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Burial Practices in Southern Appalachia

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Cross Disciplinary Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by

Donna W. Stansberry

December 2004

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ABSTRACT

Burial Practices in Southern Appalachia

by

Donna W. Stansberry

This study was conducted in an attempt to determine whether certain burial practices are unique to the people of Southern Appalachia. Eight individuals were interviewed, including a minister and a funeral director. As a result of the research, it was found that, although a strong sense of community and religion still prevails, making certain burial rituals distinctive to the people of Southern Appalachia, they are slowly eroding due to the growing presence of the modern American funeral industry.

Qualitative research methods were used to analyze a segment of the Southern Appalachian population, with literature reviews of related material and in-depth interviews conducted with subjects in Grainger, Hamblen, and Hancock Counties of East Tennessee.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The people of Southern Appalachia are unique among Americans in many ways. The area in which they live identifies them as “Appalachians”. An area of interest not discussed at length is how Southern Appalachians deal with the subject of death and burial. There are several customs unique to the Southern Appalachian area and seldom practiced anywhere else. This thesis will assert that the historical customs and traditions practiced by the people of Southern Appalachia relative to death and burial are eroding due to the growing presence of the modern American funeral industry. Deep-seated customs and traditions relative to death and burial may survive in parts of the region but only as localized customs and exercises. The modern funeral industry is slowly changing the region’s approach, customs, and traditions relative to death and burial in significant ways.

About the Study

The subject of death and dying tends to elicit negative responses in most people. One reason may be a basic fear of the unknown, of not knowing what lies beyond this life. The way members of a society deal with death reveals much about their basic values and beliefs. Looking at the history of how a region’s people treat death and dying can provide insight into basic values and beliefs.

Purpose

The reason for researching this topic is to discover the types of death rituals unique to the people of Southern Appalachia. Areas to be explored will include religious beliefs and how these rituals relate to death and burial practices; social structures that

exist in Southern Appalachia that encourage the coming together of communities when a resident dies; and the evolution of these customs as well as why some continue to be practiced.

Significance

By studying this topic, a better understanding will be gained as to why residents observe certain burial rituals that are peculiar to Southern Appalachia. This will lead to a better understanding of the people and culture of the region.

Terms

Southern Appalachia – The southern part of the Appalachian region that includes the four western counties of Maryland; the Blue Ridge, Valley, and Allegheny Ridge counties of Virginia; all of West Virginia; eastern Tennessee; eastern Kentucky; western North Carolina; the four northwestern counties of South Carolina; northern Georgia; and northeastern Alabama.¹

Cooling Board – Used to place the body of the deceased to prepare for burial when embalming was performed at home.²

Cremation - The process of burning the body to reduce it to ashes.

Embalming - To remove the blood from a corpse and replace it with a preserving fluid.

Funeral – All or some of the ceremonies or rituals that take place from death until burial.³

Rigor mortis – The natural stiffening of the body after death has occurred.

Undertaker - The professional who prepared the body for burial.

¹ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921). Reprint. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1969), 10.

² James K. Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 28.

³ *Ibid*, 77.

Wake or Sitting Up – Keeping the corpse laid out after death and keeping a “watch” or “wake” over it.⁴

Assumptions and Paradigm

This research is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed; therefore, the Interpretive/Constructivist Paradigm is appropriate. The basic assumptions guiding this paradigm is that “knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and researchers should attempt to understand the ‘complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’”.⁵ Therefore, qualitative research will be used. This is a very personal subject and data will reflect the personal realities of the interviewer as well. Information will be gathered from books and articles written about the Southern Appalachian region as well as in-depth interviews with residents of the area. Funeral personnel will also be consulted for stories and antidotes. The disciplines used will be primarily religion, geography, and sociology.

Summary

This study is presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study and states the purpose, significance, terms, assumptions, and paradigm of the study. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature relevant to the topic of the study. Chapter 3 describes the methodology guiding the study. Chapters 4 and 5 present narratives of the subjects interviewed, and Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

⁴ Ibid, 66

⁵ Donna M. Mertens, *Research Methods in Education and Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 11.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

My literature review examined the history of burial customs in early America as well as those of the people of Southern Appalachia. The review encompassed several areas of burial practices, including the evolution from home funeral practices to those of the modern, commercial funeral industry. It also examined the basis of many of the burial customs still observed at present.

Death and Burial in America

Certainly there are numerous works published about the origin of death and burial rituals throughout history. I found several works that focused on the history of burial customs and how they evolved in America from private at-home practices to modern mortuary practices. A primary source of information can be found in *Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures*, edited by Richard A. Kalish. In this book Charles O. Jackson notes in a chapter entitled “Death Shall Have No Dominion: The Passing of the World of the Dead in America,” that in Victorian America, concepts of life and death were not compartmentalized as they have come to be in recent years. Protestant Christians generally observed the “Pilgrim posture” toward life. That is that the world was merely a wilderness to be suffered as preparation for the truly significant “eternal” home.⁶ The only significance the body held was as a shell in which the soul resided.

⁶ Charles O. Jackson, *Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures*, ed. Richard A. Kalish (Farmingdale, New York: Baywood Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 47.

When death occurred, the soul departed and the body was no longer of importance. It was to be disposed of as soon as possible in order not to become a health hazard to the living.⁷

Jackson goes on to say that during the nineteenth century there was a growing need to make death more tolerable and a decrease in the social or spiritual distance between the dead and the living became evident. The two became more entwined. This trend became more evident in the way the dead were buried. Instead of the regular graveyard, more elaborate cemeteries were constructed. Monuments were erected, grounds were landscaped, and some of these places became recreational parks for the living.⁸

Throughout the nineteenth century, family and friends continued to hold primary responsibility of caring for the deceased with the home serving as the typical location of the wake and the funeral. After professional undertaking services became available by the latter half of that century, some Americans were willing to delegate some responsibility of disposing of the body to the funeral industry but “many clearly felt that the body deserved more respect than to be handed over to strangers for final disposition.”⁹ There was a great deal of concern with the containers in which the dead were buried. By the eve of the Civil War, caskets began replacing coffins. Whereas coffins were tapered to fit the body, caskets were beautiful inside and out, and even the name carried the connotation of a jewel box, a container for something valuable.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 49.

Funeral observances became more elaborate. It was accepted practice to observe three days from the time of passing until the body was buried. According to Dr. Michael Pinner, this time frame may have evolved from early Jewish tradition in which it was thought the spirit hovered around the body for three days.¹¹

Jacob W. Gruber, in an article published in *American Antiquity* in 1971, postulates that the tradition of burying a body generally facing the east has existed back to prehistoric times. He saw this pattern as the result of the primitive Christian belief that the body should face east if it were to arise.¹² The burial site studied is at Mohr, “a late prehistoric or proto-historical village which lies on a terrace overlooking the Susquehanna River at Bainbridge, Pennsylvania about fifteen miles south of Harrisburg.”¹³

Another important author, Margaret M. Coffin, in her book *Death in Early America*, chronicles the evolution of burial practices from the early sixteen hundreds. She notes that during the Civil War Thomas Holmes became the first practitioner of embalming, although it was on a limited basis.¹⁴ She pointed out that mourning cards, gloves, and crepe were accepted items of “death etiquette.” Mourners wanted a token to remember the deceased, so gifts were given to those who attended the funeral. The hair

¹¹ Michael Pinner, interview by author, 8 June 2004, East Tennessee State University.

¹² Jacob W. Gruber, “Patterning in Death in a Late Prehistoric Village in Pennsylvania,” *American Antiquity* 36 (January 1971): 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976), 82.

of the dead person was used in various ways to memorialize him or her. It could be woven into wreaths or placed in locket or funeral jewelry.¹⁵

Coffin pointed out that funerals became more intimate. This was evidenced by personal funeral invitations. In Dutch New Amsterdam and up the Hudson to Albany, it was common to have an "aanspreecker," or person to deliver funeral invitations to friends and relatives of the deceased.¹⁶ The aanspreecker was dressed completely in black with long crepe ribbons streaming from his hat to identify him as such. One could not attend the funeral without an invitation. This entire practice seems to be an ancestor to modern obituary notices. Decorated baptismal certificates called "Taufschein" were placed into the coffin with the body or laid under the tombstone of the deceased as a "passport to Heaven."¹⁷

Coffin found that although beginning around 1000 BC the Greeks practiced cremation, the first crematorium was not built in America until 1884. It was located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the Cedar Lawn Cemetery. The entire service could be purchased for forty-three dollars, which "included twenty-five dollars for two hundred pounds of steamboat coke and an attendant, ten dollars for the undertaker furnishing a cheap casket, five dollars for the hearse, and three dollars apiece for carriages for the mourners."¹⁸

According to Coffin, the custom of wearing black is ancient, originating to the era when people believed spirits stayed around the deceased for a time. It was believed that

¹⁵ Ibid, 211.

¹⁶ Ibid, 69.

¹⁷ Ibid, 90.

¹⁸ Ibid, 96.

if the living wore black, the spirits would not be able to easily distinguish them and, therefore, would not be able to harm them.¹⁹ It is natural to be afraid of the unknown or something one does not understand, and the idea of the deceased's spirit remaining near the body certainly fits this category. According to William Montell in his book, *Ghosts Along the Cumberland*, both men and women traditionally wore black for a time after the funeral, but widows were expected to continue this practice for a period of time to show proper respect to the memory of the deceased husband. If this period were too short, the community would talk about and shun the widow.²⁰

Another custom relative to scaring away evil spirits involved using bells to announce a death. This custom originated in Europe and carried over into the tolling of church bells to announce a death.²¹

The wake was a major part of the funeral proceedings. The term "wake" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "lic" for "corpse," and means to watch or keep vigil.²² Ancient peoples observed wakes, keeping watch over their dead. This custom has continued in many forms over the years throughout America. The early Greeks and Jews used the wake to ensure death had occurred. The ancient Egyptians believed that life continued unaltered after death, so the body had to be preserved for future reanimation. They believed this reanimation would occur within three thousand years. The wake was observed to mark, respect, and honor the future "life" of the deceased. Having someone

¹⁹ Ibid, 196.

²⁰ William L. Montell, *Ghosts along the Cumberland* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 78.

²¹ Coffin, *Death in Early America*, 72.

²² Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 66.

with the body at all times also assured protection against predators.²³ For early Christians, as with Jews, the wake was an opportunity not only to ensure that death had occurred but also to give comfort to the family of the bereaved. The major differences were that Christians touched and even kissed the dead, but, instead of the wailings of the mourners (sometimes hired for Jewish funerals), Christians generally kept emotions in check.²⁴

Montell points out that the Irish wake was a time of celebration. It was a lively time with drinking, dancing, singing, and laughter. This celebration even went so far as to occasionally have a mourner stand the corpse in the corner so it could partake of the festivities. If anyone openly grieved at one of these wakes, he or she was in danger of being punished by law.²⁵ Ilana Harlow, in an article written in *The Journal of American Folklore*, stated that, “The wake marks a liminal moment in the social life of an individual. In the period between death and burial, a person being waked is physically still part of the community and is present at the social gathering, yet is unable to participate.”²⁶

Appalachian Culture and History

John C. Campbell, in his book, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, isolated a part of the Appalachian province, which extends from New York to central

²³ Ibid, 66-67.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 68.

²⁶ Ilana Harlow, “Creating Situations: Practical Jokes and the Revival of the Dead in Irish Tradition,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 110, No. 436 (Spring, 1997): 152.

Alabama and called it the Southern Highlands.²⁷ Included in this area are four western counties of Maryland, the Blue Ridge Valley, the Allegheny Ridge counties of Virginia, all of West Virginia, eastern Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, western North Carolina, the four northwestern counties of South Carolina, northern Georgia and northeastern Alabama.²⁸ In his book, *Appalachia, A History*, John Alexander Williams shows a connection between the people and the land by stating, “What all definitions of Appalachia have in common is that each of them in its way tries to link people and homeland, to find some principle of regional demarcation that identifies both the place and its inhabitants.”²⁹

It is both difficult and unreasonable to make sweeping statements about the people of Southern Appalachia. According to Durwood Dunn, they have been stereotyped since the late eighteenth century as hillbillies and mountaineers “living lives of stark brutality and desperation.” He states that, “confronted with such a bewildering plethora of stereotypes, few scholars have made any effort to analyze the conglomerate area we call Southern Appalachia.”³⁰ Isolation of the area is no longer the one contributing factor that sets Appalachians apart, although in certain sub regions of the area, geographical isolation has resulted in a close-knit mentality that exemplified itself in the way the Southern Appalachian people dealt with life in general.

²⁷ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921). Reprint. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1969), 10.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia, A History* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 12.

³⁰ Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove, a Southern Appalachian Community* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1988), xii-xiv.

Death and Burial in Appalachia

Probably one of the most intensive works on death practices in Appalachia is James K. Crissman's book, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*. In his book, he evaluates changing attitudes and practices as a result of his research in the Appalachian sections of Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Kentucky.³¹

All the books and articles I reviewed indicated that death in Appalachia was observed a bit differently from the rest of the nation. Loyal Jones, writing about the people of Southern Appalachia in *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands*, gives a good indication as to why this is, so he writes, "I believe that rural Uplanders have an organic and natural relationship with the cycle of life and death, seeing it always around them. Ordinary folk talk more frankly of death than do those who may feel that dwelling on death and tragedy is somehow unsophisticated."³² He goes on to state that, "Upland Christians connect death with the hereafter, with heaven as their promised place where there will be no more earthly care."³³ The isolation and the rough terrain of the mountains in more rural areas of Appalachian tended to make those regions autonomous. As Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg put it:

When people join together in sorrow, as rural families have done a million times over, they find strength and unity. Over the years this unity broadens into a deep personal feeling that tells mountain people they belong. People elsewhere had this sense of belonging too, but the feeling was heightened by the isolation and repose of life deep in a mountain hollow. Once mountain people attained a harmony with self and home

³¹ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 5.

³² Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 48.

³³ *Ibid*, 49.

(for many it was their birthright) it became indelible, yielding to neither distance nor time.³⁴

In an article written by Joan Bailey Howard entitled “Death and Burial in the Mountains,” the notion that Southern Highlanders’ burial and funeral customs “were primitive and eccentric has been revised with the fuller understanding that these customs were modifications necessitated by isolation and other environmental factors of older Irish, Scottish, and British customs.”³⁵ This article emphasizes the deep sense of respect and dignity Appalachians have toward caring for their dead. It goes on to state that probably one of the most difficult changes Appalachians had to make was having bodies embalmed and allowing funeral homes to take over certain rites formerly conducted by family and neighbors.³⁶

One of the best articles I reviewed is entitled “A Perspective on Death in Appalachia.” In it, Donna Loughrige states that, “The Appalachian people have demonstrated a self-sufficiency, the ability to respond to their isolation and environment, a pervading independence, and a capacity to make do with their situation. Evident is the Appalachian attitude of keeping the dead body intact and inviolable.”³⁷ She goes on to explain the tie between family and mortuistic values and how this closeness among family members requires an active personal involvement in the burial process to ensure

³⁴ Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg, *Our Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 64.

³⁵ Joan Bailey Howard, “Death and Burial in the Mountains,” *Appalachian Heritage* 2 (Winter 1974): 57.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 59.

³⁷ Donna Loughrige, “A Perspective On Death In Appalachia,” *Appalachian Heritage* 11 (Winter 1983), 25.

the burial is dignified and respectful. She also points out the therapeutic value of such personal involvement.³⁸

Elliot Wigginton, in his Foxfire series, presents personal stories from the residents of Appalachia that give us insight into what it was like to experience a funeral in the mountains. The informants in the Foxfire series note that in north Georgia, when a person died, the first indication the community had of the death was hearing a bell toll. Most of the time, the bell would chime once for every year of the person's life, giving some indication to the residents of the identity of the deceased.³⁹ Immediately, family members and neighbors would stop what they were doing and gather at the house of the deceased and begin preparations for burial. Friends carrying food appeared almost immediately. As Will D. Campbell noted, “somehow in rural, Southern culture, food is always the first thought of neighbors when there is trouble.”⁴⁰

The first task was to lay the body out. This consisted of washing the body and dressing it in the nicest clothes available. Because there was no way to preserve the body, everything had to be done as soon as possible and the body had to be dressed before rigor mortis set in. Close family members washed the body, dressed it, and laid it out. Most likely, women tended to women and men tended to men. Later, when embalming was performed in the home, a cooling board was used on which to place the body for the procedure. It was folded to make transportation easier for the embalmer as it was taken from home to home.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid, 27.

³⁹ Elliot Wigginton, *Foxfire 2* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 306.

⁴⁰ Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 148.

⁴¹ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 28.

Part of the preparation involved putting silver coins on the eyes of the deceased to keep them closed. This custom resulted from the belief that when a person enters Heaven, he or she should do so with his or her eyes closed. Doing so signifies to God that the deceased is not worthy of entering Heaven, and by entering with closed eyes, the deceased is asking for forgiveness of his or her sins. Silver was used because pennies had a tendency to turn the skin green. Rags soaked in soda water, aspirin, or camphor were kept on the face of the deceased until the "viewing" in an effort to keep the skin from losing its color.⁴² The service usually took place the next day with the burial immediately following.

When someone died, the community not only came together to lay out the body but dug the grave and built the casket, usually free of charge. Men considered this part of their community duty and did it to show respect for the deceased.⁴³ Problems were encountered because of the mountainous terrain, however. Family and church cemeteries were usually located in rocky ground and the major barrier to grave digging was rock. Dynamite sometimes had to be used to clear enough rock for a body to be buried, and there was added concern that nearby graves would be disturbed. Among other barriers was earth so frozen that fires had to be built on the ground at each step of the grave digging process.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid, 309.

⁴³ Ibid, 60.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 64.

Crissman contends that the very first burial containers in the Appalachian Mountains were made from trunks of trees and called "tree coffins."⁴⁵ This practice apparently dated back to England. A tree the approximate size of the deceased was cut, and the inside was hollowed out with a foot adze. The body was placed inside and the top of the log was put back into place to form a top. The log was then buried.⁴⁶ Rough, crude boxes replaced tree coffins. Finished coffins would be padded with cotton and lined with some kind of white material, cotton, linen, or silk. Often the outside of the coffin was covered in a black material. These coffins were seldom finished or dressed because most men did not have the tools to dress the wood, thus the black covering.⁴⁷ But through the years, as the residents advanced in their skills and resources, more attractive coffins were built by local carpenters for a small fee; or by men of the community at no charge.⁴⁸ Most men considered this ability to construct and provide a coffin their contribution to the mourning family.⁴⁹ Measurements were taken of the deceased and the casket was custom built of wood and lined with white or black material. Local stores kept casket handles in stock.⁵⁰ These caskets were usually made from poplar, pine, oak, or chestnut.⁵¹ The casket was then taken to the house of the deceased,

⁴⁵ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wigginton, *Foxfire 2*, 313.

⁴⁸ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 47.

⁴⁹ Wigginton, *Foxfire 2*, 311.

⁵⁰ Warren Moore, *Mountain Voices* (Chester, Connecticut: The Globe Pequot Press, 1988), 77.

⁵¹ Wigginton, *Foxfire 2*, 311.

and the body was placed in it in preparation for the "Sitting Up" or the mountain version of a wake.

In eastern Kentucky, the custom of making "coffin quilts" was prevalent. A cloth figure of a coffin with the name of the family member was initially sewn onto the border of the quilt while the person was alive. Upon death, this cloth coffin was removed and resewn at the center of the quilt.⁵² It was then placed inside the coffin for burial.

Another contribution that friends and family provided was the burial clothes for the deceased. It was important that the body be clothed in the very best he or she had. If the deceased did not have appropriate clothes, a friend or family member would either contribute something of his or her own, or a woman of the community would make a garment. Many times, the deceased made her own dress or, in the case of a man, a suit would be put back until he died. It was customary for a woman to be buried in black or white, with children being buried in white. A man's usual burial clothes consisted of a white shirt, tie, and pants.⁵³ Sometimes the women made shrouds for the deceased. These were similar to robes with belts around the waist. Again, they were usually black.⁵⁴

At the "Sitting Up," people went to the house and sat with the family around the body. They sang, ate food they brought in, witnessed, and waited for the spirit to leave the body of the deceased. Friends and family stayed with the family of the deceased during their time of bereavement. They arrived just after the death and, for the closest

⁵² Thomas F. Garrity and James Wyss, *Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures*, ed. Richard A. Kalish (Farmingdale, New York: Baywood Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 105.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 310.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 311.

friends and family, stayed a few days afterward and helped put the house back in order. Most people arrived for the wake and stayed until around midnight. They used this time to remember the life of the deceased as well as to show respect and to keep the family company.⁵⁵ The wake usually continued all night, with individuals taking shifts to be with the family. The greatest tribute the deceased could receive was to have a mourner "saved" during this time. The life and death of the deceased was given meaning in that God redeemed another's lost soul as a result of the deceased's death.⁵⁶

The day after the wake, the body was loaded into a wagon and taken to the church for the funeral service. Usually the wagons were pulled by a steer or, if a steer was not available, by mules. Family and friends walked behind the wagon. The church bell tolled as soon as the wagon came into sight and continued to toll until the body was brought into the church. Almost everyone wore black to the service, which lasted between half an hour to an hour, depending on the status of the deceased. The service usually consisted of the preacher reading a chapter from the Bible and praying. Sometimes the funeral was the stage for evangelical preaching, a time to remind mourners of their own mortality and of their need to get right with God.⁵⁷ The casket was then opened for the last time and attendees walked past it for a final look at the body. The family of the deceased came last, with the closest surviving relative at the end of the line.⁵⁸ Crissman explains that family and friends placed a variety of objects in the coffin

⁵⁵ Ibid, 314.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 77.

