

A photograph of a cemetery with a red rose placed on a tombstone. The rose is vibrant red and sits on a weathered, grey stone tombstone. In the background, other tombstones are visible, slightly out of focus. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

Our Changing DEATH RITUAL

By Kate Hofstetter

Every person on this planet has one thing in common - we all eventually die and leave behind a body. It is estimated that globally 55.3 million people expire each year, some 2.5 million in this country alone.

In our culture, the care of a human body after death has evolved over the years, from rituals as simple as placing a rock on an earthen grave in the old West, to the elaborate crypts and tombstones on prime real estate in all of our major cities.

Until the mid 1800s, American families were responsible for and took care of their own dead.

“Typically it was women who undertook death care in our culture,” says Chris Tharp, a third generation mortician and owner of Tharp’s Funeral Home and Crematory in the town of Bedford. “In rural America, it was usually the mother and daughters who prepared the body for burial, which was most likely in a private cemetery on the family’s property.”

Many times, pure necessity would dictate the type of burial. It is believed that some 20,000 to 30,000 people died and were buried along the Oregon Trail on their way to the western frontier. In some of our most northern states with two to three feet frost lines, the deceased had to be held by the family until spring, when the ground softened enough so that a grave could be hand dug.

Tharp’s Funeral Home is a rambling, historic building that has graced the town of Bedford since 1848. Our original interest in the building’s history was shelved, in favor of the fascinating story behind the profession of undertaking, and how it has evolved over the years, as explained by Chris.