

The Development of the Funeral Business in Butte

*CARING
FOR THE
DEAD*

by Zena Beth McGlashan

ON MARCH 30, 1925, R. E. Spratt of Des Moines, Iowa, wrote to the Daly-Shea Mortuary in Butte, Montana. The body of his brother, H. G. Spratt, a salesman for a Chicago-based company, had "arrived in good shape," but Spratt wanted to know details about his brother's death and also to learn the whereabouts of his brother's watch, chain, and "Elk's tooth" watch fob.¹

The reply from Daly-Shea was both candid and kind. Spratt, Hugh Daly wrote, had been living at the Kelly Block, "a well conducted place." About the first of March, he had started to drink and on March 12 he died. "When we received the remains, there seemed to be something

about him that would indicate he was a man who had seen better days," Daly diplomatically wrote. He assured the brother that Daly-Shea had decided to "use care" in describing Spratt's death. When an out-of-town editor wrote to a Butte newspaper "looking for the low down," Daly said, "we told the editor here that he died from pneumonia and there was nothing out of the ordinary about his death." Daly even tried to get the attending physician to sign a death certificate with pneumonia as the cause of death. The doctor would not cooperate; he wrote "acute alcoholism" on the certificate. About the missing items, Daly advised the brother to write to the landlady because they were not in the man's pockets when the body was received at Daly-Shea's. What Daly did not say was what most men in the death business knew: when a body was found, it depended on who got there first to pick the pockets, the police or the coroner.²

The matter of Spratt was not quite finished. In his polite, grateful response, Spratt asked if Daly would write once more "so I can show the letter to Father and Mother," who were in their seventies. He hoped Daly could tell them that his brother had received

"good care at a respectable rooming house and from a good doctor, that his illness was of short duration and that he died of pneumonia." "I am desirous of keeping everything that would make their burden any heavier from them. . . . but they keep asking."³ Daly's response is not in the collected papers, but it is a sure bet that he wrote the requested letter.

Hugh Daly's involvement with the arrangements for H. G. Spratt shows just some of the issues faced by funeral directors in a mining city such as Butte. What would motivate a man to go into the business in a place where high wages could be had working underground may be hard to understand unless put into context. Being an undertaker meant entering the white-collar, professional ranks. It did not require hard labor nor, in the early days, did it take a significant investment to make a start; a growing population and the dangers of mining guaranteed a steady supply of customers. But from the early days on, the funeral directing was competitive. The success of a mortuary depended on a steady cash flow and both faithful and new customers, which, in Butte, meant establishing loyalties based on ethnicity, religion, and social class.

*See notes beginning on page 98.



IN THE EARLY 1800s, undertaking had not yet become professionalized. Instead, family, friends, and church graveyard sextons made funeral arrangements, while carpenters, liverymen, and businesses offering funeral supplies provided coffins, grave digging, and other services. Until the 1860s, when undertaking first began to evolve into a service occupation in cities, a man did undertaking as a sideline to his main job. This arrangement persisted in remote and sparsely populated areas. Thus, in the early years

of Butte City, just as in other frontier towns, the “combination” business prevailed.⁴

John M. Bowes can claim the title of Butte City’s first undertaker. Born in Maine in 1825, Bowes learned carpentry and cabinetmaking in his home state before moving to California in 1856 and to Nevada in 1863. In 1870, he came to Montana Territory, first to Helena, then Deer Lodge, where he built several houses and the Presbyterian church. When Bowes arrived in Butte in 1876, he bought three lots on Main Street and



In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, undertaking evolved from a profession in which a tradesman could get a start simply by advertising his services into one requiring specialized skills and facilities. Nowhere is this evolution more apparent than in Butte, where in the twenty years between 1885 and 1905 twenty-one undertaking establishments operated at one time or other; by the 1920s, seven Butte firms offered professional funeral directing. Still, mourners adopted the practice of holding funeral services at a mortuary only gradually. The photograph at left shows a lavish home funeral held in Anaconda circa 1930.

riages to transport mourners to the town's cemeteries a mile and half beyond the city limits.⁵

Even in the early years, Bowes had competition. In the same issue of the *Butte Miner* that carried his first advertisement, another builder, Balcain Pettit, advertised a carpentry and construction business. Pettit did not mention coffins, probably because everyone knew carpenters built them. By 1879, however, Pettit was advertising "Walnut coffins constantly on hand and trimmed to order." That same year J. C. Singer opened an upholstery and furniture business. Initially, Singer's ads did not mention coffins, but by the mid-1880s both Pettit and Singer were aggressively advertising the many aspects of their businesses. Pettit's ad featured "Bedsteads, Bureaus, Writing Desks, Base Rockers"—and a sketch of a coffin. In 1885, Pettit no longer advertised furniture but billed himself as the "City and County Undertaker." Singer began to referring to himself as "Funeral Director," a new term for an undertaker, in 1887.⁶

opened a business. In the June 6, 1876, *Butte Miner*, the second edition of the newspaper, Bowes and his partner ran Butte City's first ad for undertaking services and made-to-order or "trimmed" coffins as part of an ad for their construction firm. By fall 1876, the ads bore only Bowes's name and announced his new furniture business. Bowes proudly advertised the "Finest Hearses," one white and one black, just "received from the East" and "Complete with Society Emblems and Insignia" in 1885. He also offered car-