⁵⁷ Charles R. Wilson and William Ferris, "Funerals" in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 479.

⁵⁸ Wigginton, *Foxfire 2*, 315.

prior to burial. Such items included jewelry, eyeglasses, tobacco, pipes, guns, knives, toys, Bibles, and alcoholic beverages.⁵⁹

Digging and filling in the grave was considered a sacred act, with close family and friends completing this task as a matter of course.⁶⁰ After the body was lowered into the grave, friends and neighbors began “the closing,” physically filling in the grave. It was only with this task finished that the funeral was considered over. After the service was over, close relatives or friends stayed with the family for a day or two, cleaning and putting the house back in order. If the deceased had been sick awhile, his or her room was thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

The last task was to set a tombstone. Although a variety of grave makers were used, according to the informants in the *Foxfire* series, the grave marker was usually something crude, like a field rock, smoothed and inscribed with the deceased’s name. Some markers were made of wood with the information inscribed in big letters.⁶¹

The Appalachian people had a fatalistic attitude toward death. Life was sometimes hard and death was an accepted part of it. One man expressed it like this:

’Taint no use to take on so. Like the leaves on the trees, we all drop off, one by one, and when your time comes, we’ll miss you for a spell; then we’ll forget.⁶²

The funeral industry transformed the way the nation dealt with death in the late 1800s. According to the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, “the development of the funeral industry lagged in the South because of the poverty, rurality, and religious

⁵⁹ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 111.

⁶⁰ Wigginton, *Foxfire 2*, 315.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 318.

⁶² Moore, *Mountain Voices*, 79.

outlook of southerners. Southern funerals have remained distinctive because of the level of their emotional displays of grief.”⁶³

In the 1970s, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, noted authority on present-day death research, wrote in one of her books about a funeral director who, when his father died, described how he and his family members performed tasks related to his father's burial. They placed him in the casket before the service, drove him to the church themselves, and actually lowered the casket into the grave using straps and their own strength. They shoveled the dirt to fill the grave. It was only after they had completed their tasks that they realized they were able to work through their grief much more quickly. It was such a profound experience that the director changed his way of dealing with families in grief by allowing family members to take a more active role in the process instead of shielding them from the various activities related to the funeral.⁶⁴

James Dickson, in an article published in the *Appalachian Review*, pointed out that the protocol of the typical Appalachian funeral is a three-stage ritual. The first stage is the “Pre-Funeral Stage,” which centers mainly on notifying the community and the gathering of the clan.⁶⁵ The “Climactic Stage” follows, beginning as soon as the schedule of events is established. This stage is entirely family-centered and input from “outsiders” is not welcomed.⁶⁶ The final stage is called the “Denouement Stage.” With the funeral

⁶³ Wilson and Ferris, *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 479.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *Death, The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 88-89.

⁶⁵ James Dickson, “Funeral in Appalachia,” *Appalachian Review* 2 (Fall, 1967): 27.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

and burial over and the clan fed, talk ensues about the deceased and whether he or she made adequate provisions for the family left behind.⁶⁷

Henry P. Scalf, in an article entitled “The Death and Burial of ‘Boney Bill’ Scalf,” relates the story of his Kentucky ancestor’s death in 1912 and the subsequent annual services held in the cemetery that holds his remains. This article is an excellent source of information about how families dealt with the death of a beloved husband and father during the early part of the century and continued to gather to celebrate his life for six generations.⁶⁸

In the complex world in which we live today, the funeral industry is on the verge of drastic change. A recent newspaper article noted the way the Internet is being used to help "make the world's most ancient rite more effortless for family and friends of the deceased."⁶⁹ Funeral homes are encouraged to use the Internet as a way to attract business. Funeral arrangements can be made completely on the Internet. Friends can even conduct on-line “chats” with the bereaved. Some funeral homes have on-line video, so that those who are unable to attend services may observe them off location.

The contrast continues between personal involvement and aloofness in the burial process, as it has through the ages. However, it appears that the influence of close family and community ties, as well as a deep religious belief, motivates the people of Appalachia to remain more personally involved in the burial of their dead. The funeral

⁶⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁶⁸ Henry P. Scalf, “The Death and Burial of ‘Boney Bill’ Scalf,” *Appalachian Heritage* 2 (Spring 1974): 57.

⁶⁹ Larisa Brass, "Dust to Digital," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 29 March 2001.

remains a ceremonial occasion that brings family and friends together for emotional and social support. Donna Loughrige said it best:

Appalachians continue to hold the customs and ideas of the general stream of western culture as they alter the customs with marks of their own particular locality. In spirit and intention, if not in resources, their dead are buried with a concern for propriety and respect.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Loughrige, "A Perspective On Death In Appalachia," 25.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Justification for Qualitative Research

Most individuals hold strong feelings relative to death and dying. Each of us possesses a personal understanding of what it means to die. These conceptions are clearly very different, depending on cultural background. This research project dealt with these personal and communal expressions as they related to death and burial within a specific group of people – Southern Appalachians.

The topic of death and dying has been explored in many ways: via economic, social, psychological, and spiritual conduits. Numerous interviews have been conducted by scholars in an attempt to determine how individuals view death. Burial customs have also been researched as to their origins. Studies have been pursued to understand the dying process and the stages humans pass through as both participants and observers.

Most studies have used qualitative research because of the personal nature of the research topic. This is an intimate subject, given the certainty that all must experience death at some point in their lives. There are no published autobiographical accounts of human beings who have died and been resurrected and who have explained what lies beyond the grave. It remains a mystery, thereby instilling fear in most people. It is these cultural customs, community perspective, and personal experiences that I researched.

Because my research focused on people of the Southern Appalachian region, I conducted interviews with eight individuals, all residents of Grainger, Hamblen, and Hancock Counties in East Tennessee. Burial customs and their development are intricate parts of this project. Therefore, older residents of the aforementioned area were targeted,

as well as ministers and employees of the funeral industry. Because much has been written on the subject of death and dying, a thorough review of existing literature was imperative. Not a great deal, however, has been written about death and burial in the Appalachian region, and what has been written tends to be repetitive. This study delved deeper into the burial customs peculiar to the Southern Appalachian region and explored the differences that emerged. The Institutional Review Board found my study to be exempt from coverage under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced as Title 45-Part 46.101.

Research Design

Interviewees who had been long-term residents of East Tennessee were targeted for a sample group. More specifically, these people were residents of Grainger, Hamblen, and Hancock Counties, Tennessee. Interview questions were designed and modified based on responses. The residents I interviewed included funeral personnel, ministers from various denominations, and residents over sixty-five years of age. Most were individuals I knew, but some were referrals gathered as I talked about my research to friends. I then conducted interviews.

Data Collection

I sought data that was grounded in burial customs, their origins, the interviewees' perceptions of these practices, and their own views of death. I collected certain demographical data, which identified the participants by age, race, religion, and length of residency, economic background, vocation, and other demographic information. I asked questions about each individual's perceptions regarding death as well as his or her personal experiences of dealing with the death of loved ones. Each interviewee answered

the established list of questions in a taped interview session. I then transcribed the taped interviews.

Analysis

I identified patterns and themes from the interviews that related to burial practices that were specific to Grainger, Hamblen, and Hancock Counties, Tennessee. After these were identified, I traced origins of common practices.

CHAPTER 4

VOICES FROM THE PAST

The interviews conducted during this study enabled me to glimpse into the past while hearing stories from people who actually experienced the events. I was able to learn their perspectives regarding death customs and discover their views regarding the passing of loved ones.

Laura

Laura is a seventy-seven-year-old woman who has lived in Sneedville, Tennessee, all her life. She was born into a family that built coffins for the local residents before 1936 when the first funeral home was located in Hancock County. She loves to talk about her family history and relate the many stories her parents have told her about growing up with a “coffin shop” in the basement. She is a native of Hancock County and loves her community, family, and friends. She is a lifelong Methodist and retired from the United States Department of Agriculture.

The first funeral event Laura could remember attending was in 1932 when a family friend, Lillie Hopkins, died. Laura was seven years old. When the family heard about the death, her mother immediately went to the home to “what they called laid her out, gave her her bath and dressed her,” while her grandparents started building the coffin. She told me that if the deceased had been male, her father would have helped lay out the body, as he did with men who died in their small community. The woman died at home and her body stayed there throughout the funeral until it was taken to the cemetery in a horse-drawn wagon. She explained that family and friends then gathered around the

grave, where the preacher preached “hellfire and damnation.” When asked if anyone was ever “saved” at one of these services, she stated she only knew one instance when this happened, and that was about nineteen years ago. The deceased had requested an altar call be given at his funeral and someone did come forward and profess faith.

Laura stated that before the first funeral home was established in Sneedville, an embalmer came to the home to embalm the body. She said that blood taken from the body was offered to the nearest relative for disposal. In 1941 when her grandfather died, his blood was given to her father. He took it down to the creek and disposed of it there. She told me an interesting story about a woman in the town whose husband had died around the same time:

My daddy had one (sitting up) with Mr. Haynes who was a mortician at that time that came up on Malberry and helped do an embalming, and he asked the lady, said, “Where do you want me to put the blood?” and she and her husband didn’t get along too good and she said, “Just put it wherever you want to put it.” And he put it around the rose bush. How about that?⁷¹

Although that incident occurred over seventy years ago, the rose bush remains in Laura’s front yard, as big and hearty as ever.

According to Laura, McNeil’s Funeral Home was established in Sneedville in 1936. Before that, everyone took care of their dead at home or the family took the corpse to the funeral home in nearby Rogersville. Prior to that, few bodies were embalmed.

