

The first “undertakers”, he says, were actually cabinetmakers “who made caskets on the side.” They came to be called undertakers because they “undertook” the death care that formerly only family members had performed. Once these “cabinet makers” began selling and delivering caskets, it was only a matter of time before they also started transporting bodies from the home to the cemetery, and then making and selling markers for graves.

It was shortly before the Civil War broke out that Thomas Holmes, a medical surgeon, invented a satisfactory and safe embalming fluid. Prior to his research and development, several medical students had died as the result of routine dissections of cadavers that had been preserved with poisonous chemicals, which was the only effective embalming fluid available prior to Holmes’ discovery.

“Embalming took off during the Civil War,” Chris says. “Wealthy (Confederate) families made arrangements with battlefield embalmers to keep track of their sons. If they were killed, their body was embalmed right in the field and sent back home to the family for burial in the family cemetery.”

These freelance undertakers were given safe passage between the lines, thus allowing them to ply their trades in Richmond as well as DC.

It was a standard rule, at least several months into the war, that all Union troops were to be embalmed, and their remains sent home on trains in caskets that were sometimes lined with zinc. The deceased’s name was on the lid, along with the home address of the spouse or parents. Personal effects and papers were placed in the box along with the body.

Within days after the war ended, President Lincoln was shot and killed. His embalmed body was put on display in 20 or more cities, and viewed by hundreds of thousands as it was moved by train from DC to Springfield, Illinois over a two-week period. Seeing how well his body was preserved helped to make the embalming process acceptable to the American public. It also became a practical way to give relatives time to travel and gather for a funeral. Without embalming, it is necessary to bury a person’s remains within two days, due to the rapid decomposition of a human body. Demand for Holmes’ embalming fluid soon became widespread, being

sold to surgeons, anatomists and undertakers.

Instructors who represented chemical companies began offering courses and awarding diplomas in embalming. In time, many of these companies established mortuary schools. As embalming became more popular, so did funeral homes. By 1920, there were 24,469 funeral homes in the US.

Chris remembers his grandfather, who joined the Bedford business in 1931, telling about “bathtub embalming” for “home funerals”. In most other cases, the body would be removed from the private home within a two-day period, and taken to the funeral home where there were facilities for embalming. From the funeral home, it was either taken back to the family home or to the cemetery, first in a horse-drawn hearse, and later in a motorized hearse.

With the advent of the automobile, it was only a matter of time until the local funeral home’s hearse doubled as an ambulance. Hearses were, after all, the only enclosed vehicles that were large enough and comfortable enough to transport bodies that were too sick or injured to sit upright. Many of us today remember seeing the local hearse with a portable flashing red light on its roof, doubling it as an ambulance.

“By 1960, people were becoming more secular, and less involved with a particular church,” Chris says, so his grandfather added a large chapel to the family-owned structure. Now, every detail of death care could be provided, even a place for final prayers.

The 20th Century mortician thus had become a funeral director in every sense. The burden of death care had been completely lifted from grieving loved ones, and was performed by the mortician or a staff member at the funeral home. Chris’s grandfather added the chapel in response to changing customs and, for the same reason, Chris’s father installed a crematorium in 1983.

“He got hate mail,” Chris recalls. In those early days not many chose cremation. Some churches even forbade the practice. Today, he says, 56 percent of his clientele, which includes the Bedford area and about half of Smith Mountain Lake, favor cremation.

“Many people are having cremation performed immediately

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