One of the reasons that undertaking was a profitable business in frontier towns was that people "tried to replicate as nearly as possible what they had left," and a proper funeral was one of those things. For instance, in January 1877, when Charles Murphy, one of the discoverers of a promising lode in the Summit Valley district and the First Worshipful Master of Butte's first Masonic lodge, died as a result of a sawmill accident, his lodge brothers arranged a statesmanlike funeral. Murphy's body lay in state for a day and a half at the Masonic Hall, where "hundreds came to take a farewell view." Two ministers conducted the services at Loeber's Opera House. When the cortege left for the cemetery, a marshal, Odd Fellows members, Masons from the Butte lodge, and "Master Masons of other lodges in full regalia" preceded the hearse, accompanied by six pallbearers

and “followed by a large concourse of people in carriages and on foot from Butte, Deer Lodge and the surrounding country.”⁷

THE 1880s marked the beginning of professionalism for many occupations, including funeral directors. The National Association of Funeral Directors held its first convention in 1882 in Rochester, New York. Funeral homes, buildings dedicated to only that function, began to appear in American cities in the 1880s. Another change, brought about by the Civil War, was arterial embalming, the replacement of arterial blood with preservatives. Because embalmer’s training was not a prerequisite for being in the business as it is today, most undertakers learned embalming as they went along by working with another mortician or from chemical company salesmen who often demonstrated and taught embalming techniques.⁸

Starting in 1886, the last line in ads for Bowes’s Furniture Emporium read “Undertaking and Embalming a Specialty.” Bowes may have been touting the talents of Edward Sherman, an Iowan who came to Butte in 1885. Evidence supporting the connection between Bowes and Sherman appears in July 1888. A July 13 ad read, “J. M. Bowes, the Leading Undertaker and Embalmer”; “Keeps also a fine lot of Pianos, Organs and Sewing Machines for Sale and Rent. Great bargains in second-hand instruments.” Two days later, E. H. Sherman advertised himself as “Successor to J. M. Bowes” with an identical ad.⁹

Sherman demonstrated what a sharp businessman he was in 1892 when he submitted a bid to the Silver Bow County commissioners to bury paupers. For twenty-two cents, Sherman would provide “a walnut stained coffin lined with muslin, trimmed with handles and thumb screws.” Bodies would be washed and, if necessary, clothed in a “burial robe” and buried “six feet deep,” instead of in shallow graves. The only other bid was from a firm that offered to bury paupers for one cent apiece. Sherman must have known that

“his more generous offer” to provide a proper burial would win him community goodwill.¹⁰

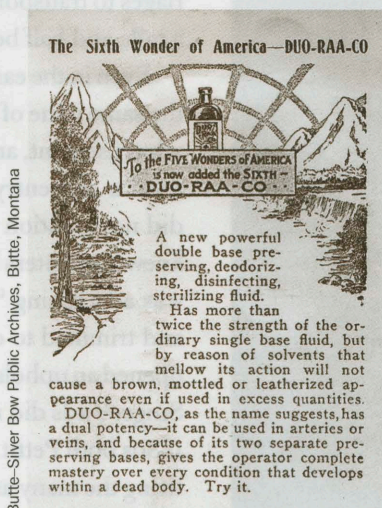
IN ADDITION TO pioneers Bowes, Sherman, Singer, and Pettit, in the twenty years between 1885 and 1905, eighteen undertaking establishments operated at one time or another in Butte. All but two were located within two or three blocks of the intersection of Park and Main streets, the heart of the business district, and most of these undertakers were in business

an average of about three years and a half years.¹¹ The proliferation of undertakers can be attributed to the city’s growth. The population stood at one thousand in 1876; by 1885, fourteen thousand residents lived in Butte and that number had grown to sixty thousand by 1900, spurred by Marcus Daly’s copper discovery at the Anaconda Mine.¹²

In the 1890s, the men who would dominate the city’s funeral business—Joseph Richards, a Cornishman; Samuel P. White of Scottish-Irish-Dutch descent; and Lawrence P. Duggan, an Irishman—came to Butte. Another Irishman, Michael J. Walsh,

moved there in 1905. Their careers reveal the varied ways that undertakers entered the business.

