

Ceremonies of Death

by Karen Seidel

Death is different today. Most Oregonians die in hospitals and nursing homes, with death generally due to “age-related causes.” The dying are ministered to by doctors, nurses, and other professional caregivers. Following death, the body is whisked off to a funeral home, which is in charge of “arrangements.” Following the formal services, grief counselors sometimes assist the bereaved in their mourning.

In contrast, Eugene pioneers of the late nineteenth century experienced death as part of their daily lives. High mortality rates, coupled with the absence of institutions and specialists for dealing with the dying and the dead, meant that most early settlers were directly involved in the preparations surrounding death.

But the lack of a funeral industry does not imply that death rituals were lacking in early Eugene. Religious and cultural practices mandated that the dying get things right with God and that the dead be conveyed into the next world with appropriate pomp and circumstance.

Barring accidents, violence, or a sudden fatal illness, settlers usually died at home. When the doctor indicated there was nothing more he could do for the Oregon pioneer, family, friends, and the minister gathered in the house of the dying person. They came in part to assist with the nursing. But they came also to provide consolation and moral support — to enable the dying person to make his peace with God and his fellow men. He was expected to bid farewell to his family and friends, to ask their pardon, and to give them his blessing or words of advice.

The most important task of the dying person, however, was to prepare his or her soul for heaven.

This entailed severing connections with this world and becoming entirely submissive to the will of God. Those gathered around assisted in this task with their prayers and hymn-singing. **Richard Parsons**, who crossed the plains in 1853, and died in Eugene at age 75, “found it hard at first to think of leaving those here that he so tenderly loved,” said the *Oregon State Journal* of June 5, 1869. “But soon he triumphed over all his temptations, doubts and fear, and gave himself up wholly to the Lord, and could say from his very heart, ‘Thy will, O God, be done.’ ”

Preparations

Deaths in early Eugene were announced by the tolling of the fire bell, one stroke for each year the deceased had lived. This practice ceased when a city ordinance was passed to prevent use of the bell for this purpose. Evidently community members found the custom too depressing. Instead, notices of a death were put in the local newspaper and on the door of the person’s place of business, and conveyed by word of mouth.

In the household of the deceased, blinds were drawn and people moved about quietly. The first actions of female relatives were to close the eyes and mouth and straighten the limbs of the body. With help from experienced neighbors the body was washed, dressed in good clothes, and moved from the bedroom to the parlor, to be viewed even before a casket was ready. Depending on the proficiency of those involved, the body looked more or less like the living person.

The casket was either ordered from a local cabinet maker or purchased from a Eugene furniture store. Cherry & Day, the predecessor of Musgrove Family Mortuary, was the first Eugene firm to advertise “undertaking” services in local newspapers. “Dealers in and manufacturers of all kinds of furniture, mirrors, bedding, coffins, and caskets,” announced their ad in 1882. “Special attention given to all orders for coffins or caskets, by mail or telegraph, day or night.” The following year they offered “a first class Hearse free.”

Time was of the essence in the family’s preparation for the funeral and burial of the deceased. Although embalming was practiced in the United



Right: Funeral wagons at England's Memorial Chapel, downtown Eugene, ca. 1890s.



States during the Civil War, it did not become an option in Eugene until near the end of the century. Many people refused to embalm loved ones because they feared it involved mutilation of the body. Without embalming, burial needed to occur within a day or two of death, or the body had to be surrounded by ice. Eugene death notices indicate that almost all burials in the late 1800s took place within two days following death.

Tradition decreed that the dead body could not be left alone, so watchers “sat up” with the dead in private homes. Young people generally served in this capacity, although a somewhat older woman would handle “changing the cloth” laid over the deceased’s face. Wrung out in soda water every half hour, the cloth was believed to keep the skin from turning black. “There was always a nice lunch laid out for us and coffee on the wood range in the kitchen ready to be heated,” recalled a woman born in Lane County in 1856. Still, it was a “lugubrious task,” and “it was a great relief to us when the first mortuary was built.”

Since the house of the dead person was the central place of mourning, visitation and most funerals, it also had to be prepared for the death rituals. Carpets were taken up, bedding was washed, and mirrors were turned to the wall. A wreath was hung on the front door, and the interior was draped, particularly the archway into the front parlor. (Hence the reference to mortuaries as “funeral par-

lors.”) In addition, a wreath and crepe were hung on the door of the deceased’s place of business. If he had belonged to a fraternal association, its lodge was draped in mourning for thirty days.

Eulogies

The virtues of the deceased, particularly if he or she was a known and respected member of the community, were celebrated in death announcements in the local newspapers. **Rebecca Lawrence**, who died in 1864 at age 24, “was charitable, kind and affectionate, and leaves sad hearts with those dear friends she loved best.” **Thomas E. Shelton**, dead at age 47 in 1882, was “a kind and loving husband and father, was respected by all who knew him, and to his widow and three children who survive him he left the priceless legacy of a good name and untarnished reputation.” **Robert Bevins Cochran**, who died at age 74 in 1894, was “straightforward and outspoken to a remarkable degree, always willing to fight for what he deemed the right, honest and open as the daylight.” Mrs. **Pameligia Moore** was remembered as “an excellent woman in all the relations of life,” upon her death in 1889 at age 72. “Few better women ever lived in any country, as everybody who knew her will bear witness.”

