

# Changing funeral rituals are here to stay

*Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - April 2024*

In his book, *Buried Alive*, Jan Bondeson describes the terrifying history of what was once our most primal fear. You see, sometimes when people died it turned out that they were not really dead. As a consequence, bodies were retained above ground for three days to see whether the deceased would “wake”. Sometimes they did.

The old tradition of the wake, in modern times, has been retained as the two or three day visitation – something which, itself, is now disappearing as cremations replace the old format of visitation, religious service, funeral procession and burial.

Although increasingly rare, funeral processions to the cemetery still occur, and Sarnia has long had a reputation for deference to these final movements of the deceased. Funeral Director Cameron McCormack, who transferred here in 2009 from Mississauga, was pleasantly surprised to witness approaching traffic pull to the side of the road for such processions, even on county roads.

Popular films have captured the drab nature of funeral rituals during Victorian times. In the movie *A Christmas Carol* based on the book by Charles Dickens, a cadaverous, black-suited and top-hatted undertaker lurked outside Jacob Marley’s door, waiting patiently for him to expire. “Ours is a very competitive profession,” the undertaker explained to the visiting Ebenezer Scrooge.

In Victorian times, mourning was serious business. The National Museum of Funeral History in Houston features a comprehensive display of Victorian mourning attire and heavily black-creped household furniture. During the 1920s, a time when most funerals were held at home, practitioners of the trade transformed from undertakers to morticians. Today they are funeral directors, an increasing number of whom being trained for the craft are women.

It should be noted that funeral directors are a special breed of people. They are not in it to acquire personal wealth. They are a caring, compassionate group, anxious to help grieving souls at one of the lowest points of their lives.

Cremations were relatively rare until the 1970s. In 2024, cremations follow a surprising 85 per cent of deaths in Sarnia and 70 per cent in the rest of the county – both figures considerably above the provincial average of 65 per cent. Fully half of cremains in Lambton County are scattered.

The funeral itself is usually now heralded as a Celebration of Life. Uniformity associated with the old style of funeral service has mostly disappeared. Funerals are now events, heavily personalized, with visual effects, songs and poetry, eulogies and tributes, now tailored to the family’s taste.

One of the significant beneficiaries of this evolution has been Smith Funeral Home and Cremation Centre. The addition of their Family Centre and 6,000-foot expansion 10 years ago has completely transformed the appearance of the traditional funeral home. The new look gives Smith FH a true advantage over smaller home-based funeral establishments.

Additionally, as church attendance has declined, religious services have also begun to disappear, together with the old funeral home loyalties. As Funeral Director Jim Robb of Sarnia’s 100-year-old DJ Robb’s explains, Sarnia’s Catholics were once all buried from McKenzie & Blundy, joking that “we got the Orange Lodge and the Masons”.

The formality of funeral services has also undergone a radical change. Funeral dress has become much more casual. The suits and black dresses of a mere 50 years ago are now gone – with some attendees even showing up in shorts.

Sarnia’s Lakeview Cemetery has also more aggressively entered the industry. Funeral Director Sam DiCesare says that they will now collect the deceased and arrange for cremation services or direct burial with an eye towards a quick, economical transaction. Like the other area funeral homes, Lakeview also offers such after-care as dealing with government, credit card and other necessary notices.

What’s in the future? Processes such as alkaline hydrolysis (a combination of lye and heat) and terramation (a form of human composting) may eventually begin replacing cremation, reducing the resultant carbon footprint.

Only time will tell what else may lie ahead for the changing funeral rituals.