Some undertakers learned on the job. Sam White was a twenty-three-year-old carpenter when he arrived from Ohio on April 2, 1890. Butte, White believed, “offered a better opportunity for a young carpenter . . . to get ahead than any other place of which he’d heard.” He started as a journeyman working on projects such as Butte’s City Hall and advanced to boss carpenter for the Boston & Montana mining properties before he left the trade to become a mortician. He may have learned undertaking from James Tachell, who operated a mortuary business at 120 East Broadway, advertising “Bodies shipped to all parts of the world.” In 1903, Tachell moved to the Pythian Castle, the elaborate building of Damon Lodge No. 1, Knights of Pythias, a fraternal secret society; that same year, White started in the mortuary business at



Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana

The care of the dead progressed as advances in embalming reached the West in the 1880s.

On January 15, 1895, a Butte warehouse fire turned into a catastrophe when stored explosives ignited, killing more than fifty people, including most of the fire department. It took all the undertakers in town to accommodate the dead, including the men, right, in Edward Sherman's undertaking room.

the Castle. A year later, White's name still appeared in city directory listing of undertakers, but Tachell's did not. White's location on the ground floor of the Castle and his being a founding member of Damon Lodge and serving on its board of trustees must have helped his business considerably because he invested in the bonds issued for the building's construction. As George White, one of his sons, recalled, when a bond came due, Sam told his Pythian brothers to "just tear it up."¹³

Other men arrived in Butte with the skills required for undertaking. Born in Cornwall, Joseph Richards, the son and grandson of carpenters, came to the U.S. in 1890, settling in the mining town of Central City, Colorado, with his family. Richards may have taken up the undertaking trade there; surely he grew up



Winfield S. Hawes, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

seeing coffins being made. Richards came to Butte in 1892 and started in the funeral business in partnership with Edward L. Harris, then hired on with another firm, the Butte Undertaking Co., in 1893. Two years later he was elected Silver Bow County coroner.

Richards's pride in being chosen coroner is indicated by his boldly writing on a page of the Silver Bow County coroner's register: "Coroner Thomas C. Porter retires from the office and Joseph Richards assumes the role and performs the functions of the dead people's friend." Richards bought Butte Undertaking in February 1897 and gave the business his name.¹⁴

Michael J. Walsh, an Irishman born in County Kerry, had already worked in his uncle's Chicago undertaking business for ten years before arriving in Butte. He bought Montana Undertaking in 1905, but shortly thereafter moved to Anaconda, probably to escape the intense competition in Butte. In Anaconda, he managed and later purchased Ehret Funeral and Undertaking and served as Deer Lodge County coroner for two terms. Not until the 1910s did Walsh return to Butte undertaking, buying a graceful, two-story mansion on Park Street and transforming it into a funeral home.¹⁵



"With Tears and Prayer the City of Butte Pays a Last Sorrowful Tribute to Her Dead Heroes," read the *Anaconda Standard* headline, January 19, 1895, the burial day of twenty-five of the January 15 explosion victims. The funeral procession required every hearse in town, as well as some wagons, each flanked by visiting firemen.

Winfield S. Hawes, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

When Larry Duggan began in Butte in 1896, he was undoubtedly the city's best educated undertaker, having studied in Chicago with men considered to be pioneers of modern embalming techniques. Born to Irish immigrant parents in 1874 in Calumet, Michigan, the Upper Peninsula mining town that provided a ready source of Butte miners, Duggan studied for two years at the State Normal School at Ypsilanti and then moved to Chicago intending to go to medical school. Instead, he went into undertaking, studying with "Professor Sullivan," quite likely Felix A. Sullivan, "the dean of embalmers of the English speaking peoples." Duggan attended the U.S. School of Embalming and graduated from the Chicago School of Embalming.¹⁶

After working for and with others, he opened Duggan's Mortuary in April 1897 on Main Street, where it would remain for nearly thirty years. In the mortuary's early years, except for a notice in an 1898 Butte Fire Department booklet that boasted of his having a "lady assistant," Duggan did not buy ads nor did he pay the extra fee to have his name in bold type in city directory listings. Being Irish, Catholic, and having his mortuary across the street from the Miners Union Hall and closest to the mines and to Dublin Gulch, Duggan had a steady clientele. He achieved legendary status early in his life. "Duggans" was the name Irish miners gave to the often deadly underground rock falls.¹⁷

THE HISTORY of the mortuary business in Butte is marked by changes in partnerships, mergers, and acquisitions. The earliest merger was that of Edward Sherman and John R. Reed, a successful liveryman, in 1902. The owners advertised Sherman & Reed as "Undertaking and Livery at the Big New Barn, Corner Broadway and Arizona. Finest Cab & Transfer Line in the City. Hacks Meet All Trains." The "Big New Barn" was built against a hill so the back doors of the second floor, where the horses were stabled, opened on the street. The building had an elevator and a full basement, which held the embalming room



In the 1890s, several men arrived in Butte who would dominate the city's funeral business for decades, including Joseph Richards from Cornwall, England (shown here with his horse-drawn hearse), Irishman Lawrence P. Duggan, and Samuel P. White of Scottish-Irish-Dutch descent. Customers often chose undertakers of the same ethnicity and religion as themselves.