Laura explained it like this:

The ones that were, there weren’t too many that were embalmed. The most of them were, as soon as they could get the coffin made, they were buried, because at that time, decay had set in on the body and I can remember this one woman who lived over the hill from us that Mother dressed her, gave her her bath and dressed her, and laid her on what they call two horses, you know what I’m talking about – sawhorses; they had

⁷¹ Laura, interview by author, tape recording, Sneedville, Tenn., 24 October 2003.

planks laid on that with a sheet over it, and they laid her out on that and then they draped a sheet over her until they could get the coffin done.⁷²

Laura explained that most people in the county buried their dead on their own property or in family cemeteries. In rural areas of Southern Appalachia it was both customary and legal for a family to designate a portion of their property as a private family cemetery. According to Laura, most of these cemeteries were located on hills to ensure proper drainage. She said that those cemeteries are still maintained, for the most part, and still used. Her husband, who died in 1990, was buried in her family's cemetery. She explained that few people in Hancock County are buried in memorial gardens.

When the conversation turned to wakes, or the "sitting up," Laura had an interesting story to tell:

I know one time a distant cousin of mine, her husband died; they kept him in the home. He was the first patient I ever seen that died from cancer. And me and my sister went to sit for the wake. OK, after we got there, the wife went out to get the minister. The father-in-law and mother-in-law went to the barn to milk. Left us there with the body and we were scared to death. We were probably fourteen and sixteen, and we were scared to death. And they had just a veil over him. You know a cat will try to get to a body. OK, there was a cat in the ceiling. If that cat had got down, we'd have left. We were scared to death. But he didn't get down out of the ceiling. And we were scared to death. But you see a cat could get that [veil] off. And if that cat would have gotten in there, we'd have been gone. You'd better believe we would have been. [We were there], I guess, close to an hour. But we stayed close to the door.⁷³

Laura explained that when the funeral home came to the county, it was so convenient to have the visitation there instead of the home. It accorded more room for family and friends, but conversely, it made the whole process more impersonal. She stated, "Because back then everybody was closely knit and when one hurt they all hurt.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Now so many times we go view a body and we're sad about it but it doesn't stick with us like it used to."⁷⁴

When the family conducted the entire burial process in the home, close friends and family stayed for a few days after the burial to help put the house back in order. I asked Laura to describe exactly what they did. She told me:

Well, the room that the coffin was in, that would be put back like it was before, because everything had to be moved out. Then all the food that was brought in, then that was taken care of. We didn't have refrigeration like we do now. That was taken care of and the house was put back in order. The bed was moved out. At least most of the time because, well, in my case, in my grandfather's, the bed was moved out because that's where his bed set. Then when the bed was brought back in, fresh stuff was brought back in – not the stuff he died on.⁷⁵

When asked what happened to the bedding, Laura told me it was burned. When asked why, she said, "I don't know if we felt we didn't want to sleep on something where somebody had died. We do it in the hospital all the time."⁷⁶

Laura had definite thoughts on the proper attitude one should have when visiting the bereaved at the funeral home:

I think it's supposed to be a sacred, quiet time, and so many funeral homes now, it's for people...and I can understand that to a point; they haven't seen each other in a while, and that's the only time they get together. But I was at a funeral up here three weeks ago and you couldn't hear yourself talk. And to me that's disrespectful to the family and to that person that's lying there. Maybe we are supposed to be rejoiceful, but I think it can be taken too far.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

When asked about the use of eulogies during funeral services, Laura told me something that shattered the stereotypical idea of an Appalachian hell and damnation funeral:

I simply agree with eulogies. We preach our own funerals. And for me to get up, and I may be wrong about this, but to get up and preach a hell and damnation sermon, I don't think it's the time. That's my personal opinion. And I don't believe in this stuff of mom's chair being empty around the table...no. I want mine short and to the point. May not have anything good to say about me, but (laugh). But anyway, I don't believe in that.⁷⁸

I asked Laura what she considered the greatest change in the burial process through the years. This is what she said:

Well, the morticians, the embalming...all of it's changed. It's just turned around from what it was back in those days. Now in the 1918's, when the flu was, it took out so many people. Well, my grandfather, he made coffins, too, and I lost an aunt, his daughter, during that time and there was so many people dying that, what they would do – they'd make a coffin and go up and slid it through the door and they'd put the body in that and they'd take it out because they didn't want to... Contagious, yes, and at times they couldn't get...the ground would be so frozen that they couldn't get down more than three feet...they'd bury that person but as the ground thawed, they mounded it until they got it to the depth it was supposed to be. Now that's what I've been told. But, there's certainly, and I think it's for the better, that we've come this far. That takes so much of the burden off of the family.⁷⁹

Neil and Joy

Neil and Joy, ages 78 and 80 respectively, are retired and live in east Hamblen County. While Joy's health is not good, Neil is very active, building solid oak furniture in his "playhouse" and energetically working in his church. He is retired from his repair shop business, having welded and built truck beds for many years. He has a reputation of being able to repair, fix, and build anything from boats to airplanes. Joy has been a

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

housewife most of her life and still manages rental property. Both have been Southern Missionary Baptists all their lives. I interviewed the couple together; therefore, their responses are documented jointly.

When asked about their earliest recollections of attending a funeral, both cited events that happened when they were very young. Joy explained that her mother took her to every funeral in the community. It was apparently not unusual for very young children to attend funerals. The entire community would come together for these events, so naturally the children would be included as well.

When asked how their religious beliefs related to burial customs, both thought a Christian burial involved being “put in the ground.” As Neil put it:

I think you’re supposed to be put in the ground, because that’s the way that the Lord buried Moses and that’s the way Abraham was buried and on down through Jacob. And all the way down to Joseph, and even Joseph told while he was second in command down in Egypt, he told the embalmers to embalm his father, and they took him back and buried him in the land that he had purchased; a field for the burial with the children of Israel. And it’s just a custom, mostly, but I think it’s the way it should be done. I don’t fully agree that a person should be put in the ground as soon as they’re dead. I think there should be some sort of a memorial service of some sort.⁸⁰

Referring to unusual burial practices, Neil explained how he came to build a coffin for his long-time friend, Jim, about two years earlier. Jim had served in World War II and had been a POW for an extended period of time, almost dying in captivity before his liberation. Neil had a great deal of admiration and respect for his friend, so when he was asked to build the coffin, he readily agreed to do so:

(Jim) was a medic in WWII and he had seen people die and all he could do was just take their dog tags and wrap them up in a parachute or something

⁸⁰ Neil, interview by author, tape recording, Whitesburg, Tenn., 6 September 2003.

and he said, “When I die, I want to be buried in a pine coffin.” He said, “Would you build me a pine coffin?” and I said, “Yea.” His sons were there a couple of weeks later and understood that that’s what he wanted and I went ahead and made him one. And the only difference I can see in that is that it’s not commercialized. You take and build a commercial coffin, they’ll cost maybe \$200 – 300 and they’ll sell for like \$5,000 and it’s a money-making proposition, and I think that’s the way he felt, that it shouldn’t be a commercialized thing. He just wanted to be put in the ground in a pine box, and that’s what they put him in the ground in, in a pine box.⁸¹

Joy helped in this endeavor by making the lining and the pillow for the coffin.

Talking about this led the conversation to how the funeral industry has become so commercialized these days. As Neil put it:

I just think that that’s more like the way that things ought to be done. Ah, we live in a day where everything is commercialized to the point that “what’s in it for me?” If there’s nothing in it for me, I don’t want any part of it...the way I feel about it, if you can’t do something for your neighbor or your friend or even somebody that you don’t know...I mean the Lord told us, “Who is your neighbor?” The man that got wounded on the road to Jericho and fell among thieves, who was his neighbor? He was just an old sinner man, he came up there and took care of him, and the Lord said that’s the way we’re supposed to be. That’s our neighbor, and that’s the way we ought to be. I just think that what we do for our neighbors, our friends, we shouldn’t expect compensation for it.⁸²

I asked the couple their thoughts on the greatest changes that have occurred related to burial customs, and Neil responded:

It’s just become more commercialized. That’s the biggest change I’ve seen, it’s just become more commercialized. Hey, I mean, you take now to be a funeral director and do a pretty good job as a funeral director, hey, you got a better job than a lawyer’s got! And a lawyer’s got a better job than the doctor’s got, and the doctor’s going to try to keep you alive. And so I mean it’s... that’s the biggest change I’ve seen. It’s got commercialized.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

Joy's answer went in a different direction. She explained that having cemeteries where graves are clearly marked is the biggest change she has noticed. As she was growing up, most residents of the community were poor and families could not afford to purchase a monument for the grave, so a stone or a rock was used as a marker. If a person could not remember where his or her family member was buried, that location was simply lost over the years.

Both respondents talked about knowing someone who was buried in a private family-owned cemetery. According to Neil:

The only one I know of was a Mr. Bible that was buried just west of where Jeffery Chain Co. is now. And it was said that they put two cedar trees there and I think his wife was buried there beside him. And they built a concrete wall around it. And one of the cedar trees died and they said it was because he didn't go to the right place. But that was what people said. And that's the only ones I know about, except, Johnny Cooper's parents and they're buried on top of the hill there. Now the owner of that property that Max's father bought from them, he and his wife are buried at the top of the hill, too. But when they put that new road through there, they had to remove those graves and set them over farther. Johnny told me that they had a piece of glass over the body and when they opened the casket, there was just one little puff of a scent and that's all there was and you could see the hair and bones and all was there, but said they took and got them all out and took them over and reburied them over there.⁸⁴

Joy stated she "had a first cousin who was buried on the Hicks farm over in Hawkins County and the grave still remains, and I think she was the only one who was ever buried there, and that's been eighty or ninety years ago."⁸⁵ I was interested to find out if family and friends dug and then filled in the graves when these private cemeteries were used. According to Neil, "Oh, yeah. The neighbors did it. The neighbors would

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Joy, interview by author, tape recording, Whitesburg, Tenn., 6 September 2003.

come together and do it. Somebody died; they'd come dig the grave."⁸⁶ Joy went on to tell me that her father dug many graves in his lifetime.

The last wake that Neil remembered attending was that of his brother-in-law who was killed in 1953. He remembered that the man had been killed in Rhode Island around Labor Day, and his body was returned to his home in Tennessee. Joy told about the death of her brother-in-law about thirty-eight years earlier. She told me his body had been brought home and it stayed there until it was taken to the cemetery. She stated that a friend of his sat up with the body all night. Both Neil and Joy thought this practice stopped because it was much more convenient to use a funeral home.

