

THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM



Newsletter

May 2019

The Spring Issue

Spring – it seems to have been a long time coming this year. However the trees are budding, the flowers are starting to bloom – it is the season of rebirth. What better time of year than now to devote an issue of the Heritage Museum Newsletter to the other end of the spectrum. The museum has a fine collection of coffins, caskets, hearses, shipping containers and other essentials. As with most things for our ancestors, even the process of dealing with the dead was difficult. You may recall the origin of some of the terms on this subject from our February 2018 edition:

England is old and small. At some point they started to run out of places to bury people. They began to dig up old coffins and they would take the bones to a bone house and reuse the grave. In the course of reopening these old graves, many of the coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside and they realized they had been burying people alive. To prevent this they took to laying the body out on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around. They would eat and drink and wait to see if the “body” would awaken and the custom was born of “**holding a wake**”. When it came time for the burial, to ensure that they were not burying somebody alive they would tie a string on the wrist of the corpse, lead it up through the coffin and ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would sit up in the graveyard all night to listen for the bell. This night duty became known as “**the graveyard shift**”. Thus the body could be “**saved by the bell**” and was considered a “**dead ringer**”.

But we digress. At the risk of being looked on as morbid, in this issue we will look at some of the Heritage Museum displays related to this antithesis of spring. Remember –

Discussing sex will not make you pregnant
Discussing death will not make you die

Anything remotely related to today’s modern embalming methods did not start to appear until the middle of the 1800’s. This meant that getting a container for the body quickly was essential. In those days it was often the local furniture maker or the cabinet and box maker who would fabricate the box which was one of two designs – the casket or the coffin.

Well you may ask – is there a difference? There certainly is and the **Heritage Museum** has the answer. A casket is a simple rectangular box in shape. Modern caskets often have a split lid at the top of the casket so that it may be opened for viewing.

A simple board casket is available at the **Heritage Museum** for viewing.



Coffins tend to taper at the feet and head. They are hexagonal or octagonal in shape and simulate the shape of a body. Remember the term Yankee Thrift – a coffin makes use of less wood and is therefore less expensive than a casket. At the Heritage Museum, a coffin is available for viewing.



In the old days, the word casket meant a container to hold valuables such as jewelry. Around the turn of the 19th century it gradually came to refer to the container for the deceased. The use of the word casket for the container holding a dead body was also thought to be less offensive than the word coffin.

Death itself was anything but final for the families who had to deal with departed remains. Undertakers were few and far between and rural families often had to make their own arrangements. Remember that old cabinet and box maker who stepped up to make the coffin? He also understood that these grieving families needed somebody to arrange for transporting the remains, dig the grave, fill the grave and place a marker. For a modest fee he offered to “undertake” these services for the grieving family. The reader can no doubt see where I am headed here – that’s right – the origin of the term “undertaker” was born.

So all the above is well and good unless the poor departed soul had the misfortune to have their death occur a long distance from home.

Bearing in mind that embalming was not advanced back then, speed in getting the body back for burial was of utmost importance. Transport was not fast in those days and shipment of the remains back home was quite likely by stage or train which posed its own difficulties:.

- It was hardly rapid
- The caskets and coffins of the day were not built for shipping
- Warm weather would quite likely make the remains a pretty unsuitable traveling companion.

The answer was a shipping casket or crate. Strongly built, large enough to hold a standard casket or coffin and able to be tightly sealed.

Of course the Heritage Museum also has one of these for all to view.



All these preparations complete and the service held, it only remained to get the deceased to the cemetery for burial. As is the case today, efforts were made to make this final journey as solemn and dignified as possible. And as today, a hearse was used for this purpose. Sometimes referred to as a funeral coach. But as with all things facing our ancestors there was a vast difference between travel in winter and travel the rest of the year. Snow plows were non-existent and a wheeled hearse could be problematic in snow.

Funerals took place in all seasons and our adaptive ancestors did not let death be dictated by the seasons. The warmer months posed no particular difficulties as it relates to burial of the deceased. The roads were passable, the ground was suitable for digging and folks did not have to risk frostbite to pay their respects. Warm weather did somewhat necessitate the need to get on with it quickly – remember there was no embalming in those days.

Once the service was held, the deceased would be conveyed to the plot for burial with as much dignity and solemnity as possible. The final journey in Francelstown was in a quite handsome wheeled hearse.



