

# FYI: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust

## The new, old way of death makes a comeback

IN 1902, visitors and students at the Cincinnati school of mortuary science were greeted every day by the sight of an elegantly dressed man sitting in an ornate armchair by the entrance, holding a newspaper on his lap.

Men coming into the school may have doffed their hats in greeting, as was the custom back then, women may have nodded politely, but the gentleman who was so faithfully there every day never responded. This was not because he was rude, but simply because he had been dead for several months and was, as a consequence, entirely indifferent to what was going on around him.

He was not really there as a greeter. He was there as an advertisement for the mortuary school's skill at embalming dead people.

The embalming of corpses, which today we take for granted, was a big thing back then. In fact, it was the birth of the funeral industry as we now know it, a revolution in the art of undertaking.

It was, as funeral director Neil Bardal says, the end of a long tradition, the tradition of the village funeral, and the beginning of a new and far more expensive tradition, pretty much the only funereal tradition that most of us in North America know today.

It was a revolution that had really begun half a century before. The art, or science -- your choice -- of embalming has been around for centuries, as Egyptian mummies and dozens of bad Hollywood movies attest. But it was not until the American civil war that the technology had progressed far enough for it to be used on a large scale.

Prior to that, dead bodies were put in the ground as closely to the place of death and as quickly as possible for reasons that are immediately obvious to anyone who has ever had a dead squirrel in her heating vents. New developments in embalming, however, made it possible to preserve the body and civil war soldiers no longer had to be buried where they fell. They could be shipped home for a ceremonious burial attended by their families and friends.

This was, of course, far more expensive than battlefield burial or the village funeral, but the days where a midwife would clean up your body, neighbours would dig your grave and family members would carry you to your rest were gone.

The modern funeral as we know it, with all its "enhancements," as Bardal calls them, with all its bells and whistles, was born.

Unfortunately, the undertakers of the time didn't realize what a dangerous undertaking they were committing. They were using bichloride of mercury, an unpleasant poison. It did not affect the embalmees, who were, after all, usually dead, but it did lethally affect the embalmers, creating a kind of perfect funeral circle. And that, accompanied by the end of war and an increasingly limited need for embalming -- it's not required for a village funeral -- reduced demand.

But the technology improved -- hardly any undertaker dies of mercury poisoning these days -- and as people wanted more time to prepare more elaborate commemorations of their dear departed ones, funeral homes hurried to accommodate them and to develop the elaborate and costly casket funeral of today.

Neil Bardal would like to change that, to take the industry and the community back to the idea of the village funeral -- intimate, inexpensive and quick. He wants to launch, in effect, a new revolution in the funeral industry or, perhaps more accurately, a counter-revolution.

Already a pioneer in promoting cremation in Winnipeg, he foresees a new style of funeral in his new funeral home and crematorium on Notre Dame. It harkens back to the simplicity of the village funeral. The undertaker picks up the body, cleans it, takes it to the viewing room for the family and from there proceeds to the crematorium. After that, a memorial service can be held, if the family desires, whenever the family desires.

Not all funeral directors are sold on this idea, although most funeral homes could provide it if pressed. At Bardal funeral home -- not to be confused with Neil Bardal funeral home -- and at Cropo, which is considered to be the largest independent funeral home in the city, they are not convinced that it is what their customers want.

And they should know their customers, or, at least, at one time they certainly did.

The funeral industry in Winnipeg was for many years ethnically oriented. Bardal served the Icelandic community, Cropo the Ukrainian. The French and the Germans, every major ethnic group, even the English, had their own.

That is no longer so much the case. At Bardal, Kevin Sweryd says that the ethnic connection has been pretty much lost. At Cropo, John Leggat says new waves of immigrants into the North End have changed their clientele, too.

There is a lot of confusion in the public mind about the funeral business. It is an industry that we never want to have anything to do with but which none of us can avoid. In the end, the undertaker will get you.

Fortunately, you will be blissfully unaware of what's going, what with being dead and all, but your family will be acutely, painfully aware of the entire process.

The funeral industry is a business that can never lose its market -- everybody dies. A recent report in the *Globe and Mail* suggested that this market actually might not be as certain as it seems, that the bottom might be falling out of the cash coffin, so to speak. But undertakers and obituary pages tell us otherwise -- it is just a demographic blip resulting, as so many other brief social anomalies do, from the baby boomers. The boomers are living longer than previous generations, generating a dip in deaths, but that will turn into a boom in burials and cremations fairly quickly, so don't get your hopes up.

There is one common confusion about the Winnipeg funeral business that needs to be cleared up for the sake of this article -- the difference between Bardal funeral home and Neil Bardal funeral home. They are not the same. The Bardal sign hanging above the street outside the funeral home on Sherbrooke is almost an icon, perhaps the most immediately recognizable funeral home in the city.

There is not, however, a single Bardal inside. The company was founded in the late 19th century by Arinbjorn Bardal, an Icelander who established a dynasty of undertakers in Winnipeg. He was followed by his son Njall, and then grandson Neil Bardal.

We sometimes forget that funeral directors are people, too, with passions, prejudices, strengths and weaknesses that the rest of us endure.

In Arinbjorn Bardal's time, the Icelandic community in Manitoba was by riven by schisms that pitted Lutheran against Lutheran and all of them against Unitarians, who do not believe in an afterlife.

Arinbjorn was a staunch Lutheran but, being an undertaker, he could move among all the various sects and in the end, they all came to him.

A story has it that when a prominent Unitarian with whom Arinbjorn had differences in the past died and was brought to Bardal, Arinbjorn visited the coffin when it was ready for viewing. "Look at him," he said, turning to his assistant. "All dressed up with no place to go."