In talking about funeral processions as well as the location of modern day cemeteries, Neil expressed concern again about the commercialization of the funeral industry, with his wife agreeing:

Well, they've changed so they're more commercialized. And I think that used to, we had more church cemeteries and now we don't have the church cemeteries. We have memory gardens and all that sort of thing. We've got mausoleums and all of those things that you take and just put them in. Actually, what it is, it's just commercialized burials, it's all it is.⁸⁷

Joy shared her thoughts about the personal nature of funerals, comparing today's services with those of even twenty years ago by saying, "I remember when I was a child growing up, it was not unusual to see somebody faint at the funeral."⁸⁸ She does not think that mourners these days show their emotions like they did in years past.

⁸⁶ Neil interview.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Joy interview

Neil has never “sat up” with a family, but Joy told me about her experiences sitting up with a family who had lost a baby about sixty years earlier. When asked what they did to pass the time, she said, “Well, we all sat in a room, and we weren’t rowdy or anything like that, but we talked. And in the middle of the night we fixed a little something to eat. And that’s about the extent of it.”⁸⁹ Neither Neil nor Joy thought this was a time to socialize, but that it should be a time to sympathize with the family. According to Neil, it should be a time to console the family and offer help in some way to ease their pain of loss. As the sitting up has evolved into the receiving of friends, Joy expressed a good point about the reverence one should show during such times:

You see people you haven’t seen for years. And if it’s a family you grew up with, they’re so pleased you came. And, uh, there’s just different ways to look at things and you don’t mean to not be reverent, but people are glad to see each other. And it may have been forty or fifty years since you saw each other.⁹⁰

In both Neil and Joy’s experiences, eulogies have been seldom given. Most funerals have featured preachers who give the funeral sermon. Neil was emphatic that it is impossible to “preach someone into heaven:”

Our pastor said that he did the funeral for a person that had died across the mountain and some of them told him, “We want you to preach him into Heaven.” That was the sum total of it. And he said he knew the man’s life and he said, “I couldn’t do that. And they pretty well had it all down what they wanted me to say. And all I could do was, get up and say, He’s in the hands of a just God. And that’s all I could say. I couldn’t say anymore.” You pretty well know what a person has done in his lifetime and you don’t have to take and have someone to tell you, hey, he was a good fellow, yak, yak, yak, when you know he didn’t do it.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Neil interview.

When asked about the greatest change they have seen in the entire burial process, Joy gave a surprising answer. She explained that years ago flower girls were used to carry the flowers from the church to the cemetery. She told me what a pretty thing that was to watch. I have not seen any such ceremony referenced in my research to date. She also said that families are not allowed the time to spend with friends and family at the gravesite after the service because the funeral personnel are anxious to have the grave covered. She said that she could remember when they stood around talking for nearly an hour before they left the cemetery.

Neil stated that the time of day when funerals are held has changed from years past. Whereas most funerals now are held at night, they used to be conducted during the day. When asked why he thought this change had come about, he concluded it was because jobs have moved from the farm and public works employees are not able to take off from work to attend funerals.

Evelyn

Evelyn is a ninety-four-year-old woman who still works 365 days a year at her job as the airport manager of the Morristown Airport. She is somewhat of a legend, having spent the equivalent of six and a half years of her life in the air. She holds the Guinness Book of World Records for the most flight hours of anyone on earth. She still actively instructs students as well as administers flight tests. She spent a number of years as a member of the Tennessee Aeronautics Board and is active in the community. She was born in Corbin, Kentucky, but has lived in East Tennessee the majority of her life. She is a devout Christian and attends the local First Baptist Church every Sunday morning before reporting for work. She has been widowed twice and lives alone.

Evelyn could not articulate her early memories of funerals but she did have definite thoughts about what a funeral should be like. Instead of mourning one's death, she thought it better to celebrate the person's life, and stated she would hope that her funeral would be like that. She did remember a wake she attended sometime in the 1920s:

Someone died and I don't even remember who it was, but some of the young folks were friends of the person and we went and stayed with the family there until about midnight then we went home, just trying to be a comfort to them.⁹²

I asked her why she thought bodies weren't taken to the home like they were then:

Well, it's really better to have them at the funeral home, I think, because it's no point in having memories in the house of the dead person. Have memories in the house of when they were alive. And I think it's a good idea that they don't do it that way anymore.⁹³

Evelyn is old enough to remember a time when there were no cars and the only means of transportation was by horse and buggy or wagon. She related how the body was transported to the cemetery in a horse-drawn wagon.

When asked about how the location of cemeteries has changed over the years, she related the following:

Well, of course the location, some company buys a lot of land, they open up a new one and it's real nice, and they make them so you can mow the grass and all; they don't have stand-up monuments and things, so all the old ones have the stand-up ones and I love to go to an old, old cemetery and read the things on the monuments because they're very interesting. I guess it makes more sense like they do it now, because they can keep the cemetery looking so nice. Some of those old ones have old stuff just thrown around and they haven't been cleaned up in fifty years.⁹⁴

⁹² Evelyn, interview by author, tape recording, Morristown, Tenn., 6 September 2003.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Evelyn stated that, in her opinion, funerals and burials are not as personal as they once were. She stated that people are not as demonstrative as they once were; “they’ve kind of calmed down.”⁹⁵ As we talked about these occasions being times of socialization for family and friends, she stated:

Well, it was! They’d talk and talk, and of course they’d talk a lot about the person and things they’d done and all like that. Yes, it was. And sometimes people would sit there all night doing that talking.⁹⁶

The greatest change Evelyn has noticed in the burial process is “just going from a horse and wagon to a nice long big hearse that carries them from the funeral home to the cemetery.”

Wayne and Betty

Wayne and Betty are residents of Grainger County, Tennessee. Wayne, who is seventy-six years old, has lived in Grainger County all his life and Betty moved there from Hamblen County when they married nearly forty years ago. He is the CEO of a local bank and both are very active in the community. Betty, age sixty-four, entered the ministry about three years ago and has pastored a small church in Cocke County for the past year. Both Wayne and Betty are Methodists.

Both remembered their first experience with death at an early age. Betty was seven years old when her great aunt died at home. She was with her at the time. Wayne recalled the death of his great uncle when he was ten. He related the following:

The first I can remember is my great uncle who was about eighty years old and he passed away and they embalmed him at the house and the funeral director just left him there and the people sat up that night with him, all

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

night, and I remember staying real late. My father brought us home and he went back and spent the rest of the night. He already had his casket made, it was handmade, and a local carpenter in the community made it. And as I remember, it was made out of oak, and probably trees off of his property.⁹⁷

When asked about the role their religious beliefs play in the observance of burial practices, Betty had an interesting thought that could be considered a more “modern” attitude for the region:

I think a body should be treated with respect but my religious beliefs are that the person, the soul has already departed and so it really doesn't matter. I think the services that we do are for the comfort of the survivors and have nothing to do whatsoever with the deceased.⁹⁸

When talking about unusual burial customs, Wayne stated something he had been told as a child, which reflected early superstitions of the area:

I've heard that in the early years of America, in colonial times, that they used to put coins on their eyes to keep them from seeing the spirits (of the deceased).⁹⁹

Grainger County is a very rural area, and both Wayne and Betty remembered hearing the church bell toll when someone died and counting the number of times it rang for a clue to the deceased's identity. Wayne recalled:

I remember when they used to toll the bell, you could hear it from Helton Springs down here and it was real clear. We'd be out working in the fields around here and we would count how many years it was and we would know if it was somebody real old and it was just plain as could be.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Wayne, interview by author, tape recording, Rutledge, Tenn., 22 August 2003.

⁹⁸ Betty, interview by author, tape recording, Rutledge, Tenn. 22 August 2003.

⁹⁹ Wayne interview.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

In Wayne's opinion, the greatest change in burial customs is the availability of modern facilities to prepare bodies for burial, making the process much more convenient for the family. Betty had another perspective:

Well, I think we went for a period of time there where it was quite the style and if you had the money, you had all this taken care of by the professionals. So everything was done at the funeral home. Now I see a little bit of drift back to churches and a number of people are lying in state. Of course that causes a little bit more trouble because usually...well, they've also drifted to the business of receiving friends and then having the service the following day, having the actual burial and the graveside. Well, of course if you're at the church, then you've got a body to go back and forth with, so, that makes it a little more difficult.¹⁰¹

As the discussion turned to private burial plots, both interviewees told of having knowledge of several family cemeteries in Grainger County that are still used to inter bodies. Betty related the following:

[In a private cemetery], you're protected by law, regardless of who buys that property, that cemetery remains a family cemetery and you can't just demolish it or do anything to it and you've got to allow access to that family to visit that grave if they want to.¹⁰²

I asked who dug the grave at the last burial they attended at a private family cemetery. Wayne explained:

They had a gravedigger come in with a machine. Now in the early days, people would come in and dig the grave for the family...their friends and people in the church. They wouldn't have to be called. And when they found out they were dead, they would just go and gather at the cemetery.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Betty interview.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Wayne interview.

When asked about their memory of sitting up with the body, Wayne stated the last time he did so was when his grandmother died about sixty years earlier. He described the night:

I drank coffee most of the night to stay awake, and of course, they had a lot of food there. Neighbors would bring in a bountiful amount of food and just eat and of course people would take little naps and somebody would stay awake all the time. I guess [we] kind of replayed their life and thought of all the good things.¹⁰⁴

We began to talk about how things have changed through the years and both Wayne and Betty thought the burial process has become less personal, with health professionals attempting to spare the family from having to deal first-hand with death.

Betty explained the evolution like this:

Usually, neighbor ladies came in and washed the body. And of course now we're not aware of it. That's done even now at the funeral home or the hospital room. The family is asked to step outside while someone cleans up the body, so that's kind of a procedure, which is a hygiene that they just do. Of course, now you also have the aspect if someone dies at home, the coroner must come and you cannot touch that body, you cannot move that body until the coroner has come. You couldn't; in fact, you can get in a little bit of trouble just moving it from the floor, if the person has collapsed on the floor. You're really just not supposed to bother it. It's got to be covered and noted as natural. That's one of the advantages of hospice, for example, because hospice can bypass that.¹⁰⁵

Betty also noted that it was important for the deceased to be buried in the finest clothes available:

It think it's also interesting to note that when Wayne, in his time as a child, people would be laid out with their very best clothes, be that whether it was overalls, coveralls or what, they were still the best they had. Now, we even have funeral homes that will provide shrouds or, you know, someone who's been real sick will be buried with a fancy little nightgown and bed jacket and all that kind of stuff. It's just a little different. Now Nanny Shirley (Wayne's mother) wanted to be buried in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Betty interview.

her party dress, so she was buried in her party dress. She went out in style!¹⁰⁶

Both participants thought that religious beliefs of residents are not as strong as they once were, noting that it is not unusual for family members to attend different churches, and this impacts the burial process. They related how their children today attend one church while they attend another. Betty related that:

Mom and Dad, Dad went to the Baptist church and Mom went to the Methodist church and I turned out to Presbyterianism for a while, so we just had everybody going everywhere.¹⁰⁷

Consequently, one family would have ties to multiple churches. Instead of using one of the local church cemeteries for family burial, members tend to prefer the services of professional memorial gardens, where the family can be buried together despite their religious affiliations.

