

American Funeral Director

- The Lafferty Legacy -

by Mac McCormick, May 1999

Nestled in the hills of southern Ohio, the William Lafferty Memorial Funeral and Carriage Collection enhances the Lafferty Funeral Home of West Union. The museum, replete with hundreds of well-maintained components of American Funeral Service heritage, is an "absolute must see" for funeral service historians.

Visitors to this museum need to allow sufficient time to view the funereal artifacts and appreciate family and funeral service history. The interesting commentary provided by John T. and Elaine K. Lafferty, and their son John R., could surprise most tourists. The walking tour leads visitors on a journey through the six generations of Lafferty funeral directors, "undertakers", and their embalming and funeral equipment. John R. Lafferty is the current funeral director manager and President of Lafferty Funeral Home, Inc. His father, John T. Lafferty, a distinguished and articulate gentleman, proudly points to the American funeral service and Lafferty memorabilia dating from the mid-1800s.

"I don't think another funeral service museum exists in the United States of America that has as much equipment passed down through one family as we do. We just can't estimate the worth of the museum," Lafferty said, calculating that about 300 visitors a year tour the property "by chance or appointment."

To The Memory of William "Bill" Lafferty

Family members opened and dedicated the William Lafferty Memorial Funeral and Carriage Collection in 1994 in memory of 4th generation funeral director James William "Bill" Lafferty. Bill Lafferty served as a funeral director for just short of 60 years. He preserved the family funeral carriages and made additional acquisitions of horse drawn vehicles which now comprise this unique museum. Bill Lafferty often traveled across the nation in search of horse drawn funeral carriages, and sometimes found a true prize. The pride of his collection is a stately 1899 Brewster Omni Bus, procured in Lebanon, Ohio, which was used for pallbearers or family members.

He loved horse-drawn carriages so much that when he died in November 1987, family members took him to his grave using his father's black horse-drawn hearse. John T. Lafferty and his brother Richard (a retired funeral director) made the solemn trip. People lined the streets for the funeral procession to the West Union Cemetery (originally known as the I.O.O.F. - Independent Order of Odd Fellow's Cemetery). West Union schools dismissed classes so students could view the historic sight of the procession. A crowd of more than 40 local Amish quietly awaited the hearse at the cemetery to pay their final respects. Bill Lafferty, a friend to all, often employed the Amish in the maintenance and restoration of the funeral carriages.

John T. and Richard thought Latour Lafferty's 1914 horse-drawn hearse was the appropriate carriage to use for their father's service. Latour Dau'Vergne Lafferty, Bill's father, represents the 3rd generation of this family. Latour's 1914 hearse, with its high seat and brass fittings, has been the highlight of many Fourth of July parades in West Union.

A Fateful Question and Elopement

A tour of the unique museum begins with a biography of funeral business founder William Voris “W.V.” Lafferty. W.V. worked as a shoemaker and cabinet maker until the death of his father Absalom in 1848. At the age of 18, W.V. asked his uncle, Joseph West Lafferty, to help him find another trade.

“Why not build coffins?” replied his uncle, not realizing the impact of his suggestion. Joseph’s counsel allows the descendants of W.V. to claim that they maintain the oldest family-controlled funeral business in the Buckeye State. In 1998 the Ohio Funeral Directors Association commemorated the firm’s 150th anniversary by presenting a scholarship in the firm’s name. The reliable Lafferty family has attended to the funeral and burial needs of area residents since 1848.

Adams County historians tout W.V. Lafferty as a sympathetic and generous undertaker who “entered the darkened chamber and executed his duties well.” Romantic folklore surrounding W.V. details his elopement with the daughter of innkeeper Fields Marlatt. W.V. placed a ladder under Margaret Marlatt’s bedroom window and carried her off in the middle of the night. In 1856 W.V. became the innkeeper of the Marlatt House. The building (built in 1804 as the Bradford Tavern) has had several names including the Olde Wayside Inn which was opened by Bill and Grace Lafferty in 1963. This building is still owned by descendants of W.V.

