aging population, the demand is predicted to grow, not least during the current pandemic. Ontarians alone have \$2 billion invested in burial pre-arrangements.

It is also an industry that has come under some scrutiny, due to claims of high-pressure sales practices, significant price markups, and aggressive upselling. Investigative journalists for the Toronto Star in 2017 discovered markups on caskets and urns ranging from 185 per cent to nearly 500 per cent compared to industry manufacturers’ wholesale price lists. This practice appears to be less prevalent at independent, family-owned funeral homes, than at the corporate chain operations which now represent a significant proportion of the industry.

These days, there are plenty of options for those who have, to quote one of Hamlet’s soliloquies, “shuffled off this mortal coil.” Cremation has become popular to alleviate costs of more elaborate funerals. For those in search of a “no frills” approach, there are basic caskets and funeral-related products available online. Embalming is not required by law in Canada, but



Dreisinger Furniture and Undertaking, Elmira, Ontario, 1920.

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is a common practice, especially if there will be a delay before interment occurs.

“Green” or “natural” burial focuses on reducing the environmental impact on the earth. All materials used in the process, including the casket, are made of biodegradable materials. Concrete vaults and grave liners are not used.

An Italian company, Capsula Mundi, eliminates the coffin by burying the deceased in a biodegradable urn or pod, with a seedling tree on top. The decaying body literally nourishes the tree as it grows in a memorial park.

In 2017, a Catholic cemetery in Granby, Quebec, became the first in Canada to have a garden exclusively dedicated to biodegradable

urns. Called the “Boisé de Vie” (tree of life garden), the deceased’s ashes, along with seeds from one of the tree varieties native to Canada, are placed in an urn made of natural materials which decompose in a month. The entire process is completely “green.”

Looking for something really unusual?

A company called Eternal Reefs will take the cremated remains of an individual, mix them with cement, and deposit the concrete orb at a site in the Florida Keys to create an artificial reef, which becomes a habitat for marine creatures.

For those who are into pseudoscience, financially loaded, don’t mind the cold, and want to live forever, then cryonics might be their tick-

et to eternity. Instead of being buried, a corpse is placed in a metal chamber at almost -200 degrees Celsius, frozen in time as it were, awaiting their speculative resurrection. Some 250 bodies have been cryopreserved thus far, mainly in the USA and Russia. Baseball player Ted Williams and his son are among them, and television host Larry King is on the short list. So are PayPal founders Luke Nosek and Peter Thiel. It’s a good thing they have deep pockets, because the price tag can be as much as \$200,000.

And contrary to the urban legend that Walt Disney had himself cryogenized, he was actually cremated and interred at Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery, in Glendale, California.

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