Betty, as a Methodist minister, talked about the receiving of friends and her experience as it relates to this being a time of socialization for the family:

Well, I run into the two extremes. I run into families that felt like it was absolutely a sin for anybody to laugh or to, you know, and then you get other families who enjoy telling the fun things and the good things they've experienced with the deceased. Well, it concerns me because I feel like it is to be celebrated. And I feel like when someone cannot find, you know, when they can't remember the good, I don't know, I don't know...¹⁰⁸

Betty also explained that, in her experience of going to funerals, ministers and loved ones often deliver eulogies. She described them as follows:

Well, for the most part, they're just a capsule of the person's life. And there, too, it runs the whole list of...I did a funeral not too many months ago that the woman was actually not a Christian, so the family, well, in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

fact she was an alcoholic. Oddly enough it was very amusing because the family, when I asked them if they'd like to share memories of this aunt who had no children of her own, they told about cleaning hogs and getting drunk and trying to make souse meat when they were pretty well soused themselves, so it was just a closure, it was a humorous time of remembering a very favorite aunt and they loved to do it. But, it did not have the overtones as for someone who had been a little more pious would have. So it was a little different.¹⁰⁹

A short time before the interview was conducted, a local doctor had died. He is thought to have been the oldest doctor in Tennessee, dying at age 101. Both Wayne and Betty described the eulogy given at his funeral:

We were just at a funeral a couple of weeks ago; Dr. Bryan's, and his daughter and his grandson and great granddaughter read a poem. She was a very young child, and she read a poem that she had written so it was very family-oriented. Now it was hard, I mean those family members quite often will do a little crying, and it's very emotional for them. Dr. Bryan's grandson related about him buying that Mach II Mustang and talked about that, and in fact the Mustang set in front of Dr. Bryan's house with white flowers on the hood the day of the funeral. It sure did. So I think maybe we can't really say that it's getting less personal.¹¹⁰

Betty went on to talk about the funeral of a music teacher:

But then I also attended a funeral in this last year. She was a music teacher and her children were both musical and her daughter played the piano for her son to play a trumpet and it was absolutely gorgeous. They were music majors and it was a concert. Just absolutely beautiful and it was tailored to that individual and I think we're doing more of that. We're tailoring to the individual.¹¹¹

As we talked about changes in burial customs, Betty had an interesting thought about what she considers one of the greatest changes:

Well, probably, twenty-five or thirty years ago there would not have been the memorial gifts for blue-collar people. Maybe people who were very well off financially might do great big memorial things but now there are a

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

lot of Gideon Bibles, there are a lot of church building funds, the organ fund, and this sort of thing. Now of course we have another facet of things that have changed and that's organ donations. So there again, fifty years ago you wouldn't have mutilated a body. You wouldn't have removed any organs.¹¹²

Wayne had a different perspective:

About thirty or forty years ago, people didn't have the money to buy the flowers and if it was spring or summer, they would bring flowers from out of their garden and I think probably that now all the flowers are purchased.¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Wayne interview.

CHAPTER 5

THE PREACHER AND THE UNDERTAKER

Two individuals were interviewed for their perspective on burial customs of the area. One is a seventy-four-year-old retired minister and the other is a fifty-two-year-old embalmer/funeral director. This chapter will focus on their interviews and Appalachian burial customs from their points of view.

Marvin

Marvin is a seventy-four-year-old Baptist minister who recently retired from his pastorate for health reasons. He spent the last two years battling cancer and appears to have won the fight, but it has left him weak and less energetic than usual. He has lived in Grainger County all his life and was a bivocational minister for the past forty-eight years. He has worked as a mechanic, mail carrier, and even owned an auto body shop at one time. He is married with children and grandchildren. He is a very gentle man and is well known in the community as a minister always willing to assist when needed. He has pastored several churches, seldom if ever being without a pastorate.

Marvin is unlike many “old timey preachers” as concerns his attitude of the appropriate way to conduct a funeral service. He explained it this way:

Well, one of the things that has stood out with me over the years is, when I was just a boy, my neighbor and mother were talking and she was telling about when my dad passed away and she was telling about the minister who officiated the funeral and some of the things that he said, and of course, that fascinated me. I was interested in listening even though I hadn't made a profession of faith at that time, but, she was telling about the preacher talking about telling the family that, “He's gone, and that old cane you heard making the noise, tap, tap, tap, will never be heard again, and the place at the table where he always sat – that chair will be vacant,” and just a number of things that would call attention to him. And I thought even then that, if I were going to do a funeral, I certainly wouldn't use that approach. What I've done over the years is, to try to point out,

not so much of what the family has lost, but what the deceased has gained. And in doing that, I feel like that I'm often consoling to the family instead of making a hardship. And over the years, that's the way I've always done it. Most of the people that I've officiated funerals for, I say most of them, there have been total strangers that I haven't even met. I probably just knew some of the family. So most of them I could talk and say something about their relationship with the Lord, the church, their community and so forth. And I try to do it that way because I know that, on a personal level, when they're gone, they're gone. And I know there's going to be a vacancy there that only time can replace with them. And I try to point out certain advantages.¹¹⁴

I asked him how he thought burial customs were tied to the local history of the region, and he explained that before the local funeral home burned in the 1960s, most bodies were embalmed at the funeral home and then taken to the home for viewing. They were then transported to the church for the funeral and burial in the church cemetery. After the funeral home was rebuilt, it was equipped with a chapel. Families gradually started having the viewing and the funeral at the funeral home because it was easier and more convenient.

When asked about special or unusual requests families make regarding the burial, he related the following experience:

I had one gentlemen buried lying on his side. He requested that. He wanted his body placed in the casket with his left hand under his right cheek and they laid him on his side. That's the only one that I can remember like that. That's the way he slept. He was going to sleep and that was his request and they carried it out. But I'll tell you, a number of people have requested to be buried in ball caps and things like that.¹¹⁵

We talked about the funeral sermon and, when asked if it had changed over the years, he told me that his sermons had basically remained the same, but the amount of time allotted for the actual sermon had decreased considerably:

¹¹⁴ Marvin, interview by author, tape recording, Rutledge, Tenn., 11 July 2004 and 10 August 2004.

You know, back years ago, even before my knowledge, if the preacher didn't talk for an hour and a half, why he hadn't done the funeral justice. But, twenty or thirty minutes at the most with a song or two is sufficient. Even with another minister doing the prayer, it's about a half hour.¹¹⁶

He went on to tell me about the longest sermon of which he had knowledge:

All total, it (the funeral) was about 6 hours. And it was this friend of mine, a mortician. And I was riding with him to a funeral over there (in Cocke County). He said that he and his partner had the funeral in this very small church and the minister met them at the church. He got up and when he started out he said he didn't have a whole lot to say, and it took him two hours to say it. And just before he sat down, he saw another minister back there in the congregation and he said, "Now, so and so is back here and he might have a word or two to say." Brother so and so said he didn't have much more to add but it took him two hours to prove that he couldn't. And then when he concluded what he was going to say he saw another minister and he called him by name and said he might have a word or two, and he said he stood up and said, "I don't think I could add anything to what these two brothers have already said," as he was walking to the podium, and it took him two hours to point that out. And so it was a 6-hour service. And the weather, it was real cold and they had a big potbellied stove and it was red hot, you know, burning up on one side of the church and freezing on the other, children crying. I can't imagine putting a family through something like that. I can't imagine! There's such a thing as spiritual ignorance – just to make a long story short. It's not the spirit of the Lord, but there's spiritual ignorance.¹¹⁷

As we talked about his experiences of "sitting up" with families, Marvin described his own personal encounter when his father died:

My dad died in 1972 and he requested that his body be kept at home, so we didn't have any other choice. And it just so happened it was a rainy time; it was just a terrible time. I'll never forget that. I look back and I question whether it was the right thing. There must have been 30 or 40 people that would sit up with us. That was a very common thing back then. We'd gossip and talk and eat, you know, there's always a bunch of food at that time. People cook a lot and bring a lot of food. And we just stayed up all night.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

I asked him about the state of his emotions after staying up all night and then having to endure a funeral and burial. He said that his emotions were on the edge and he felt just terrible the next day. It was very hard on the family to bring the body home, sit up all night, and then endure a funeral and burial the next day. Even so, they appreciated family and friends surrounding them during such a difficult time.

I was interested in whether families still requested that the body be displayed at the church for the viewing and subsequent funeral instead of leaving it at the funeral home, although from personal experience, the funeral home is used more often. I think one reason families use the funeral home is because it is more convenient. Another reason is the decline in the number of people who have a deep relationship with a particular church congregation. Since funeral homes have modern chapels in which to hold funeral services, there is undeniably less time and trouble involved in having the service at the home. Having the service in one place allows participants to feel as if they are in church. If a person has not made a specific request to have his or her funeral at their church, the family usually does not feel compelled to do so. Marvin told me:

There's more funerals going on at the funeral home than the church; that's been my experience. My wife's aunt died recently and she requested to be taken to the church. That was her request. But, I don't do too many funerals at the church. It's more convenient and then, too, because of work situations, most people...there was a time that more people farmed and they quit what they were doing, but now, they're on public works and they pretty much can't leave work, so it makes it a little more difficult. And for a day funeral, you don't have too many people. But a night service, that's when you will have more of a crowd. They can be there. Most funerals are at night and of course they've got it arranged now that if all the pallbearers can't be present, they'll let the funeral directors and others join in, no problem with that. But that's why it's changed.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

As expected, Marvin stated that the average funeral process from death to burial takes about three days, if family and friends can gather in that amount of time. Only on rare occasions will the process last longer, if family live out of town or if the funeral home has multiple funerals to conduct.