In a scenario not unlike others that played out across the United States, the Lafferty funeral business began when the cabinet maker, turned coffin maker, expanded his services. W.V. Lafferty began building caskets from the plentiful wild cherry and walnut trees found in the area. He produced them in a wide range of styles, lining them with velvet, satin or muslin. Visitors may examine one of the \$3 child caskets manufactured by W.V. Lafferty.

The salesman who sold him the first horse-drawn hearse offered suggestions on how to boost casket sales. These ideas included the addition of black calico, black leather, ornate carrying handles and sentimental name plates. Guests can examine boxes of both the handles and nameplates used by W.V. when constructing these coffins.

W.V. and his associates transported the deceased to various cemeteries. He purchased another one-horse hearse that he and his son Theodore used. Both hearses are in the museum. A May 9, 1896 letter from W.V. Lafferty to Sayers and Scolville Company requests a price quote on a funeral vehicle: “Style #458 with front brakes and a hammer cloth covered front seat.” According to the preserved bill of sale, Lafferty finally paid \$765 for the grand horse-drawn hearse, now a mainstay of the carriage display.

Almost a century later, that letter would furnish a clue to W.V.’s great-great grandsons about how to refurbish the cherished horse-drawn hearse. John T. and his son are quick to explain the irony:

“The family had stored the hearse, like much of the equipment seen here, in one of our barns a few miles away from our current funeral home. We were very fortunate. The barns never caught fire over the past century. While my son Jayson and I were restoring this hearse in 1994, we could not get the front seat clean. It was full of straw and hay seed. We tried brooms, power brushes, vacuum cleaners, and just about everything short of turning a hose on it. Then, I remembered the letter my great great-grandfather had written. Since purchasing the hammer cloth seat was that important to him, it must have been very durable material. We used the water hose. Then, we got the scrub brush, and went to town cleaning it. This seat looks beautiful now.”

Embalming Gains Favor

Visitors can also view early journals and ledgers containing area residents' requests for "Undertaker Lafferty" (referring to W.V., Theodore "Dode" or Latour) to come to a home with a coffin of specific proportions. Other displays show W.V.'s use of embalming methods and cooling boards.

Theodore Henry Lafferty was born in 1862, the son of W.V. and Margaret. His descendants could not find his diploma until early 1997 when the certificate was found behind a chimney in the attic of the funeral home by an installation worker. The handsome and valuable document authenticates that the second-generation undertaker Lafferty graduated from the Oriental School of Embalming in Boston, Massachusetts, on April 11, 1884. This diploma is one of several on display which shows the increasing educational requirements for Ohio funeral directors and embalmers.

Theodore enjoyed Adams County politics. However, following one notable election in the late 1800s, the election results so displeased him that he rode his horse through the County Court House – a comical protest noticed by the West Union Constabulary. A receipt for the fine levied against the political equestrian hangs on the museum wall.

Elaine K. Lafferty, wife of John T. Lafferty, spent almost a year sorting through documents, diplomas, newspaper clippings, and paraphernalia for display in the museum. Other family members found artifacts stored in barns, attics, basements, cupboards, garages, Bibles, and books. Elaine, who serves as docent and curator of the museum, said the organizing and sorting was not an easy task. "It took the better part of nine months of parceling each generation to a different corner of our dining room. Whenever we found anything new, we'd put it in the appropriate area. Prior to the grand opening of the museum, we needed to display the historic items effectively so that the public could read and understand the material. People are amazed that our family saved so much equipment and documentation," she said. "Lots of school children tour the museum. It's not only a taste of Adams County history, but also a glimpse of funeral history. This museum is a good thing for the community, state, and funeral service," Mrs. Lafferty added.

The tour continues with a perusal of more diplomas. W.V. learned how to embalm without any formal training at a mortuary school. Theodore went to Boston for a 10-day course. His son Latour attended a six-week course in Cincinnati and took his state board exams in Cleveland. James William "Bill" Lafferty, son of Latour, completed a nine-month course at the Cincinnati College of Embalming. His sons, John T. and Richard, attended college for two years followed by a year of study at the Cincinnati College of Embalming. Then they served a year of internship before taking their state board exams. John T.'s son, John R., the sixth-generation funeral director, attended college for two years prior to serving a two-year apprenticeship before taking his state board exams. His brother Jayson, a sixth-generation funeral director and embalmer, attended college for two years prior to entering the Mid-American College of Funeral Service in Jeffersonville, Indiana. The State of Ohio currently requires a baccalaureate degree, plus one year study at a mortuary college, and then a one-year apprenticeship prior to state board exams for licensing as a funeral director and embalmer.

