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Death and Burial in The Mountains

THE PREPARATION AND BURIAL OF THE DEAD

The view that burial and funeral customs in the Southern Highlands 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. There are records of hollow logs being used for coffins, split slabs and rails, or stones being placed around for greater protection. There are records of efforts to preserve bodies by salting and of having graves chiseled in rock for greater permanence. Legs have been broken, when rigor mortis set in before proper laying out could be accomplished, so the body would fit into the coffin. In pioneer days some bodies were buried quickly and wagons run over the graves to mislead Indians who might desecrate the graves. None of these are more strange, considering the circumstances, than the modern emphasis on embalming and steel vaults. Each demonstrates a deep respect for the dead, a sense of the dignity and sacredness of death, and the desire to keep



the body intact and inviolable.

But as with other aspects of mountain life, burial customs and funeral customs have changed and are changing. And with the changes, some of the better aspects of that life are passing—the imaginative use of native materials, independence and self-sufficiency, the ability to “make-do,” to respond instead of being handed made responses, to be whole and natural. This sort of condition with its loss of dignity was long ago pointed out by Henry W. Grady in his “Parable” of a Pickens County, Georgia, funeral which is worth quoting again in some detail:

. . . They buried him in the midst of a marble quarry: they cut through solid marble to make his grave: and yet a little tombstone they put above him was from Vermont. They buried him in the heart of a pine forest, and yet the pine coffin was imported from Cincinnati. They buried him within the touch of an iron mine, and yet the nails in his coffin and the iron in the shovel that dug his grave were imported from Pittsburgh. They buried him by the side of the best sheep-grazing country on earth, and yet the wool in the coffin bands themselves were brought from the North. The South didn't furnish a thing on earth for that funeral but the corpse and the hole in the ground. There they put him away and the clods rattled down on his coffin, and they buried him in a New York coat and a Boston pair of shoes and a pair of breeches from Chicago and a shirt from Cincinnati, leaving him nothing to carry into the next world with him to remind him of the country in which he lived, and for which he fought for four years, but the chill of blood in his veins and the marrow in his bones.

It is the purpose here to describe the older customs of preparation and burial

with occasional comments on changes, and it must be remembered that it is to the rural areas rather than the towns that the descriptions most faithfully apply.

The Laying Out of the Dead

Death was often preceded by a vision, especially if the person was old or had been ill for some time. Frequently the person would designate someone to prepare the body for burial—a close friend or relative. Some specified even to the manner of the funeral, the preachers to conduct the services, the clothes in which they were to be buried, and the kind of wood to be used in the coffin. Some had their coffins built years before their deaths. One man who had done so used his as a storage bin for seed corn.

The preparation of the body began as soon as death was assured. Generally two boards were put together to form a cooling board on which the body was placed while final preparations were being made. However, the body could be laid out on the bed. The hands and feet of the body were tied so that when rigor mortis set in the body would be in a natural comfortable position. A rag was then tied under the chin and over the head to keep the mouth closed. Pennies or small coins were often placed on the eyes to weight the eyes closed. Sometimes these coins were kept for years expressly for this purpose. In the event that rigor mortis set in before the death was discovered, the muscles could sometimes be relaxed by massaging the body with a warm wet cloth.

The body was then washed and clothed. The burial garments varied somewhat, depending on circumstances but the aim was to have the body clothed “decent and proper.” In earlier days shrouds were made and somewhat later new clothes were some-

times made for the dead. Still later, store-bought clothes were obtained, but generally burial garments were clean every-day clothes, such as the person was accustomed to wearing. As with coffins, sometimes the individual had burial clothes chosen ahead of time and laid away for the coming event.

The Coffin

Word of a death would spread rapidly in a neighborhood. Often it was not a surprise because it was customary for neighbors to visit and “set up” with the sick and provide help and relief for the immediate family at such times. Neighbors would gather to dig the grave, help make the coffin, or carry messages according to need and circumstances.

The coffin was a plain wooden box of six sides, a modified hexagon. Before the construction of the coffin, the person for whom it was to be made was measured. Each custom-made coffin was approximately eighteen to twenty inches at the head and foot. The widest part was at the shoulders. The woods used varied according to the preference of the dead and the family—and often depended on what was available.

After the construction was completed, the coffin was lined. For a child, the entire coffin was covered with white material inside and out, including the lid. For an adult, the inside of the coffin was draped with white material and the outside with black. Whenever it was available and the family could afford it, lace was used as a final decoration both inside and outside the coffin. Country stores, once faint lines of communication began to develop, carried such material as white and black sateen and laces—or less expensive material—expressly for decoration of coffins. Often a quilt was placed in the coffin for the body to rest on. Sometimes pillows were used

for the head. In some cases, trinkets, tobacco, or money were included. Rarely were eyeglasses placed on the dead. The body was now ready to be displayed for visitors and those who came to “set up” with the corpse.