As we talked about funeral sermon content, Marvin shared some insight into one of the Bible's stories about a certain funeral:

I remember when I first started in the ministry, I thought I'd go to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and get me a funeral message. You can't get them in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John because Christ was alive then and he didn't attend any funerals. He would call the deceased back, but he didn't attend any funerals. It's kind of humorous, but I've thought about the boy that we read about, the son of the widow that died, and they were carrying his body to the graveyard to bury him. And now you might say Christ just happened by that day, but no, he didn't. They were supposed to cross paths. But what's humorous about it is telling the gravediggers to fill the grave back up because we don't need them anymore. Did you ever think about that? I can imagine them saying, "What do you mean, fill it back up, you don't need it anymore? A man just came along and called that boy back to life? Who is that man? I want to see him." So I don't know what happened as a result. There may have been a lot of people became followers of Christ because of that. See we're getting just bits and pieces of the manuscript. We don't get an in-depth detail of what took place.¹²⁰

As the conversation turned to grave digging, I asked him about the last time he preached a funeral in which family and friends actually dug the grave:

To my knowledge, the last hand-dug grave was in Central Point. It was dug by hand – with a mattock, pick and shovel, and I remember whenever it was. And back in those days they didn't have vaults. The grave itself was dug about eight inches wider at the top and they'd go down, I believe at that time it was about six feet, and they would go down about four feet where it was eight inches wider, then they would narrow it down about eight inches narrower and what it did, it made a ledge that they could put wood boards across there and that kept the dirt from sinking in on the coffin. That was the purpose. They had to leave a ledge on both sides of the grave. That's the way they did it, all dug by hand. That was the purpose of the tolling of the bell, that was to call in the grave diggers and

¹²⁰ Ibid.

let the community know that so-and-so had been sick and they had died, and they pretty well knew who had died by counting the times the bell tolled, they pretty much knew who it was. But it was also a call for the men to start digging the grave.¹²¹

When asked about his memory of the use of handmade caskets, Marvin told me about the following experience:

I've only had one funeral with a handmade casket. I had it at Central Point. I pastored there for twenty-two years all together. But, this fellow who lived in Knox County came out of the Central Point community and he had a walnut handmade casket and when he passed away, they used that casket. I think it was made by either his uncle or his grandfather. And there were six wing nuts, two on each side and two on the end, and that held the lid on. And when we got to the church, they took the lid off and they set it on its side behind the casket. And it was made – it was narrow down here and came out wider at the top, and it was black walnut and shined like new.¹²²

Marvin explained that in this area most people request that the casket be opened for viewing. Only rarely, and usually when the body cannot be displayed properly because of the way he or she died, does the family request to close the casket. He described one such experience:

I've only had one double funeral. They were two brothers-in-law, and they had married sisters from the church down there at Deep Springs, my first pastorate. They moved out of that community, the four of them, and they both worked at the same job. One morning there was an old train they started to try to get in front of and it hit them and the car burned, and I had their funeral. And they requested the caskets be closed. That was the only double funeral I've done.¹²³

Marvin stated he had conducted around two thousand funerals in his forty-eight years of preaching. When asked about what he considered the greatest change in the

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

entire funeral process from his perspective, he again referenced the change in the type of jobs residents of the county have:

I think the biggest change is; you take for instance the time for the funeral. I think the work changed as far as public works jobs. I know back when I first started forty-eight years ago, most people worked on the farm but now they work on public work, and their job demands their presence. You've got someone operating a machine and the second person depends on that first machine to operate, you can't afford to have that person be off. If we were all farmers it would be a lot easier. And it's just that simple.¹²⁴

Steve

Steve is a life-long resident of Hamblen County, Tennessee, where he continues to live. At fifty-two years of age, he has worked in the embalming industry since he was sixteen years old. He worked part-time at the local mortuary during high school, went to embalming school after graduation, and has worked full-time in the funeral industry since. He also owns and operates a part-time auction company with his wife. His vocation has been a "calling" and he remembers always having a fascination with anything to do with burial practices. He is a Missionary Baptist.

When asked what he considered to be the greatest change over the years in the observance of certain burial customs, Steve related that the amount of time the family is willing to spend between the death and burial has shortened:

I think people have gotten to where anymore they don't want the lengthy type services; they don't want to wait anymore. They want to go ahead and get it over with. Used to, it would take you maybe three or four days to have a final from start to finish, but now they get to where, people any more, they want to get it over with as soon as they can, they don't want to wait around on it, you know.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Steve, interview by author, tape recording, Morristown, Tenn., 19 March 2004.

He told me that local customs influence burial practices in that “whatever the area customs are, they’re still going on now, forty years from now or forty years ago, they’re still a base, still a hub.” This leads me to wonder if we have preserved local customs or simply have complied with whatever has become acceptable in contemporary practice.

Steve had an interesting story about the most unusual funeral he conducted. He described the experience of working with a group of Hell’s Angels when one of their members died. It should be noted that the Hell’s Angels organization is a national one and the following is not typical of the local area. It does, however, bring to mind Crissman’s description of friends placing personal objects into the coffin of the deceased:¹²⁶

Well, it was a very clannish thing. I mean they came in here with all the motorcycles and they all went by the casket and everybody had to throw something inside the casket as some kind of token. They threw in money, they threw in jewelry, they threw in different clothing. Headbands was a big thing, and like I said, some of them even threw in money, little trinkets, rings, so on and so forth, I mean that just about filled that thing up. [The deceased] was dressed in blue jeans, kind of a khaki type shirt, I guess, with a vest, a leather vest, and I believe some type of headband, something like that. But this vest had all kinds of Hell’s Angels stuff on it, all that, representing the club they belonged to and all that. It was rather unusual. It was different than any other funeral you’ve been to in your life. They had their own minister, I guess you might say. He didn’t...he got into some religion, I guess, in the service, but basically he was talking about the Hell’s Angels programs and all they had done, and of course we had them lined up going to the cemetery out here. There were at least 60 of them and they all rode their motorcycles, every one of them. They all cranked up out here and it was the awfulest thunder you’ve ever heard.¹²⁷

In talking about the funeral sermon, Steve’s opinion is that it has not changed very much over the years except to include more personal references to the deceased:

¹²⁶ Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia*, 111.

¹²⁷ Steve interview.

One thing that ministers are trying to do now, they're trying to do more of a eulogy thing toward people. Which is good, I think. Instead of just getting up and preaching, they're trying to do more the eulogy and trying to make it more related to the person's life, which people pay more attention to that, too, than the preacher just getting up and preaching. I mean, anyone can get up and preach a funeral like that, but if he knows the person and can speak of the person and there's a trend to do that now. We're doing a lot of the family portrait thing – people bringing in pictures of the family and picture boards, you know, and put pictures of a person's life and experiences on it. And it's a good thing. Use to, you never did it, but now the trend is moving more in that direction.¹²⁸

In Steve's experience, he seldom receives requests from family members to take the body of loved ones to their homes for viewing. The last request occurred about three years previously:

That was just a situation where it had just been the custom to take the family member home, and to them it was the only way to do it. We took it there early that morning and the body stayed there all that night and we went back the next day and got it and then we left from there and went to a church and had the service. The family took care of it all (while at the home). We went back to check on them periodically. There's no rules or laws or anything that says someone has to be there (with the body). It's just customary that somebody will.¹²⁹

In describing the average time period between the death and burial, Steve said the average is about three days, although there is some deviation on that time period:

Well, usually [it's] a three-day thing, most of the time. Like if you have a death on Friday and you have the weekend coming up, usually they don't have a paper here on Saturday or the family might wait till Sunday night to have visitation and, that being the case, you usually finish up on Monday then. But if it's during the week, say they have the death on Monday morning, then they might want to receive friends on Tuesday night, and they might even want to do the funeral Tuesday night and the burial Wednesday morning. Like I say, the cycle's gotten shorter now than what it used to be. Cause used to be, visitation was always over two nights cause you might have a death on Monday and you might receive friends on Tuesday and Wednesday and you wouldn't have the service until

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Thursday. We seldom have a situation like that now. Unless it's a black, now. Now the blacks, now a lot of times they hold out for a longer period of time than the whites do, for some reason. Of course, there's a black funeral home in town. But we still do, gosh, twenty-five or thirty a year, that many calls. Now they've kindly took on a change too, they're different than what they used to be. They have a tendency now to do it all in one day. Having a visitation like from twelve to two, the funeral at two then going on and burying them. So, they're doing it all in one day now. It's an all-day thing. White folks really haven't taken up on it like the blacks have. The blacks are really going to this trend, more so than the white folks. The last three black services we've had, they all operated under this procedure.¹³⁰

Because funeral personnel deal with many families of different faiths, I was interested to know what kind of sermon is usually requested. According to Steve, the sermon content has changed over the years from one of hell and damnation to something that focuses more on the life of the deceased:

Most of the time, they just want something – not lengthy, and if the minister can speak of the person's life, and they don't want a really, like I say something real...except if it's someone, say, that's been a member of the church – someone's who's been real active in the church. Maybe a minister or something like that. They don't want a lot of hoopla in a service. Simple, to the point, and move on. Of course, closure has to come at a certain point.¹³¹

Contrary to Marvin's experiences in Grainger County, Steve stated that he sees about half the funerals conducted at the funeral home and half in the church, especially for very religious and faithful church members:

If the person's a real active member of the church, been real dedicated and faithful, then it just seems fitting to have the service at the church. But if it's just the ole average person out here, you know, why most of the time they just have it here. See, funeral homes are now all equipped for services in their facilities, where used to, forty or fifty years ago they weren't. Everything had to be done outside [the funeral home] – and was

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

because most of the bodies were taken home, and then taken to the church the next day. So, it's changed.¹³²

Something that is not very prevalent is to have the family dig the grave. Steve attributes this to a liability issue as well as the restrictions of commercial cemeteries:

We discourage it big time anymore, because these cemeteries – they've all gotten to the point where they're trying to be real cautious. They're trying to keep them in good shape. And then the mowing has to be done. Most cemeteries now, they don't want families in there digging. They want a professional team in there doing it so they can haul off the excess dirt, do the grave tapping where you don't have a lot of sinkage afterward, you know, and they'll just almost discourage it entirely, you know. We will, too. Sometimes you do (have private cemeteries). Now if you get over into your more rural counties like Hancock County and some in Grainger County, you have the little small family plots. And it'll just be the family custom to dig the grave. Which in that case is fine. But if you go to a church cemetery, especially if you go to a memorial gardens, they do their own. They have their own attendants who take care of all the lawn and they want it looking good all the time, which I can understand. They're selling these graves and it's a money thing, too. Of course, we'll always tell them that if they're going to dig the grave, then they need to have provisions to fill the grave. If they're going to take all the responsibility of doing it, then they're going to have to follow it all the way through.¹³³

