

FEATURED ARTICLE

Right Next Door to the General Store: The Washburn Family offers more than groceries. They'll also help you plan a funeral. By John Vaughan

Catherine Washburn went to visit her mothering-law at Rutherford Hospital a few weeks ago, and while there she dropped in on an 8-year-old neighbor boy who was recovering from an accident.

A friend who introduced Washburn asked the lad: "D'you know who this is?" He gave Washburn a wry glance and said: "Yeah – you're the lady that buries people."

A dubious distinction, you may say. But in Rutherford County, Catherine Washburn and her husband, Edward, have a long and honorable connection with the undertaking business. It dates to 1928 when Nollie Washburn, Edward's grandfather, bought himself a white Model A hearse and hauled his first body.

Nollie's son, E.N., held one of the first funeral-director's licenses ever issued in North Carolina. Edward himself has been putting people away since 1955 at the family funeral service near Bostic, three hours west of Charlotte.

As far back as 1900, Washburns were selling caskets as a sideline to their main business, which was Washburn's General Merchandise. This old-fashioned country store has sat since 1831 beside State Road 1006, halfway between Bostic and the crossroads community of Sunshine.

So today it seems perfectly natural – to people around Bostic, anyway – that you should be able to buy garden seeds, fertilizer and flower pots at Washburn's general store, then go next door to Washburn Funeral Service to pick out your casket and plan your funeral. All in one trip.

You can even have yourself embalmed on the premises, if you insist, in a little room off the casket sales area.

The Washburns have a specialist to do that. Your funeral can be held just across the road in the big white-columned Washburn family home, where Edward's mother, Margaret, still lives.

It's Not Son Unusual

While a combination of general store and funeral service may seem odd today, the idea has deep historical roots. In the Carolinas, undertaking businesses frequently got their start as adjuncts to some other enterprise: furniture sales, usually.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, furniture makers could be found in many Carolinas towns. They had the lumber, tools and craftsmen to turn out a handsome coffin when one was needed. From making coffins to handling funeral was just a short step.

Ed Washburn's grandfather had a furniture business for a while. Padgett and King Funeral Home in Forest City, 7 miles away, started as a furniture company in 1900. Frank Vogler & Sons funeral service in Winston-Salem began the same way, and there were many others.

Until World War II most families "laid out" their dead at home, usually with the help of friends. It was considered proper work for women. Before embalming was common, bodies were usually buried within 24 hours. A towel soaked in camphor was laid across the face of the deceased to help with preservation.

Neighboring men dug the grave, and somebody was hired for a dollar to set up a tent and chairs at graveside. Then {

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continued }

the men went home and changed into their Sunday best for the funeral that afternoon.

There were no florists in those days, so in winter people brought cedar, holly and other greenery to place on the grave. In summer they picked flowers from their yards and tried to keep them fresh on the ride to the churchyard.

“The day of a funeral, church bells would ring out beckoning people from the farms,” Catherine Washburn recalls. “There were no radios and few telephones out here, so the bells would announce the hour of the service. There’d be a long tolling, then a pause, then two more peals for 2 o’clock, three for 3 o’clock, and so on.”

As the somber music drifted across corn field and pine stands, people slowly gathered at the Washburn store to ask the identity of the deceased.

Today Edward and Catherine handle about 50 funerals a year. They’re acquainted with almost everybody they bury. Business comes from up and down that secondary highways and section roads of Rutherford, Cleveland and Lincoln counties; from Bostic, Sunshine, {Golden} Valley, Polkville, Casar, Hollis, Forest City, and other communities.

Nowadays Edward buys his caskets from companies in Charlotte and Clarksburg, W. Va. You can see them on display in the brick building next to the store: 18-gauge steel coffins in burgundy, cobalt, bronze and gunmetal gray; women’s caskets with violets on the side panels; nobly grained coffins in polished oak and solid cherry.

The cherry version costs \$1,950. “You’re lookin’ at a real piece of furniture there,” says Edward. But you’d be proud to spend eternity in any of his models.

Edward’s great-great uncle Benjamin Washburn, opened the general store 160 years ago in a tiny wooden building. Brick today, the store sells everything under the sun: copper tubing, farm tools, stove pipe, overalls, washboards, hand corn shllers, oak rockers, butter molds, steel wash pots, local honey and molasses, railroader’s caps — you name it.

For decades, Washburn General Merchandise has been a gathering place for rural retired men. The morning crowd includes a chair- and wagon-maker, a carpenter, a retired textile worker, one or two highway department employees.

They arrive about 8 for Catherine’s fresh coffee, then sit chatting among the {plow} blades, fence wire, and plumbing fixtures.

“They spread a little gossip, like the women do,” says Edward, “then they go back home knowing pretty much what’s going on in the community.”

As you might expect, Washburn’s funerary sideline sparks a few flippant remarks from the morning crowd. Like: “How’s morning business Ed — still dead? Heh-heh.” He tolerates these comments with exemplary patience.

“But I have to be careful about visiting people in the hospital,” he says. “Some of ‘em may think I’m trying to get more business.