and storage room. On the first floor, the west side held funeral parlors, a chapel, an office, and "a casket and burial suit display," and the east, carriages and hearses. Livery included "three elegant hearses, twenty-one landaus, and a number of thoroughbreds" as well as twenty "fine hacks" and "forty stylish and up-to-date single rigs." Sherman's part of the firm dealt in mortuary supplies and employed two salesmen who traveled Montana and Idaho.¹⁸

As their businesses grew, Butte's funeral directors continued to innovate. Joseph Richards built Butte's first dedicated mortuary in 1908, advertising proudly in 1909 that he was "Owning and Occupying the Entire Building for the Undertaking Business."¹⁹

Such a claim was typical of Richards, who was always looking for ways to increase his income and visibility. Starting in 1901, he advertised that his was "the next oldest firm in the city," after Sherman. Later his stationery proclaimed him "The Pioneer Undertaker, Embalmer, and Funeral Director." Richards may have set a record for memberships; he belonged to twenty-three fraternal organizations as well as the Silver Bow Club and the Butte Auto Club.²⁰

Just how dedicated Richards was to business is demonstrated with the arrangements he made when he was preparing to move to California in 1912. Richards named his brother, Warrington, manager of the firm and in appreciation for "your faithful services in the

past” presented him “one quarter of the future profits” after expenses and so long as Warrington remained in Joseph’s “employ under your present and existing contract.” Richards created a corporation, “Joseph Richards, Inc.,” in November 1912, issuing to himself 397 shares of capital stock. The list of property reflected the transition from horse-drawn to motorized vehicles. Included was “one Cadalac 30 Automobile, one Winton motor Casket Wagon, one Ford Automobile, one horse-drawn casket wagon, one buggy, one set single harness and one set double harness.”²¹

The teens brought new names and new partnerships into the Butte mortuary business. One new firm was Daly-Shea, started in 1917 by Hugh Daly, a distant relative of Copper King Marcus Daly, and Dennis Shea, who had come to Butte from Calumet, Michigan, and learned his profession working for Michael Walsh.²²

Two men who later held prominent positions in Butte’s funeral business, Fred Root and George Wade, both went to work for Richards in 1910. Root was an undertaker in Idaho when Joseph Richards invited him to come to Butte. Wade arrived in Butte in 1898, worked at W. A. Clark’s Colorado Concentrator, Clark’s Butte Reduction Works, and later as a city fireman. Somewhere along the way, he joined the Masons. He became Masonic building custodian in 1909 and purchased stock in Richards after its incorporation, probably from Joseph, who was a Royal Arch Mason. Root and Wade took over the business in 1925 when Warrington died in an automobile wreck.²³

Partnerships in mortuary firms often changed rapidly. John W. Daniels opened his mortuary in 1916. He took on Matt Bilboa as a partner in 1918. Daniels soon quit the business; Bilboa, a hoisting engineer at the Colorado Mine before he became an undertaker, continued. In 1921, James A. Cassidy, who had worked for Sherman & Reed since 1909, partnered with Bilboa to form Cassidy-Bilboa. After Bilboa was killed in 1922, Cassidy took on as a partner Arthur J. Gosselin. Cassidy too soon dropped out. In 1925, Gosselin’s partner was Albert Harkins. Gosselin & Harkins operated until sometime in 1929.²⁴

A FUNERAL DIRECTOR touched the lives of countless families and their friends, and as a result these men earned the trust of the community. Larry Duggan’s career is a prime example. Duggan ran for Silver Bow County sheriff in 1920. The race was close and contested, and it played out at time when Butte was experiencing the tumultuous aftermath of a 1917 strike and Irish and Finnish opposition to World War I as well as heightened fears of the “Red menace” resulting from hysteria created in part by the Russian Revolution. Duggan’s Irish connections, including membership in a radical Irish group, the Robert Emmett Literary Association, made him hated by Republicans and the Anaconda Company. Compounding matters, Montana became a dry state on December 31, 1918; the national Volstead Act went into effect in January 1920. Prohibition was as beloved in Butte as a scab walking through a picket line.²⁵

When Jack Duggan, Larry’s nephew, became involved in a bootlegging scandal that swirled around John F. “Jack” Melia, the head of the county attorney’s “dry squad,” Company newspapers had a heyday. “Melia is booster-in-chief

Undertaker Edward Sherman joined liveryman John R. Reed in business in 1902. They built a two-story edifice (left) specifically designed to integrate their two enterprises, advertising “Undertaking and Livery at the Big New Barn.”