There was no embalming so that bodies could seldom be kept up more than a day after death—unless the weather was unusually cold. Camphor was used for bathing the exposed flesh of the body to keep down the deathly pallor. Sometimes alcohol was used. Also, a dish of salt might be placed on the stomach as protective charm against decay. Both of these served also to keep cats away from the body of the dead. One of the changes most difficult to make in mountain burial customs was that to having the body embalmed and having funeral homes take over certain rites that were formerly those of the family and neighbors. It was generally felt that it showed lack of respect for the deceased to let outsiders care for the body. Many old timers objected to being embalmed and to funeral homes. The funeral home personnel now try to give that homey feeling and being a “concerned neighbor” or “one-of-the-family” atmosphere.

Setting Up with the Dead

The custom of setting up with the corpse still persists, even though often in a modified form. Now the dead may be kept overnight in a country church or at the funeral parlor instead of at the home. Services may be held at either place. Formerly, neighbors and relatives gathered at the home of the dead person the night before burial somewhat in the manner of the Irish wake. Whatever its origin, the practice by this time was an expression of respect for the dead, sympathy for the bereaved, and neighborliness. It was customary to feed

the crowd there, just as it was customary to prepare "feasts" for funeral meetings and welcome whoever cared to eat.

The Grave and Burial

The grave was dug usually by neighbors, or by the family with the help of neighbors, often in the morning before the burial. The grave was hewn out of the earth with a special effort to make the sides of the vault, the bottom of the grave where the coffin would rest, as smooth as glass. The vault of the grave was dug in the shape of the coffin, the rest of the grave being rectangular in shape. The coffin was usually lowered into the grave by means of ropes under each end. The ends of the coffin were so constructed that they protruded down enough below the bottom of the coffin to permit removal of the ropes. Once lowered, boards were placed over the coffin so that it would be protected from the dirt filling. The graves were usually dug in an east-west direction so that the dead could be buried with feet toward the east and head toward the west. On resurrection day the dead would rise facing the sun. It was not at all uncommon for the burial ceremony to be of the simplest order—a scripture reading, a hymn, a prayer—or to have no ceremony at all. The funeral was scheduled for late summer or early fall at a later date when arrangements could be made for preachers and other rather elaborate details for the time.

The cemeteries—graveyards—were usually located on high points or shoulders of the mountains and usually began as family burial plots—and often remained so—although sometimes neighbors made use of a burial plot once it was begun even though they were not relatives (It will be noticed that some of these practices differ from those in less remote areas where churches

existed and communities were more accessible). The coffin, which had no handles might be carried attached to poles on the shoulders of "pall bearers." Sometimes the body would be transported by wagon or sled, especially if the distance to the burial site was considerable.

The new grave was mounded over and firmed, perhaps to make it shed rain more easily. Sometimes temporary covers were made until small, sometimes rather elaborate, grave houses could be erected. Temporary grave markers of boards or rough stones were placed at the head and foot of the graves. Sometimes there were no others, and there are many unmarked or unidentified graves. But usually markers of local stone and workmanship, at least, were placed as reminders and identification. Many—as present graveyards attest—went to enormous time and trouble to bring tombstones from outside, having to haul them by wagon and sled as much as forty miles from railroad stations or river delivery points.

Other Practices

There were, of course, many superstitions about death prevalent throughout the mountains. These were treated in the previous issue. There were other practices with more or less superstitious characteristics—the burning of the bed tick on which a person had died (if made of straw) and waiting a considerable time for airing and cleaning (if feather tick). Some people turned pictures and mirrors to the wall and stopped the clock at the hour and minute of death. Some could remember such things as winding sheets and tolling of bells for the dead, even though they lived in remote areas and never saw or heard these practiced.

Some searched the pillows of children

who had died for feather crowns—a sign that the child had gone to Heaven. Signs, death warnings, omens were often looked for and talked about. In later years pictures were taken of the dead in the coffin, sometimes with family members around. These became cherished possessions and were prominently displayed. Expensive pictures of the dead (taken while living), either as a family group or singly, were placed by some in special niches in the tombstone (monument). Memorial services conducted over a period of years is another old custom that still persists. The spring issue of this magazine will have a story of memorial services conducted yearly for a man over a period of more than 60 years—and one preacher participated in nearly all of them!

In spite of its seriousness, the death occasion had its humorous aspects that got into oral record, especially when someone tried to make too much of a show before the neighbors or “put on the dog.” The

native was quick to see the ludicrous and quick to puncture the phony with humor. The story is told of a family that decided to place a tie on the corpse of a man who had never worn anything but work clothes in his life. As the story goes, the man’s young son looked on his father in the coffin and seeing him adorned with a tie for the first time, remarked: “Look at Pap! All dressed up and no place to go!”

A good many people have worked on the material for this article and a good many sources have been referred to. Joan Baily Howard did a great deal of the preliminary work of interviewing and gathering material. Book sources most helpful were those of James Still, Lucy Furman, Jesse Stuart, and Cratis Williams. Local help was provided by Verna Mae Slone of Pippa Passes, Kentucky, and Kermit Everage of Amburgey, Kentucky. Judy Stewart did most of the work of organizing the material.

MOUNTAIN ROAD

For years it has been climbing
Hills as old as death,
Halting at the bottom
To gets its second breath.

Regardless of the weather
Or what the errand, still
It struggles on, a symbol
Of life and the human will.

Huge sycamores remember
Its origin, a hewn
Path through the woods, no wider
Than a man’s hunger at noon.

—John Robert Quinn