



## **Preserving Death: Funerary Objects**

### **Video Podcast Transcript**

### **Minnesota Historical Society**

I'm Matt Anderson, a curator with the Minnesota Historical Society. We're fond of saying that the Society's collections document all aspects of life in the North Star State. And when we say "all," well, we mean it. In this episode, we'll take a look at some of the death-related objects in the Society's collections.

Like everything else in American life, death – rather, how we deal with it – has changed much over the years. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, death was an intimate affair. A person passed away at home, the family dressed the body at home, and visitations and funeral services were held at home. Embalming didn't become commonplace until well after the Civil War, which may explain the overabundance of fragrant flowers seen at many services. Post-mortem photography was popular, and survivors sometimes posed with bodies in ways that, today, we would consider macabre. In the pre-snapshot era, though, these might be the only photos a family had to remember their loved one by.

Caskets were built and sold by cabinetmakers, embalming was performed by a specialist, and the family handled the remaining arrangements. In time, a new profession evolved to "undertake" some of these tasks. Eventually, the undertaker's role expanded from simply handling the body, to being the comprehensive source for end-of-life needs. By World War II, the undertaker – now with the gentler title of funeral director – even provided a place for the viewing and the funeral: the funeral home. Indicative of how recently our modern funeral practices emerged, Minnesota didn't establish statewide mortuary licensing until 1937.

The Minnesota Historical Society's collections include a number of objects that reflect the change in how we handle death. We start with a selection of pieces acquired from the Chandler-Wilbert Vault Company of St. Paul.

#### **Object: Casket (62.8.40)**

This ornate brass and copper casket was a product of the Montrose Seamless Casket Company of New York, and dates to about 1900. Needless to say, it never had a permanent resident, and likely was a sales model. It's not unheard of, though, for funeral homes to rent elaborate caskets for the viewing and service, allowing the family to purchase a less expensive model for the actual burial.

#### **Object: Hearse (62.8.1)**

The copper casket would've been right at home in the back of this 1889 horse-drawn hearse. The vehicle is fitted with wrap-around glass windows along its sides and back, allowing for unobstructed viewing of the casket inside. A trap door in the floor allows a worker to stand up in the vehicle to clean the inside surfaces of the glass.

**Object: Infant burial dress (62.8.10)**

This silk child's burial dress from the 1920s was part of a stock of clothing maintained by a funeral director. As funeral homes expanded their services in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they offered a range of burial outfits for sale to decedents who did not have suitable outfits of their own. Interestingly, while adult funerals are dominated by the color black, white has always been the choice for children's services, as it symbolizes the innocence of the life lost.

**Object: Badges (62.8.15)**

These black silk badges, topped with decorative rosettes, were worn by funeral pall bearers. Note that two of the badges contain the symbol for the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, a fraternal organization. The badges are sales samples, still mounted to their display board.

There are other pieces in the collection beyond the Chandler-Wilbert acquisition.

**Object: Embalming table (056TI.1)**

This item, which looks like a wooden case, is in fact a portable embalming table. And while it was manufactured by the Durfee Embalming Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan, it was used in Minneapolis by the Minnesota Casket Company. It pre-dates the funeral home era, and is from a time when the body might be prepared right in the decedent's private home. A similar table is seen in this 1925 photo of a meeting at the Minnesota Casket Company's factory.

**Object: Embalming fluid heater (1989.348.13)**

This device, dating from around 1925, is a heater for embalming fluid. The device is entirely self-contained and, again, designed to be easily transportable.

**Object: Body basket (1977.34.1)**

This wicker body basket was used by the Assumption Church in St. Paul. It could've been used to carry a body from the family home to the church, when a proper casket wasn't immediately available. Baskets like this were also used by funeral directors, to move the body from the private home to the funeral home.

**Object: Tombstones (1992.200.3,9,10)**

These tombstones all are products of the Delano Granite Works of Delano, Minnesota. Each one was ordered and produced but, for reasons unknown, the families never claimed them. The Society acquired the stones from the company in 1992.

Funerals continue to evolve. Today, they trend toward less-extravagant but more personalized affairs. Cremation is increasingly popular, and websites provide online memorials to the deceased. Our attitudes toward death seem to have changed a bit as well. Whether it's due to our longer life spans, or the removal of much of the death process from the private home, we seem a little less comfortable with our mortality. But

it's an inescapable fact of life, and one we'll continue to document in the Society's collections.