Seeing them only in their official role, which is usually solemn and sombre and followed by a large bill, it is easy to forget that undertakers are human, too. Arinbjorn's pictures look like he could never even crack a smile, let alone a joke.

Njall Bardal played the banjo to relax and, being a Hong Kong vet, he had a lot to relax from. Neil Bardal is a talented pianist who likes to play the grand piano that is the centrepiece of his new funeral home/crematorium and at, age 69, has just completed writing a novel to be published in January.

Neil Bardal lost the business in the 1960s when he attempted to buy out his partner. A shotgun clause in their contract kicked in and when the partner counter-offered, he had no choice but to accept. There are no Bardals at Bardal today; they are all at Neil Bardal, which is a funeral home of quite a different nature.

So undertakers are people, too. They don't always wear dour expressions, black jackets and grey pants and the fact that they are individuals, with different personalities and philosophies has to reflect on the way they do business.

The funeral homes themselves seem to make their own, slightly different statements. Bardal is stately and elegant. It seems to say to visitors, to customers, that you are here on the most important business your family will ever conduct and you can be confident that we can help you with it.

Crope consists of a long, winding labyrinth of rooms and corridors in which one might easily get lost. John Leggat warned me not to stray away because, by the time they found, me I might well be a customer, but each corridor and each room seems warmly designed to welcome and comfort clients.

These are older buildings, designed in a day when the funeral business was a more simple thing, when cremations were rare, when green, environmentally friendly funerals hadn't even been imagined and the embalmed body, the casket and the tombstone were standard fare.

Most funeral homes today can offer you a cremation or a green funeral if that is what you want -- cremations account for about 50 per cent of the business at both Bardal and Crope -- but the way they are set up shows a clear disposition towards the standard burial.

The show rooms are extraordinarily impressive with their coffins -- caskets -- of all descriptions and in all price ranges.

(Few of us are in a rush to death, so what is it about an oak casket with all the shiny metal enhancements that is compelling it almost makes you want to lie down right there? Frankly, the crematorium oven, as interesting and efficient as it may be, is nowhere near so inviting.)

The display room of caskets is there to offer the bereaved a range of choices, and it is a remarkable range. Unless you find yourself in the hands of the Oil-Can Harry of undertakers, however, it is unlikely that you will feel any pressure to pick a more expensive casket from that selection, even though the prices can range from a few thousand dollars to, quite literally, as much as you are willing to pay.

The funeral business may be the only business where not only does the market never fail, but the customer never needs to be sold. Clients bring their own high-pressure sales tactics with them in the form of guilt and grief -- is that \$7,000 casket good enough for Mom? Perhaps not, but one has to settle somewhere, and in the end both family and funeral home are as happy as circumstances permit.

But, as that undertaker of modern middle-class North American culture, Bob Dylan, wrote, "The times they are a'changin'."

All of these funeral homes now also have impressive displays of urns, spectacular in their variety but singular in their purpose -- to hold the ashes of cremated bodies so that the families of the dead can take them home.

These urns aren't cheap, except as compared to caskets, but just as you can have Dad buried in a plywood box you can haul Mom home in a plastic baggie.

Plastic baggies, in fact, are where funeral homes keep the ashes of people that were never picked up by their families and there is a surprising number of them stored in some semblance of dignity.

Who knew that so many of us cared so little about those whom we were supposed to love?

As standard burial declines in popularity, the green funeral might pick up some of the slack, although it has yet to catch on in Canada. Everything about a green funeral, from the coffin to the shroud in which the corpse is clad, is designed to be completely biodegradable, to return to the earth cleanly as quickly as possible.

In a world that feels increasingly guilty about the environment, it might still become popular, but when it comes to green, our actions hardly ever catch up with our conscience.

It seems almost inevitable that the popularity of cremation will grow as the standard funeral falls more and more out of fashion. At Bardal, Kevin Sweryd says that the closer a family is, geographically, the more likely it is to opt for burial. That's not good news for the casket makers because increasingly families scatter across the country.

At Cropo, John Leggat believes the standard burial will continue to be popular as families continue to cling to their roots. Burial, he thinks, is the best way for many families to honour their dead. Cremation rushes the process: "We are missing the meaning of death."

Neil Bardal's philosophy of death is as different from theirs in its understanding as his funeral home is different in its architecture. Cremation as part of the village funeral, he says, does not subtract from the meaning of death. Rather, it helps to restore it, to rescue it from the complicated, confusing (for the client) and costly business it has become.

The simplicity of the village funeral emphasizes the dignity, enhances the intimacy, of death. After the body has been released by the medical examiner it is taken to the funeral home. The family is brought by car to the viewing room and then can accompany the body to the cremation room. They follow the body through the whole process, far more closely, far more quickly, far less painfully and at less expense than in a burial. There is no embalming needed -- although, curiously, a number of people who opt to be cremated also choose to be embalmed first -- so you are unlikely to be met by a Cincinnati-style greeter when you come through the door.

But sitting in the bright and sunlit reception hall at Neil Bardal's, where funerals, or celebrations of life as people like to call them now, are held, one is struck by a certain poetry in the view.

The dead are represented by Brookside cemetery across the road, particularly the row after row of identical tombstones of fallen soldiers, each one made unique, individualized only by an inscribed name. The graveyard is mostly and usually almost empty of visitors.

The living are represented by the traffic going by on Notre Dame, oblivious to the death on either side of them.

And in this room there is an undertaker with a vision -- if that is not an oxymoron -- of turning his industry completely about. It is a vision of a new and more friendly face for death that will bring it home in a way that it hasn't been home for decades.

[tom.oleson@freepress.mb.ca](mailto:tom.oleson@freepress.mb.ca)

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