

He's a Basket Case

Prior to the establishment of funeral homes, family members and neighbors took care of all the details involved in taking care of the dead and burying the body. The family observed specific rituals and traditions.

Curtains would be drawn, clocks would be stopped at the time of death, and mirrors were covered with black cloth (crêpe or crape) to prevent the deceased's spirit from getting trapped in the looking glass. A wreath of laurel, yew or boxwood tied with crêpe or black ribbons, was hung on the front door to alert people that a death had occurred. The body was watched over every minute until burial, hence the custom of "waking." The wake also served as a safeguard from burying someone who was not dead, but in a coma.

In the 19th century, the dead were carried out of the house feet first to prevent the spirit from looking back into the house and beckoning another member of the family to follow him. Family photographs were also sometimes turned face-down. Personal stationery and handkerchiefs carried a black border, with a wide border indicating a very recent death. It was not unusual to keep a memento of the deceased—a lock of hair or a photograph taken after death.



By the 1890s, caskets were rectangular, rather than the older "coffin-shaped" style. The undertaker became the supplier of a service, the funeral, rather than the commodity, the casket.



Embalming, developed during the Civil War, allowed bodies to be shipped home for burial. Undertakers, rather than family and neighbors, began to control the entire process after death, carrying the corpse to the funeral parlor in the remains basket (right), embalming the body, providing a parlor for the body to be viewed, and taking care of all the arrangements. One explanation for the expression, "he's a basket case" has to do with the need to use a remains basket to transport someone whose limbs might have been separated from his body.



Hearses were well built and received light and limited usage. The casket was loaded through a door in the rear of the hearse which was decorated with black mourning draperies. Rollers in the floor made loading the casket easier, and rails and pins kept it in place.

Delaware County

Samuel Whitfield Allen saw the need for an undertaker in his community of Grove so he decided to add this service to his furniture store. He stocked ready-made caskets on a balcony along with a stock of mattresses, but most of his caskets were a coffin type that he covered himself. By 1909, he owned a horse-drawn hearse that was quite the showpiece of the community. Since he had to have horses for his hearse, Allen went into the livery stable business with one surrey and one buggy. In 1937, his undertaking business was sold to Luginbuel's of Vinita, and they later sold it to Worleys.

In Cayuga, the **Mathias Splitlog** wagon factory also made coffins. A supply of well seasoned walnut was always kept on hand for this purpose. When there was a death in the community, all other work at the factory ceased while the coffin was being built.

In Deerlick, among the many things **Travis Walker** did was to make caskets for friends and the women of the family would line them with fabric.