

Cremation

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The Past, Present and Future of Cremation



Most do not know the history of cremation. If we don't understand the history, we are ill-equipped to deal with the results of the past. While the roots of cremation go back more than 5,000 years, we began the modern age of cremation in the 1870s. Before the modern world of cremation, bodies were cremated in outdoor pyres or within outdoor cremation pits. Cremation became "modern" in the 1870s, when an Italian professor named Ludovico Brunetti invented the first commercial cremation chamber. Brunetti demonstrated his cremation "furnace" at the Vienna Exposition in 1873. An improved commercial retort was demonstrated at the World's Fair in 1876 in Philadelphia.

Cremation had been a part of the culture of many eastern religions as well as other Christian religions that were starting anew in the 1600s. In Great Britain, the modern cremation movement was fostered by Queen Victoria's surgeon, Sir Henry Thompson. Thompson was concerned with hazardous health conditions posed by bodies before burial and assumed that post-burial

contamination was also a danger. He and his colleagues founded the Cremation Society of England in 1874, taking advantage of Brunetti's invention. Public crematories were constructed in England and Germany beginning in about 1878.

There were many new religious movements in the United States during the 1800s. During the mid-to-late 1800s came a philosophy merged with

theocracy named The Theosophical Society, which was founded in New York City in 1875. The Theosophical Society believed that spirits of the dead could be contacted by mediums. These spirits existed on a higher plane. The matter of death and what to do with a dead body, so the spirit could continue on, became an issue. We have all seen smoke rise to the heavens. Cremation was seen as a way to allow the spirit to

rise to this higher existence. With the World's Fair of 1876, the modern crematory became an option for a new civilized society.

There needed to be one person who would be the cremation promoter of this new religion. That person turned out to be Baron Joseph Henry Louis Charles De Palm, an Austrian-born immigrant living in the United States. Prior to his Dec. 6, 1876 death, De Palm had arranged for his body to be cremated. This cremation was a public event and, by all indications, it was not a pretty sight. For one thing, it was difficult to find a crematory to use. After months of searching, De Palm's friends located a crematory built by Dr. Francis J. LeMoyne based roughly upon Brunetti's concept.

LeMoyne was an eccentric physician, inventor, radical politician and abolitionist. His home was a stop on the Underground Railroad, a safe haven for escaping slaves during the 1850s.

Finding a crematory and arranging for disposition in the 19th century was not as easy as going online. It took De Palm's associates more than six months to set up the cremation event. De Palm died in May in New York City. His body had to be preserved while the details of the cremation were worked out and then had to be shipped hundreds of miles to LeMoyne's estate.

Early embalming techniques were just being accepted at the time of De Palm's death. De Palm's body was injected several different times with arsenic and later with a sterner treatment of potter's clay and crystallized carbolic acid. The effect of this preservation effort met with mixed results.

When the coffin containing De Palm's body was opened for inspection Dec. 5, 1876, the results were poor. The body was badly shrunken and discolored. Some marveled that De Palm was recognizable at all. "No spectacle more horrible was ever shown to mortal eyes," gasped one newspaper report.

De Palm's cremation generated a media circus that would make our modern-day paparazzi cringe. Just

before his death, De Palm had joined the newly formed Theosophical Society and, true to its vision, he left instructions to conduct his funeral "in a fashion that would illustrate the Eastern notions of death and immortality" and then to cremate his body. This was precisely the public-relations opportunity the Theosophists needed to attract attention to their cause. They set about making public ceremonies of both the funeral and the cremation. This was the first record of commercial equipment being used for a cremation in the United States.

The actual cremation was relatively uneventful: As the baron's body slid into the furnace, there was reportedly a brief sizzle and a puff of smoke, and then the predictable golden and rosy hues of the body as it burned. Most of reviews of the day, however, were not kind. Words like "folly," "farce," "weird," "objectionable," "repulsive," "revolting," "a desecration" were used by reporters writing up their stories. "For all the ceremony that was observed," one reporter noted, "one might have supposed that the company had been assembled to have a good time over roast pig."