C. Owen Smithers, photographer, Waymyren-Richards Funeral Home, Butte, Montana

for Larry Duggan, red candidate for sheriff,” the *Butte Daily Post* crowed, adding that Melia was in line to be Larry’s deputy if the undertaker won the election. Duggan prevailed in the election but only after a court-ordered recount of the vote.²⁶

It was not the Irish vote alone that put Duggan into office. He had been a businessman for over a quarter century and served on the city council in 1900–01, in the Montana House of Representatives from 1901 to 1902, and as an officer of the Working Men’s Union, whose membership included doctors, attorneys, and other professionals. And he had the respect of others in the business community. Larry Duggan and Sam White, though rivals in business, were friends for years: when Duggan died in 1939, White was first on the list of the pallbearers.²⁷



It was often said that a Cornishman couldn’t get to heaven if Joseph Richards didn’t bury him. In 1895, Richards became the Silver Bow County coroner, in 1897 bought Butte Undertaking Co., and in 1908 built Butte’s first dedicated mortuary. One of his funeral home’s tastefully appointed public rooms is pictured here.

Duggan won the election for sheriff in 1922 by a 2,500-vote margin and an unprecedented third term in 1924. Butte elected men like Larry Duggan because they knew the city and its people and because Butte knew them. And for decades, who a man knew was vital for getting a job—or for getting out of trouble with the law. A story about Duggan as sheriff tells a lot. A fellow killed a “real bastard.” The murderer asked Sheriff Duggan, “What’ll I do?” and Duggan said, “Never mind. We’ll send him to the leading mortician and we’ll bury him at night and no one will ever know.”²⁸

BY THE 1920s, seven firms—Duggan, Sherman & Reed, Richards, White, Walsh, Daly-Shea, and the Cassidy-Bilboa-Gosselin-Harkins combinations—offered professional funeral services in Butte. This peak in the funeral business was tied to population. Census figures for 1920 showed the city had more than 41,000 residents and the county, 60,000. Of these, 6,511 men worked on “the Hill.”²⁹

With stiff competition from the other mortuaries, landing a contract with a union or fraternal organization gained importance. In January 1924, Hugh Daly signed a burial contract with the Butte Typographical Union guaranteeing burial services for members for \$150. The typographers drove a hard bargain. The contract provided the mortuary would perform the following services:

- 1) embalm the body
- 2) furnish plain casket, trimmed
- 3) outside rough box
- 4) underwear and hose
- 5) suitable funeral robe
- 6) gloves for pallbearers
- 7) death notice in daily papers
- 8) candles if necessary
- 9) hearse car
- 10) one family car for funeral
- 11) one pallbearers car
- 12) all personal services such as chairs, taking body from place of death to parlors and back again if necessary, also car for officiating clergyman and to provide free use of the chapel. No extra charge for shipping remains outside of town.³⁰

Funeral directors not only arranged services and burial, they were also important sources of information. A sampling of correspondence from the Daly-Shea Mortuary in the 1920s indicates just how complicated the funeral business could be.

Because miners were often single, morticians were sometimes a family’s only contact with a brother or son who died on the Hill, and the funeral director was often the man who broke the news. On July 17, 1924, forty-year-old Frank A. McDonald died from a “fall of ground between the 400 and 500 foot level in the West Colusa mine.”³¹ Unless a man had made funeral arrangements for himself—and some did—the coroner assigned the body to a mortuary.³² At Daly-Shea, Hugh Daly took care of the correspondence. Frank’s brother Lewis McDonald immediately responded to the Daly-Shea telegram, asking about funeral expenses and requesting to “bury the body there.” MacDonald sent the two hundred dollars required for church services and interment in a Catholic cemetery.³³

Daly must have written to MacDonald again because a letter from him arrived in September: "Thank you kindly for your nice letter. It relieved me of a lot of worry. Poor brother, I know that he had his faults just like us all. And believe me Mother will be thankful to you when she gets your letter as she used to worry about him as he was not much good to write."³⁴

Sometimes funeral directors found themselves in the midst of family dramas. Anthony Zymann, a patient suffering from tuberculosis in Silver Bow County Hospital, apparently wrote to the wife of his brother, Edward, in Chicago sometime in the summer of 1924. Edward typed a scathing response on August 9. The letter must have been among Anthony's personal effects because it was filed at Daly-Shea. "Listen young man," Edward told his dying brother, "if you have any more hard tales to tell, just write to your dad, for I have troubles of my own, *get me*, when I was sick who sent me any thing especially money why no one even gave a DAM, so you will just have to do like I did, 'PADDLE YOUR OWN CANOE.'"³⁵

Furious as Edward was with Anthony in life, he became the epitome of the solicitous brother after Anthony's death. Edward came to Butte to accompany his brother's body home to Chicago. His letter to Hugh Daly afterwards was polite and complimentary. "Took the body direct to the undertaking rooms as I figured the long ride and jarring of the train would have some effect on the body, but for looks he could

not be beat, considering the length of time." After mentioning the funeral expenses "cost me so far . . . \$700 not counting my personal expenses," Edward requested that Daly obtain the doctor's signature on an enclosed death certificate "as there is an insurance policy of \$55.00" that he could not collect until he had a signed certificate. Daly replied promptly, which elicited another letter from Edward: "In appreciation, I'm sending you a small package, if you do not use perfume perhaps your wife does."³⁶

