Eternity at East End: Memories from a mortician

Mr. Bill
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Bill Miller of Lanark Village is a former undertaker with a long memory of East End history. The following are stories of his life as a mortician and more.

My first brushes with death were neighbors who were with my dad in the North African invasion.

My next experience was meeting Heywood Griner in late '61. He was the local mortician working under Pete Comforter out of St. Joe. Now Heywood had the best demeanor in handling grieving families and tops in embalming expertise. He also imbibed quite a bit.

He took me in as a partner at the old funeral home at 207 Third Street, which I still own. We use it as a hurricane escape house. Gloria and friends fixed it up into a giant haunted house one year.

We had real spooks.

Heywood couldn't collect his money. He complained to Chester Rhodes over in Apalach who told him, "Mr. Heywood, I get my money while the tears are still in their eyes."

We had to run the ambulance also with a '54 Ford panel delivery truck, and funerals with a 1955 Caddy hearse with no muffler.

We had a man who shot himself in the temple with a World War I .45. The bullet barely went through and fell out on the pillow. Judge Witherspoon came as coroner, and swore us and four more bystanders into a coroner's jury. He asked us, "Do you believe this man shot himself? Do you believe he is dead?" which was unanimous.

Case closed!

Into the embalming room, I was to do my first hook up. Heywood, after a few snorts, mixed cold water with the embalming fluid. Needless to say, the man went to flopping around, his eyeballs dangling, along with me having a hard time with the outlets.

Heywood picks up a two-by-four and says, "We can't lose this one," and goes to hit him. I really freak out and Heywood drops to his knees laughing. Good thing he still had the two-by-four or I would have had a double funeral next day.

We had a lady so doubled up with osteo that we had to put her knees up against the top of the casket so they could have a viewing. When the preacher got almost through, we walked down the aisle and stood at each end before closing it up. I noticed a couple of old ladies with wide-open eyes, then a couple more. I looked down at her and her head was two or three inches off the pillow. I'm trying to get Heywood's attention and several folks had already got up and left and the rest was wide-eyed as she came up further and further out of the casket. Heywood shut the lid on her and we were outta there.
Now Heywood knew when to step on the lowering device. We did a funeral for Buck Wilson Funeral Home, one in Panama City. Seemed the girlfriend had stabbed her boyfriend to death.

We had been there from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Just when we thought it was over, here came the cops with the gal in cuffs and she throws herself on top of his casket. The lowering device tripped, Heywood said by accident, but she was going before they could peel her off.

A cold beer never tasted so good.

Talk about Dr. Death, sometimes I feel like a jinx. I hired my first real estate salesman in 1970. All of these have died: Jimmy Litton, Paul Spacey, Arline Thornton, Barney Fish, Leonarda Perry, Ed Diorio and Al Hudson.

Bill Bailey got away, but I still have Anne May.

My Indian heritage (Oklahoma Comanche) has decreed, "Smoke is the first thing to get to heaven." Since smoking has damn near killed me, I'm going to let it finish the job.

My dad had no Indian in him, but always wanted cremation as my grandparents are buried in Oklahoma City and there is nobody there to tend the graves. He said, "I don't want folks saying, "Well, we would have gone fishing today, but we got to cut the grass on Pop's grave."

As I well know, embalming is a degrading occurrence even if you're dead. Funerals have gotten so expensive, also. Even cremation ain't cheap. Even the terms are not what they used to be. Now it's DOA - COD

This fall I plan to visit each grave at Evergreen to actually count the number of people I have personally known. I guess my greeting will be, "See you soon!"

**Mr. Bill is the pen name of Bill Miller.**

**Memories of Apalachicola burials**

Collie Watkins of Apalachicola shared some memories with us after reading the first three installments of the series "Eternity at East End."

Last October, I wrote that Dr. John Gorrie had been moved twice since his original interment in Apalachicola's lost Bayside Cemetery, located where Lafayette Park is today.

Watkins corrected this; Gorrie was actually moved three times. He was first relocated from Bayside Cemetery to the round plot in the center of the traffic circle at the junction of Avenue D and 6th Street. Then he was moved to Magnolia Cemetery and finally during the mid 20th-century, moved to his current location in Gorrie Square.

Watkins said his father-in-law; Newman Marshall, told him about the move from the traffic circle because he actually transported the remains, which he told his son-in-law only of a few bones.

Marshall, a contractor who built many of the cement foundations in the historic district of Apalachicola, also constructed cement burial vaults and copings for some of the Magnolia Cemetery graves.

Marshall had a trick of preparing the vaults and copings so they appeared to be made of marble. Watkins said a man once asked him how he gave the cement its appearance, and Marshall answered that he rubbed them.
The fellow pursued the topic, asking what he rubbed the copings with, and Marshall replied 'Grease.'

The man asked what kind of grease and Marshall replied, "elbow grease."

Watkins does not remember Bayside Cemetery but did recall the lady in the glass-fronted coffin

Workers digging the foundation for a house across Avenue C from the park discovered a metal box. Believing it to be treasure, they reburied it and returned to retrieve it by lantern light. Watkins said he remembers the night well and that it was stormy with pouring rain. What the workers found when they pried the box open was the mummified remains of a young woman with a child in her arms.

Watkins offered an answer to one of the mysteries surrounding this story: What became of the bodies?

He said they were never identified but were reburied in a cemetery, probably taken to Magnolia, and placed in an unmarked grave in the potters' field with the occupants of most of the Bayside Cemetery graves.

Watkins also remembers the discovery of more artifacts of the Bayside Cemetery. He said the Messina family had five boys who were his playmates as a child. One afternoon they were digging in the yard of another Avenue C house across from Lafayette Park and discovered a set of coffin handles. — By Lois Swoboda