The death notices of Eugene’s early settlers almost always ended with eulogies. **Elias Stewart**, born in Virginia and later a resident of Missouri, came to Oregon in 1852 with his wife and six children. His wife died of cholera on the journey. He and his children continued on, and, in 1855, he purchased a donation land claim in Eugene where he lived for forty-eight years. The Eugene *Daily Guard* of April 30, 1898, after announcing his death and describing his past life, declared:

Deceased was a man with the excellent traits of the pioneer, strong, honest and of sterling worth and integrity, possessing a warm heart and strong will power, kind to his family, constant to his friends; a

representative man of a generation that is fast going to its last reward — noble, courageous pioneers.

Fraternal organizations, essential for business and social networking in Eugene and other frontier towns, played important roles in the rituals of death. If the deceased had been an active member, his or her organization published a “Resolution of Sympathy” in the paper. When Oregon pioneer **Norris Humphrey** died in 1879, the Masonic Lodge unanimously resolved “that this lodge laments the loss of a Brother who was ever ready to proffer the hand of aid and the voice of sympathy to the needy of the fraternity, a friend and companion who was dear to us all.”

Likewise, at the death in 1893 of **Lucinda McMurtry**, senior vice president-elect of the Women’s Relief Corps, the Corps resolved “that in her death our beloved Corps has lost an active and useful member, who was ever ready and willing to discharge every duty, that we mourn with those who mourn and tender to her sorrowing daughter and relatives our heartfelt sympathy.”

Procession

Most funeral services in Eugene in the late 1800s took place in the home of the deceased or a close relative. Evelyn Lampman, whose mother forbade her to attend funerals when she was young, recollected, “My friends, who were not so protected

My friends reported that funerals were just like church, only the sermon was about the person who had died.

A 1913 Funeral
for Wiley Griffon (see page 14)

Casket	\$40.00
2 Carriages	5.50
Hearse	10.00
Wagon delivery75
Removal Charge	1.50
Clothes bought	1.40
Opening grave	5.00
	\$64.15

as I, reported that funerals were just like church, only the sermon was about the person who had died and everybody cried, and it was scary when you had to walk by the open casket and look at the dead person inside.”

Funeral services lasted at least an hour, and usually included an opening prayer, reading of scripture, a sermon on the mystery of life, singing of hymns, a eulogy, and a closing prayer. When nineteen-year-old **William Belshaw** died in May 1865, the minister quoted Revelations 21:4. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying. . . .”

Possibly because all the mourners could not be accommodated in the deceased’s home for the service, the funeral procession was the most important and widely attended ritual. In fact, most death notices in Eugene newspapers announced that “the funeral will take place from the family residence to the Masonic Cemetery.” Relatives, friends, and colleagues, sometimes from out of town, gathered at the home to take part in this ceremony.

The procession was frequently under the supervision of the deceased’s fraternal or civic association, whose members participated in full regalia. The hearse, in which the coffin was placed, was supplied and driven by the undertaker, dressed in top

hat and mourning clothes. Before Eugene had an undertaker, the coffin was carried by pallbearers or put in the back of a wagon. The widow, widower, parents, or children of the deceased followed the coffin in horse-drawn carriages. The other mourners followed in carriages or on foot to the cemetery.

When **George Kincaid**, joint proprietor of the *Oregon State Journal* and member of the Eugene fire companies, the Ancient Order of United Workmen, and the Knights of Pythias, died in 1885 at age 27, the newspaper reported:

Both fire companies in uniform, the members of the A.O.U.W. in regalia, the Knights of Pythias and the Eugene Brass Band, that volunteered its services, were in attendance, and all of these organizations in a body and many other citizens marched on foot along Willamette Street and to the head of 11th Street. From this point delegations representing each of the organizations named, under direction of F.M. Osburn, escorted the hearse, which was followed by twenty carriages filled with sorrowing relatives and friends, to the Masonic Cemetery.

When **Francis Dunn**, successful businessman, Mason, philanthropist, and former mayor, died in 1892, the largest gathering in Eugene’s history turned out for his funeral procession. The current mayor requested that Eugene businesses be closed during the afternoon of the funeral, so that all of Mr. Dunn’s colleagues could participate in the procession. County and city offices were also closed. Masons from as far away as Portland attended. According to the Eugene *Daily Guard*, “the floral offerings were numerous and beautiful.”

The funeral procession, with its impressive hearse, solemn music, floral tributes, pallbearers, fraternal members on foot wearing ceremonial dress, and relatives and townspeople in their carriages, must have been an imposing spectacle. Its destination was frequently the Masonic Cemetery,

located on an open, grassy hillside about four miles from Eugene’s town center.

By the time a procession reached the cemetery, the grave had already been dug by family members and friends. The pallbearers deposited the casket over the grave, and either the family minister or an official of the deceased’s fraternal organization began the graveside service, which usually consisted of a responsive reading, Bible verses, prayers, and a hymn.

A handful of fine dirt was sprinkled over the casket when the minister came to the words, “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God, in his wise providence, to take out of the world the soul of our deceased brother, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . . .” The Lord’s Prayer was then repeated as the wooden casket was lowered into the grave. The grave was not filled until the bereaved had departed back down the hill, still mourning but at the same time convinced that this separation from their loved one was only temporary.



Right: Christian Church of Eugene, built 1868.