IN A single-industry town like Butte, economic conditions could change quickly. In 1921, when the Anaconda Company closed the mines to bear down on the unions and to force a rise in the price of copper, the local economy crashed. Daly wrote to a friend in San Francisco on September 20, 1921, saying, "We have had a very bad condition lately, half our population have left the city, there has not been any mines working in the past six months."³⁷

That conditions were "very much on the bum" is echoed in a November 1921 letter from George Wade at Richards to Joseph Richards in California. Joseph still owned the firm's building. Wade begged for a rent reduction, saying that a bank officer told him the bank had reduced its tenants' rent by 25 percent as soon as the mines closed and "practically every other owner of Business Blocks have done likewise." Rooming houses and landlords in residential areas

were not collecting rent at all. Joseph's reply was immediate and hard-nosed. He would reduce the rent by fifty dollars a month for six months beginning in December 1921. "Now, Mr. Wade," Richards continued, "if you feel that the rent of my building is too much for you to pay and you can better yourself, I cannot blame you if you get a cheaper place." He reminded Wade that the lease did not expire until November 1922, "but if you will let me know by return mail and give me thirty days notice, I will go to Butte and take it [the mortuary] off your hands." The idea of packing up and moving an established



Joseph Richards made community contacts through memberships in twenty-five Butte fraternal and civic organizations. His brother, Warrington Richards (above), served as manager of the funeral home from 1912 until his death in 1925.

Ellis, photographer, Waymire-Richards Funeral Home, Butte, Montana

funeral home was ludicrous. Undoubtedly Wade understood Joseph's thinly veiled threat.³⁸

While Daly-Shea, Richards, and the other mortuaries were having problems paying their own bills, collecting for services never ended. The collection effort is apparent in the Daly-Shea correspondence. On June 8, 1921, L. L. Harksell in Darby wrote regarding his son's account. "I am out of funds myself and he has not worked but one week since his trouble in loosing his wife." Grattan J. Sullivan wrote from the Utah Consolidated Mining Co. Mill Plant in October 1922 about the balance due for his mother's funeral. "Am very sorry this has not been paid but the industrial depression the past year has made it impossible." A telegram from Salt Lake City on November 10, 1922, simply said: "CAN'T RAISE NO MONEY AT PRESENT H.D. BRANDENBERG." A relative, Joseph B. Brandenberg, a miner, had died on November 8, 1922, in St. James Hospital of double pneumonia. He was buried in a pauper's grave in Mountain View Cemetery.³⁹

Arrangements for payment even extended to barter. Mrs. B. C. B. Colvill in Missoula offered apples in lieu of the sixty-five-dollar balance on her

account. Responding in September 1921, Daly wrote, "The wholesale houses [here] are charging the stores two dollars and fifty cents a box for McIntosh Reds. If you ship us twenty six boxes of McIntosh Reds freight pre paid, we will send your note cancelled." Daly added, "We think this proposition will be of some benefit to you and if we are successful in getting rid of the apples, we will handle just as many more of them as we can get sale for."⁴⁰

In this economic climate, the number of county-paid cases the mortuary received was an issue for Daly-Shea. As 1921 rolled into 1922, Hugh Daly talked to county commissioner B. E. Cooney about "burials from the Poor Farm," which paid forty-five dollars per corpse. In a letter to Daly in January 1922, Cooney referred to "our recent conversation" and gave the statistics for 1921. Walsh and Duggan each had five burials from the county hospital; Sherman & Reed, four; Cassidy and Bilboa, two; and Daly-Shea only one. Richards and White had none. Cooney assured Daly that he had "instructed the superintendent" to work toward getting Daly-Shea an "equal quota of the business."⁴¹



Carpenter Sam White started his mortuary business in 1903 in the building of the Knights of Pythias, one of the nation's most popular fraternal orders at the turn of the century, and by the 1930s ran a funeral home in this graceful mansion on Park Street. Pictured out front in the 1930s are (from left) George White, Sam White Jr., Sam White Sr., Bob White, and Ed Jordon.

