

Burial Customs

By Jerry Long
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Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, 7 June 1893, p.1:



OLD TIME SUPERSTITIONS.

[Bowling Green Democrat]

There is scarcely a farm of any size in Kentucky that has not a graveyard. In many instances these burying grounds are in a sad state of dilapidation. The wooden head-boards have rotted away, and only a low mound, beaten flat by the rains of many winters, marks the resting place of the dead. Perhaps from the foot the grave springs a flower, not grown wild, but which was planted there by tender hands that trembled with grief. If more pretentious marble marks the grave, time and bad weather have eaten out the letters chiseled on the stone, and now the dead has become nameless. The inclosing fence that once shone so white and ghastly to the belated farm boy and made him quicken his steps, has been washed of all its paint; the loose boards flap idly in the wind, and when the surrounding trees are rocked by a storm, the fence threatens, to comb down altogether. Indeed, the private burying grounds, which every family in Kentucky of any pretensions once had, are disappearing. In some cases, where there is an assurance of the farm remaining in the family, they are still used, but in the country now the majority of burials take place in the little city of the dead that surrounds every country church,

The family burying-ground was generally on the highest land on the farm, so that the drainage would be good. A shaded spot, whose ground rolled gently, was best liked. Another thing which was generally taken into consideration was that the ground selected be not suitable for

farming purposes. The graves were dug by friends of the bereaved family. There were but few farmers forty years ago that did not know how to dig a grave. Usually two or three men went out the morning after the death to dig the grave. It was always dug on a line east and west, so that the head could be laid to the west. This was the result of a belief that had its origin in a far older one, that Gabriel would sound his trumpet from the east, and the chosen could rise quickly and without the inconvenience of having to turn around in their graves. So it was a sacred rule that the excavations be made to comply with this belief. For a man the grave was made three and one-half feet wide seven feet long and four feet deep. At the bottom of the pit, as is the custom now, enough earth was taken out to make a neat receptacle for the coffin. There were no hearses, carriages or heavy black crape used at funerals in Kentucky forty years ago. Nor did the pall-bearers wear gloves of any kind, if it was not cold. Unless the burying ground was some distance from the house, the coffin was carried to the grave by the pall-bearers, the members of the stricken family and the friends walking behind. Before the remains were taken away from the house a song was sung and if a man was present who was accustomed to praying in public, a prayer was said. At the grave the ceremonies were very short and simply. A song and a prayer, and the friends began to shovel the dirt on the box. A head-board of rough-hewn timber, from three to six inches wide, was driven in at the head of the grave, and a small stake was pushed down at the foot. In some cases this was the only thing that marked the grave of the deceased.

Though just as good and just as deserving people died in those days as do now, it was very seldom that sculptured marble gave the dates of birth and death and soothed the mourners with a scriptural quotation.

Generally, however, the narrow head-board was displaced with a wider piece, and one that had been smoothed with a plane. Sometimes a piece of stone was cut out of a neighboring cliff and roughly hewn to the shape of a tombstone. The initials of the deceased were cut in the stone. This was generally done with a file and was a very tedious job. The farmer put in his rainy days this way. In those days – forty years ago – wreaths of flowers were seldom, if ever, placed over the grave at the time of burial or afterward. However, flowers and evergreen trees were generally planted here. If, at the time of the interment, there was no fence around the burying ground, a rough rail pen was built about the mound. That prevented cattle from trespassing. A short time afterward this was displaced by a white paling fence. These fences were all alike and some of them can yet be seen from the country roads in certain parts of the State.

The funeral was never preached at the grave forty years ago. Very rarely was a preacher present at a burial, for preachers were so few and far between in those days that it would have been impossible for one to attend them all. The family, after they had recovered from the first shock of grief, set the day for the funeral. It was seldom less than six months, sometimes a year after the death. The day selected was almost invariably Sunday. The preacher who was to deliver the funeral oration, spent the night with the family, and repaired with them the next day to the church, where a goodly crowd gathered, for the people had been notified of the funeral. After the sermon a big dinner was set at the house of the bereaved family, to which all the friends and the preacher were invited. But no visit was made to the grave on that day.

Even greater superstition prevailed in those days in regard to graveyards than does now. No one liked to go near the burying-grounds at night, and the country boy would go out of his way two miles to avoid the sleeping place of the dead. Some farmers put this fear to use, Nobody lived in such deadly fear of the grave-yard at night as the negro, and nobody loved the luscious watermelon so well as the colored man. In the still night he would hie himself to his "mahstuh's" patch, and the next morning it would look as if a drove of cattle had been stampeded among the

vines. So some of the farmers, in order to protect themselves from the voracious appetites of their slaves, placed their watermelon patches near the family burying ground. Though the slave loved watermelons "with a love that was more than love," he feared ghosts with a fear that kept him out of patches which were near tombstones.

When a person died in those days there was much inconvenience getting a coffin, if the death happened in the winter time. Then the roads would be so muddy that it would be difficult to reach the neighboring town, where a visit had always to be made to obtain a coffin. Withal the family burying ground had a good many inconveniences – to the living – and it may not be a bad idea that it is disappearing.



The Park City Daily News, Bowling Green, KY, 2 May 1937, p.5B:



SOME BURIAL CUSTOMS

Burial customs are among the most persistent things we know. Many people will not weep under the bed of a sick or dying person for fear that such a deed will hasten death. Mirrors are turned to the wall in the room or house where a dead body is lying, and a picture of the dead person is likely to be swathed in many layers of cloth or turned to the wall.

It is thought that the person who sees himself in the mirror while the corpse is still in the house will be the next to follow. I have never known it to happen, but taking a corpse out of a house head first would be regarded by most people as a major calamity. Just how far back into the past this custom of removing the corpse from the house goes back no one knows; it is probably as old as any form of house.

In some Kentucky neighborhoods that I have known the pallbearers to ride in the wagon or the coffin, seated three on each side.

The custom of filling up the grave in the presence of the whole family is gradually disappearing in many sections; a few months ago I was present at a funeral where the family left, but the neighbors remained to help fill in the grave. On one occasion I saw the grave filled by the pallbearers; what makes me remember it is that I was one of them and the day was exceedingly warm.

A custom that I have not heard of in recent years was that of having the funeral many months or even several years after the burial. I have attended such, but that was a long time ago. Just how this custom started I do not know; it probably grew out of pioneer times, when the roads were bad or the weather would not permit a long service in the open air or the poorly heated churches. It was customary to hold a brief service when the burial took place, but the funeral often lasted a whole day, with dinner on the ground.

Julie, a Negro who worked for us, came in a towering mood one Monday to do the washing. The day before the funeral her mother, Aunt Milly, had been held at Mt Zion. Julie and Lucy, her sister, had made many preparations for the event, including the slaughter and barbecuing of a sheep. Then the dinner was spread out after the morning services, some rude boys of color made a dive for that mutton and soon had it reduced to bones. There was also some sliced potato pie, a gallon and a half of it, said Julie, that disappeared quite mysteriously. She and her sister, not to mention all the children and the relatives, were completely left out. That seems a comic version of a funeral, but those of white people sometimes were not vastly different.

Sitting up with the dead is still a live custom though hardly so common as formerly. I have seen it made a delightful and even gay occasion with plenty of food for a midnight lunch and a good yarn spinner to enliven things. In some families I have known, this custom has been given up very reluctantly. In its way it was a neighborly thing, designed to show respect. If the young people who came were not always sad, we must remember that it was not their sorrow. They often took this custom as well as others as their proportionate share of the responsibilities and duties of their neighborhood.