This was the first of what would become the choice of more than 50 percent of all deaths in the United States. Almost immediately after the LeMoyne crematory was used, a second crematory was constructed a few miles away in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Where We Stand Today

Today, there are about 2.6 million deaths in the United States annually. About 1.4 million of those dead bodies are cremated. These cremations are conducted in about 2,000 crematories throughout the U.S. While the Cremation Association of North America and others who have studied cremation have listed cost as one of the top factors influencing consumers choosing cremation, I strongly disagree. I think the number one reason people choose cremation is value. I would define value as the relative amount someone is willing to

spend to acquire a product or service based upon their impression of the importance of the acquisition.

As we in the industry ponder why so many people are choosing cremation rather than burial, we have to look backward. In the past, we were focused on helping prepare a body for religious rites resulting in an afterlife. We were equally focused on helping the survivors go through their chosen beliefs to mourn and allow that body or spirit to pass to the afterlife. We within the funeral profession were aligned with religious institutions. To me, the question is not, "Why are so many people choosing cremation?" The question should be, "Why did it take 140 years for cremation to become popular in the United States?"

If today's society is about 40 percent spiritual but not religious, if the baby boomers are not turning to religion for answers as previous generations did, then the perceived value of a funeral is changing for many within our population.

In my travels I have been to many countries that do not have funeral homes. These are not uncivilized societies. Even within the U.S. we have faiths in which members wash and prepare their loved ones' bodies. We have seen an increasing natural burial movement, with families preparing their dead and using oils rather than embalming. It is imperative for our society to have regulated parties controlling the body and disposition. What is optional is the role of the funeral service provider beyond that regulatory function. Capitalism will dictate how important you are beyond the regulatory function.

The future is in our hands. We should not discuss cremation as if it is a lesser offering than burial. Therefore, we should price cremation to cover our overhead, just as we do for burial. We should not tax our burial consumers to pay for the discounts given to our cremation consumers. You can't tax the 49 percent to offer discounts to the 51 percent.

Rather than being thrown when someone says, "I want a cremation service," funeral professionals should

start by asking whoever is handling the arrangements these questions:

- *What days do you want your family and friends to be with you?*
- *Do you want this gathering at our facility or another site?*
- *Do you want your deceased loved one to be present at this gathering?*
- *If you want them present, do you want their whole body or cremated remains to be present?*
- *Who can work with us to create the video memorial to be shown at the gathering?*
- *Do you want the gathering to have any religious leadership or will you want a celebrant to lead the event?*
- *Do you want a permanent place of memorial for the cremated remains, such as a niche in a cemetery?*

I have long used the following definition of a funeral, which is

either credited to Todd Van Beck, Alan Wolfelt or Thomas Lynch: “A funeral is an event that gets the dead body where it has to go and the living where they should go.”

We have to bring value to the funeral event. We have to reinvent what a funeral is. Cremation is consistent with this definition. However, if we stop talking to consumers when we hear the word “cremation,” then shame on us. The 2016 National Funeral Directors Association Consumer Survey even demonstrated that, “In 2015, only 39.7 percent of respondents were aware that one can view a body that is prepared but not embalmed as part of a cremation service, compared to 47.8 percent in 2017.” We must continue to educate, inform and understand.

My friend John McQueen teaches

his staff at Anderson-McQueen Funeral and Cremation Centers “all options, all families.” Doug Gober, of Gober Strategic Capital, and I have meshed our geeky brains and computed that about 210,000 families each year that previously chose burial are now choosing cremation. There is no way all of them know all of the options they have in planning a modern-day funeral.

The past is done. We can learn from it. The present is the time for us to educate and inform our communities. The future is going to be based upon your work today. We all know the importance of holding a gathering after a survivor suffers a loss. Let us train society about the integrated service of dispositions and gatherings so funeral service has a long future. •

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