Comparing the 1921 county cases with those of 1926 is striking for the totals alone. For much of 1921, mining was suspended and unemployed people left the city. County-paid burials totaled only 17 that year. In 1926, with the mines going full bore, the number of county cases rose to 107. However, the inequity as to which mortuary handled the poor continued. Larry Duggan was still sheriff, so it is not surprising his firm handled the most cases, twenty-seven. Daly-Shea's share increased to fifteen.⁴²

During the five-year period between 1922 and 1926, the Butte mortuaries handled an average of nine hundred burials each year. A look at statistics from 1926 shows that religion and the undertaker's ethnicity played a role in which funeral home customers chose. It was often said that a Cornishman couldn't get into heaven if he wasn't buried by Richards; likewise, if a person was Catholic and Irish, heaven was off-limits unless they went to Duggan's. Whatever the common wisdom, for that year at least, Daly-Shea served the highest percentage of Catholics; 79 percent of the clientele was Catholic. Duggan's followed closely, with 72 percent, and Walsh's, with just over half. The three mortuaries were operated by men with Irish roots who were active in the church and Catholic fraternal groups such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians.⁴³

White and Richards buried the lowest percentages of Catholics, 6.5 percent and 5 percent, respectively. These two funeral homes were known as the Protestant mortuaries, and their owners participated in Masons, Pythians, and other groups. Many Italians went to Sherman & Reed, which had a relatively high percentage of Catholic burials in 1926—38 percent. Finns and other Scandinavians also used the services of Sherman & Reed, which was close to Finntown. Serbians favored Duggan. White buried the "elites"—Company officials, professionals such as attorneys and doctors, and businessmen and their families, including the Chinese, and handled almost all the deaths in the Wisdom and Basin areas. Butte had a relatively large Jewish community at the time.

They were in the professional and business ranks and used the services of White's.⁴⁴

FROM THE city's beginnings, Butte men controlled the funeral business, but in 1928 a mortician from Utah, Charles Merrill, bought firms in Missoula, Great Falls, Livingston, and the Walsh mortuary in Butte. Merrill named the Butte mortuary Gateway and hired a local man, Pat Gagner, to run it. When Gateway moved in 1930 to the Victorian mansion on North Montana Street built by U.S. senator Lee

Mantle, the business became Gateway Merrill Mortuaries and, soon after, Merrill Mortuary.⁴⁵

Gagner was state manager for Merrill Mortuary in 1931. As a June 1931 letter from Merrill reveals, Gagner encountered intense pressure to make the

mortuaries produce. "The

Great Falls mortuary showed a 50% efficiency," Merrill wrote.

"That is, where they should have made \$2,677, they made around \$1,200." He went on to describe each mortuary's efficiency—Livingston only 10 percent, and Missoula "made the poorest showing of all . . . making only \$8.35, whereas they should have made \$2,163." Butte, which included Anaconda and Phillipsburg, had the best showing at 60 percent efficiency.⁴⁶

Given these statistics, Merrill wanted to know "Are we getting any Protestant business? Are we holding our friends? Do people rave about the treatment they get, or to say it was all right?" "All in all Pat, I think there is some sign that the baby will get well," Merrill encouraged Gagner in closing. "Now just rich up the milk a little and put mama on proper rations and make it stay home at night and give it a shot of 606 and everything will turn out better next month." The "606" Merrill referred to was a chemical used to treat syphilis before penicillin.⁴⁷

Merrill's entree into the Butte mortuary profession alarmed local morticians. For the Butte funeral directors, one of the most contentious issues was that Merrill sent out salesmen to sell burial certificates

Percentage of Catholic Burials by Mortuary, 1926

Mortuary	Total Burials	Catholic Burials
Daly-Shea	151	119 (79%)
Duggan	157	113 (72%)
Walsh	101	51 (51%)
Sherman & Reed	222	84 (38%)
Gosslein	50	18 (36%)
White	183	12 (6.5%)
Richards	126	6 (5%)



At the start of the twenty-first century, two funeral homes—Wayrynen-Richards and Duggan-Dolan—continue the Butte tradition. In some ways, the city's funeral business has not changed much since the bereaved chose caskets in the Sherman & Reed's casket room (left, circa 1930).

that guaranteed 10 percent of a funeral's cost, but the sales pitch did not say what that cost would be. The salesmen gave the impression that single fee would cover all the burial expenses. Sam White, who was always proud of being a carpenter and continued his membership in Carpenters Union Local 112 until he died, went after Merrill at a meeting of the Central Labor Council. He told the union leaders that that the preburial contracts being sold "furnished no adequate guarantee that its provisions would be carried out." The funeral directors' ire combined with that of state auditor E. V. "Sonny" Omholdt, whose relatives had become involved in the Merrill insurance plan. As a result of Merrill's activities, the state legislature passed laws protecting Montana consumers. Today, the state has strict laws that stipulate that funeral homes cannot be part of the insurance business. Also, under the Montana Trust Plan, if the mortuary does offer a funeral trust, every dollar that goes into an individual's account and the accrued interest belongs to that person, not the funeral home. Montana is one of the few states that has such a strong consumer protection plan.⁴⁸

STARTING IN 1926, when Larry Duggan moved from the humble storefront where he'd been since 1897 to a renovated bank building on Main, the Butte funeral business underwent a series of changes. In 1930, Sam White left the Pythian Castle for the Park Street mansion vacated when the Merrill Mortuary moved to the Mantle house on North Montana