This Francelstown hearse is one of the few surviving carriage hearses. Built ~1867 it has original glass lights in the sides. While it cannot be authenticated, these glass lights have beveled glass of the type manufactured by Chester Glass in the UK that was popular back in those days. The coffin floor has rollers to facilitate placement and removal of the coffin. The decorative glass light drapery is ornate and typical of that found in funeral carriages of the time. Inside is an early coffin. It is believed the whip is also true to the time of the carriage.

The hearse was used to transport the dead to their final resting places at one of the five cemeteries in town.

This funeral carriage was not in the best of condition when obtained but was restored with funding provided by FIHS.

Winter on the other hand posed a number of problems when it came to burial of the deceased. An obvious problem was the frozen ground that made digging the grave nearly impossible. However the cold weather eliminated the problem of having to rapidly bury the remains as they could be kept quite suitably in a burial crypt or vault until spring when the grave could be dug and the final service held.

However transporting the body in heavily snow covered ways in a wheeled carriage was not practical and in many instances not possible. Yankee ingenuity to the rescue once again. Rather than a wheeled hearse why not a sled hearse? Why not indeed. Come to the Heritage Museum and see one for yourself firsthand.



This winter hearse was built ~1870. The four wooden skids have metal strips along the bottom to prolong the life of the skid and prevent wear. The coffin slides in and out on rollers and the hearse floor elevates the coffin off the rollers to prevent the coffin sliding during travel.

For the readers of the March issue of the Heritage Museum newsletter you will recognize this as what is known as a Bob-runner type sleigh, or sometimes called a bob sleigh. It is easily recognizable because rather than one continuous runner, it had two sets of runners, making it easier to turn.

As with the summer hearse, it was restored with funds provided by the Francelstown Improvement and Historical Society.

THE MONTHLY PUZZLE (WELL – ALMOST MONTHLY)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14				15				16				
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49			50		51	52				53	54	55
56			57		58				59			
60					61				62			
63					64				65			

Across

1. Jerk
5. Cleat on a horseshoe
9. Reward for good performance
14. Long, long time
15. Beehive, e.g.
16. Mature
17. Boat trailer?
18. Spanish dry wine
19. European capital
20. Resolutely
23. Tool for cutting
24. Drops from the sky
25. Organic compounds
27. Basis of fruit jelly
30. Moves over ground surface
32. East Asian nursemaids
33. Controls by magic spells
36. Naught
37. Makes holes in things
38. Tendency to do something
39. Town cemetery
42. Blender button
44. "Om," e.g.

Down

45. Box for valuable objects
46. Final transport
48. Blowgun ammo
49. Flat bladed pole
50. Having equal dimensions
56. Getting on
58. The maximum point
59. ___ of the above
60. Inexperienced
61. ___ Spumante
62. Father of Balder
63. Affirmatives
64. Violin prodigy Hilary _____
65. Gigantic

Down

1. Old cliches
2. Furnace output
3. British slang for donkey
4. Grounded
5. A funerary box
6. Birdlike
7. Contact _____
8. Nautical unit of speed
9. Look after a child

10. "___ to Billie Joe"
11. Shark with barbel nostrils
12. Of an arm bone
13. Frets
21. Platform for speakers
22. All the words in a language
26. P.I., e.g.
27. Sudden sharp pain
28. Arabic for "commander"
29. Squids prepared as food
30. ___ cotta
31. Feeling of reverence
33. Big pig
34. Blunted blade
35. "Let it stand"
37. Memory units
40. Alt. spelling
41. Rank of some Navy personnel
42. Young salmon
43. British actor Peter _____
45. Flowering unisex spike of trees
46. A hero sandwich
47. Current caused by the tides
48. End of life
51. Brightly colored fish
52. Flat topped hill
53. Concluding event
54. Cuckoos
55. Granted temporary use of
57. Born, in bios

ANSWER TO CROSSWORD



T	S	V	A	N	H	V	H	S	E	S	E	A
N	I	O	I	T	S	V	N	E	R	G		
E	N	O	N	K	V	E	D	S	I	G	V	
T	V	C	I	R	T	M	O	S	I	O	V	
T	E	K	S	A	C	A	V	A	R	S	A	H
E	R	U	P	D	R	A	V	L	V	G		
T	P	V	S	E	R	O	B	T	I	N		
S	H	C	T	I	M	B	S	H	V	M		
S	E	I	X	A	T	N	I	N	A	M		
S	R	T	S	E	N	I	V	R	A	V		
M	V	S	A	T	S	V	F	I	T			
E	N	R	E	O	N	I	F	E	K	V		
T	L	D	V	N	E	V	O	E	V			
S	U	N	B	K	T	V	O	W	H	S		