The antique hearses and other funeral service vehicles fill the middle of the Carriage Collection Museum Building. In addition to the horse-drawn carriages, tourists see one motorized vehicle. Guests marvel at the condition of the various hearses: one of W.V.'s dating from 1875, Theodore's 1896 Sayers & Scovill, Latour's 1914 ????, and an 1860 "dead wagon" (used by three generations of Laffertys). Also you will see a children's white hearse, a combination hearse/flower-wagon, an embalmer's buggy, the Brewster omnibus that hauled family members or pallbearers, a rare horse-drawn ambulance, and the 1923 REO motorized ambulance.

Other interesting relics of the Lafferty Funeral Home on display include burial clothing, hundreds of historical photographs, certificates, several century-old biers and cooling boards, home visitation equipment, casket veils, horse rigging, buggy jacks, wicker baskets used for removals during the flu epidemic, and all types of funeral lights.

Guests can examine a Crane and Breed metal child's casket with a glass facial area for viewing. Funeral palls, funeral home advertising and calendars, burial shoes, an old wooden wheelchair, and various shipping cases, including one from World War II, help complete the extensive display.

Of particular interest to funeral directors and embalmers will be Lafferty's first electric embalming machine and the complete sets of embalming valises which were carried to the home. The valises contain make-up, wax, embalming instruments, an oil cloth to place under the body while embalming, and bottles of embalming fluid dating to the early part of the century. Another rarely seen item is a two-gallon bottle of embalming fluid in its wooden shipping case with the shipping label still attached. The ??? company shipped the fluid to W.V. Lafferty in the last century from Indianapolis by steamboat via the Ohio River. He used a carriage to pick up his shipments of fluid at Wrightsville on the Ohio River, about 10 miles away from West Union.

Curator Elaine Lafferty said, "Area residents have kindly donated items to the museum. An excellent example is a length of Irish burial linen, known as a *pall*. Many people had fans or calendars that were saved through the years. Several people gave us memorabilia when we opened the Carriage House Museum. They brought us items they thought we would find interesting, and we are very grateful for that," she said.

The Main Street Chapel

In 1923 Latour Lafferty built one of the first electrified and modern funeral establishments in southern Ohio on Main Street. Prior to having the funeral home available for families, services were conducted in either the deceased's home or a church. The Laffertys stored much of the historic paraphernalia in this building. Like many other funeral homes, the Lafferty family operated an ambulance service for 75 years and owned the first motorized ambulance in Adams County. The REO ambulance is now on display in the Carriage House Museum.

In 1935 Bill Lafferty bought the Smith Grimes mansion on Cherry Street. He paid \$3,500 for the property. A wise investment to relocate his funeral business from Main Street.

For three decades, from 1962-1991, Richard Latour Lafferty managed the Lafferty Funeral Home at Peebles, Ohio, 14 miles north of West Union. When Richard retired he sold it to another funeral director in Peebles.

One Family Serving Adams County Since 1848

As of this year, 1999, seven funeral homes operate in Adams County, which has a population of 27,000. Funeral preplanning is on the rise. "People are understanding how much easier it makes things

for them,” said John T. Lafferty. The quality of service that families receive makes a difference. Elaine Lafferty elaborates on their service philosophy: “Helping to serve people when they come to Laffertys is the most rewarding part of funeral service for us. They come in here, in need of some tender loving care and consideration, some thoughtfulness. In this small community, most of us know one another. If we can ease their burden of grief at all, it’s well worth the many years of being on call 24 hours a day.” That kind of common sense, combined with the history of service, no doubt insures that the Lafferty Funeral Home will continue serving Adams County residents for many more years.

There is no charge to visit the William Lafferty Memorial Funeral and Carriage Collection. It is located at 205 South Cherry Street, West Union, Ohio. West Union is 1½ hours southeast of Cincinnati. If you want an appointment for a tour of the museum, call (937) 544-2121.