Street. White operated the business until his death in 1943, when his son, Sam White Jr., inherited it. White moved away in 1954, leaving experienced undertaker Rudy E. Sayatovic as manager. Sayatovic, who started as a driver in 1930, bought White's in 1958 and soon changed its name to White-Sayatovic Funeral Home. Sayatovic's death in 1976 marked the beginning of an ignominious ending for the Park Street funeral home. It passed through several owners then burned in 1982 in what many said was arson.⁴⁹

Duggan made another move in 1934. After Merrill left town, he leased Merrill's building, creating the Duggan's Merrill Mortuary. After Larry Duggan's death in 1939, a young Serbian named George Perry managed Duggan's Merrill for Duggan's nephew, Jack. Jack died in 1955. Perry bought Duggan's in 1963.⁵⁰

At Daly-Shea, Dennis Shea became president around 1940. Shea's stepson, Francis X. Dolan, who graduated from a Chicago mortuary school in 1928, eventually became manager at Daly-Shea. In June 1956, the mortuary announced in a full-page ad a "Grand Opening" of the funeral home, which had been "remodeled and rebuilt" after "two disastrous fires." Two years later, Dennis Shea died at age seventy-eight; he lived long enough to see his grandson and namesake, Dennis Dolan, join the business. Dennis became a partner in 1959. In 1960, he changed the mortuary's name to Dolan's. Dennis Dolan and George Perry of Duggan's formed a partnership in 1973, and Dolan closed Dolan's, renaming the former Duggan property the Duggan-Dolan Mortuary.⁵¹

R. J. "Ray" Wayrynen, a man who'd grown up in Finntown and worked as an embalmer for Sherman & Reed since the early 1950s, bought the business from the Reed family in 1957. In 1959, it became known as Wayrynen Funeral Home. Wayrynen built a new facility in 1967 on the Flat, the city's newer area, breaking the tradition of all Butte's undertakers working on the Hill.⁵²

At Richards, Fred Root took over after George Wade's death in 1941. Root's stepson, Arlo Axelsson, became president and manager in 1944, with his wife Wilda "Winkie" Axelsson serving as vice president.⁵³

As Richards's vice president, Wilda, who did all the bookwork as well as making funeral arrangements, ran into a wall of discrimination in what was then solidly a man's world. One of these occasions was at the Montana Funeral Directors Association annual meeting. The meetings included separate activities for wives, and Wilda was accustomed to being with the ladies, but she also had serious responsibilities at Richards. "One time at a state convention, I knew that they were going to be discussing a certain insurance issue I needed to know about. I walked into this meeting and sat down. A gentleman came over and said, 'Is there something you wanted, Winkie?' And I said, 'Yes, I want to hear this discussion about the insurance problem.' Well, they sat in silence for about five minutes and then started the meeting."⁵⁴

In the mid-1950s, Wilda became Montana's first female licensed funeral director.⁵⁵ After her hus-

band's death in 1967, Wilda took over Richards. Although some said she wouldn't last in the business, Wilda bought Wayrynen's in 1970, merging it with Richards. She achieved another first in 1971 when the members of the Montana Funeral Directors Association elected her secretary-treasurer, making her the first woman to sit on that board. She served until 1974. In 1978, she sold the funeral home to her sons, Jim and Steve Axelsson.⁵⁶

Butte's population shrank after the Anaconda Company's collapse and the subsequent closing of the Berkeley Pit in the 1980s. The start of the twenty-first century brought another change to the Butte funeral business. John Hossfeld, who began working at Wayrynen-Richards when he was nineteen, bought the funeral home in 2001. Hossfeld did not want Wayrynen-Richards sold to an outside corporation: "It seems like every time we turn around Butte gets a raw deal and I wasn't going to let that happen." Echoing this sentiment, Dennis Dolan Sr. of Duggan-Dolan Mortuary expressed concern in a 2002 interview about the encroachment of huge out-of-state corporations, which, like the 1930s-era Merrill Mortuary, seemed primarily interested in profit, not service. In Dolan's view, locally owned mortuaries "give individual care which doesn't happen in the big groups. It's just a job."⁵⁷

Butte's remaining funeral homes are, for now, still in the hands of Butte owners. Duggan-Dolan is a fourth-generation, family-owned business. Hossfeld traces his Butte roots back to his great-grandfather, Sam Rowett, a miner who also took care of Joseph Richards's horses. And so two of the oldest names in the Butte funeral business remain. The affable Irishman Larry Duggan might be pleased and the hard-nosed Cornishman Joseph Richards probably would not be surprised.

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Wilda "Winkie" Alexson achieved two firsts in Montana: she was the first woman licensed as a funeral director and the first woman elected to the board of the Montana Funeral Directors Association, pictured above in 1971. Pictured (from left): Hobart Brusvold, Billings; Dennis Dolan Sr., Butte; Wilford Bell, Malta; Wilda Alexson, Butte; William Riddle, Browning; Rex Troth, Bozeman; Tim Gerraghty, Missoula.

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