Steve said he had not had the opportunity to use a handmade casket. He told me he had seen them in storage in some funeral homes, but no one had ever requested burial in one. "People just don't think about that. Most of the time they want something pretty nice and decent."¹³⁴

Most people do, however, request an open casket for viewing. He attributed this to a family's need for closure:

It's part of the whole funeral profession to see the remains back into a life-like appearance. That's what the visitation and open casket does, you know, your body is restored back, embalmed and dressed and it's put back

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

into what's referred to as a life-like appearance. And it just gives a final closure and people see the person more in a restful state and knowing that they've done everything that they can – it's just the final aspect of it. The viewing aspect is still as much now as it was fifty years ago, I guess.¹³⁵

When asked if he thought families are attempting to make the burial process more personal, Steve replied that he thought they were:

They're wanting to do more the personalization of it. The eulogy part and wanting to do the picture boards and maybe a lot of time also, the family themselves will get up and speak about the person's life. We've had that to happen, too. Maybe like a son or daughter or a brother will make an attempt to get up and say...and do a good job of it, too. Now I know that Richard Emmert over here at Manley Church, now he's gotten where anymore, especially at the graveside, and he's done it at some of the services, but he's done it more at the graveside after Scripture and prayer, he'll say, "Does anyone have anything you want to say? Does anyone have any comments?" And really you'd be surprised how many people will get up and will make a comment before they leave the graveside. Which I think is fine. I think that's the way it ought to be, instead of having just...like I say, any preacher can preach anyone's funeral; just get up and have a little Scripture and prayer and Bible and all like that. But the personalization puts it just where it needs to be.¹³⁶

He has even had requests from family members to be allowed to style the deceased's hair and, on rare occasions, to help dress the corpse:

I haven't had many to help dress. I've had many, like in cases of ladies; the daughters will come in and fix the mother's hair. Which is fine, if they feel comfortable with it. I always question them pretty good, saying, "Do you feel comfortable about this? Can you do this?" And we always try to, somebody stays with them during this time, so if they have any problems or anything we can always escort them out or something. But most of the time, the family members that have done the hair have been very strong and they've done a good job of it, too.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

When asked about his opinion of the greatest change in the burial process, he stated the cost of the funeral and a family's desire to keep the cost down:

I think there's a trend out there, like everything else, funeral cost has gone up. Just like anything. Used to, everybody came in and they wanted to buy the very best, you know, that you could buy. Of course, now with funeral costs what they are and rising all the time, I think people are being a little more conservative in their buying than they used to be. Instead of buying copper or bronze, they're buying a good steel casket instead. Which is good, you know. I think they're being a little bit more conservative in their purchasing than they used to be. Then, of course, you've got cremation, which is coming on, too. We do quite a few. And of course, cremation is a cost factor. Basically, that's what it is. I mean you don't have to buy a casket, you don't have to buy a, unless you want a service, you don't have to have a service, but, and it's a lot of times we find they're doing it strictly on a matter of cost. Keep that cost down there. So yes, that's been one of the biggest changes, is cost. The purchasing of merchandise, and families are more inquisitive now about what's here, you know, what else do you have. Which we cover the whole spectrum. When I'm working with a family, I tell them we have our caskets start here, and go here, and arrange to show you anything you're comfortable with, and then we start with them and they can add, subtract, whatever they need to do.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of my study on burial customs was to determine if certain burial practices unique to the people of Southern Appalachia are changing as a result of the growing presence of the modern funeral industry in the region. As I interviewed residents, a funeral director, and a minister, it became evident that several themes emerged among these lifelong residents of East Tennessee. The emerging themes included the following:

- A strong sense of community continues to dominate the Appalachian burial experience.
- Most of the people I interviewed agreed that religion plays a critical role in the observance of burial practices.
- The growing presence of the modern funeral industry has influenced the way Appalachians bury their dead.
- The changing economic climate has affected when funerals are scheduled.

Friends and family, upon hearing of a death in the community, continue to take food to the home of the bereaved and attempt to comfort them by their presence. It is not unusual for friends and family to eat communally in the home of the bereaved for several days, from the first notification of a death until after the funeral.

Although the climate is slowly changing, my research showed that apparently the Southern Appalachians I interviewed still believe a proper burial entails burying the body in the earth. Very few believe that a Christian burial permits cremation. My interviewees tend to prefer open casket viewings. It is also apparent that in seeing the

body brought back to a life-like, restful appearance, many persons apparently are comforted. It is during this viewing that people are allowed to say their last goodbyes. The bereaved believe the funeral is for the comfort of the survivors and most, but not all, see a decline in the “hell and damnation” content of the sermon relative to remembering the deceased. One interviewee stated that a funeral is sometimes the only time some people are in the presence of a minister and that, therefore, the time should be used to preach to them in an attempt to save their souls. However, people are delivering eulogies more often and there is an effort underway to make the funeral more of a celebration of the deceased’s life. Although the actual funeral service has decreased in length, there seems to be more of an effort to personalize it with picture boards showing the deceased’s life in photographs.

Friends and family seldom build the casket and dig the grave anymore because of the use of grave digging equipment, purchased vaults and caskets, and other modern funeral practices that have changed the burial customs in Southern Appalachia. In years past, when the men of the community first heard the church bell toll, notifying them of a death, they immediately came together to start building the casket and then dig the grave. This was a time for social interaction between the men to both grieve and contribute something tangible to the bereaved family. Given the fact that caskets are commercially produced and graves are seldom dug by hand, this social dimension has changed completely. Gravesites are still considered sacred, even if they are located in private cemeteries, which according to my research, is a diminishing tradition. Commercially-produced tombstones are the norm and have been for several years now. No one I talked to would dream of making a homemade tombstone.

Modern funeral homes have made the task of burial more convenient, but at the cost of less personal involvement by the family. The family spends less time in the actual process, with the funeral personnel embalming the body, dressing it, and preparing it for viewing. Family members may not perform the services they performed in the past, but making arrangements does constitute personal involvement. Whether this is a positive or negative consequence is arguable. It is my opinion that this limited personal involvement prolongs the actual grieving process. In an effort to shield the bereaved from further pain, it simply delays the actual grief process that all must endure.

Before the modern facilities became available, bodies were taken home and the family was never left alone until days after the burial. The home was the center of Appalachian burial customs. That has been changed by the modern funeral industry. Although not prohibited by law in Tennessee, taking a body home is adamantly discouraged by funeral home personnel, thereby making the funeral home the center of burial activity. Funeral homes have added chapels, replacing both the home and the church in the burial process. Now the family schedules a set time to receive friends at the funeral home or church and this interaction has become more of a time to socialize. Socializing in this context can be considered a form of grieving for the family, especially as it involves friends and family of the deceased, but it was apparent from my interviews that this socialization process can also be construed as being disrespectful to the deceased. Again, there is a time and place for everything, and the individuals I interviewed definitely did not think this should be a time for “cutting up,” a term used to describe when the socializing goes beyond acceptable limits.

My interviewees expressed that in years past, people in more rural areas farmed the land and few of them worked public jobs. As the economic climate changed and agriculture in the area decreased, more residents work outside the family farm. This has had an impact on when funerals are scheduled. Most families receive friends with the funeral following in the evenings, allowing more people the opportunity to attend the services. It is more difficult to leave a job for a few hours in the middle of the day than it was to leave the farm.

Although the grieving process is universal, local customs influence the burial process. They dictate how we grieve as well as the length and appropriateness of our funeral etiquette. While selected areas of East Tennessee still observe localized customs, what was generally accepted fifty years ago may no longer apply in this faster-paced world.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I had two questionnaires; one for the elderly interviewees and one for ministers/funeral personnel.

1. Describe your first memory relating to the funeral or burial of someone.
2. How old were you at the time?
3. Describe your religious beliefs as they relate to burial customs.
4. What is the most unusual custom or tradition you've encountered relating to burial customs?
5. Where have the greatest changes occurred relating to burial customs?
6. Have you ever known of someone who was buried at home in a private family cemetery?
7. If so, did the family and friends of the deceased dig the grave?
8. Did they also cover the grave after burial?
9. Do you remember the last time you attended a wake held in the home with the deceased present?
10. Can you describe it?
11. How long ago was it?
12. Why do you think this practice was stopped, or at least doesn't happen as often anymore?
13. Have changes occurred in the way funeral processions are conducted?
14. Can you describe these changes and give any insights as to why they have occurred?
15. Have you observed a change in the location of cemeteries in past years, and if so, how have they changed?
16. Do you think funerals and burials are as personal as they used to be?
17. Why or why not?
18. Have you ever "sat up" with the family of the deceased?
19. How long ago was that?
20. Please describe that experience.
21. Do you consider the receiving of friends, or "sitting up" to be a time for socialization?
22. Why or why not?
23. In your experience, are eulogies usually given?
24. By whom?
25. How has this changed over the years?
26. What is the greatest change you've observed in the entire burial process?
27. In your opinion, what brought about this change?

1. In your experience, what are the greatest changes that have occurred over the years as it relates to the observance of certain burial customs?
2. How are burial customs and rituals influenced by local customs as well as the history of the region?
3. Describe the most unusual custom or tradition you've encountered as it relates to death and burial.
4. Have you observed changes in the funeral sermon over the years?
5. How so?
6. Do families still request the body be taken home for the sitting up?
7. When was the last time this happened?
8. Thinking about visitations, how often do families request that the body be displayed at the church?
9. How many days does the average receiving of friends and actual funeral and burial last?
10. Has this changed over the years?
11. What kind of sermon is usually requested for the funeral?
12. How is this different from the funerals of 20 to 30 years ago?
13. Where do most funerals happen?
14. Has this changed over the years?
15. How prevalent is it to have the family insist on digging the grave?
16. In those instances where they do, do they also fill the grave in after the body has been placed in it?
17. Do you remember a time when most caskets were handmade?
18. When did this begin to change?
19. Do families ever use "homemade" caskets today?
20. Can you describe a time when this was the case?
21. About how often does the family request the casket be opened for the viewing and receiving of friends?
22. How has this changed over the years?
23. Why do you think this has or has not changed?
24. Do you feel families are attempting to make the whole burial process more personal these days?
25. In what ways?
26. What is the greatest change you've observed in the entire burial process?
27. What brought about this change?

APPENDIX B

“FAMILY FUNERAL PHOTOGRAPHS”



At my great-grandfather's home before his funeral 1968



Later at the graveside service



One of my distant relatives – early 1970s



VITA

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