

The Civil War Creates Change

By Ryan Helfenbein

The Civil War truly redefined what we call America today. It introduced us to can openers, left and right shoes and even the word “skedaddle.” In addition, the war gave birth to the holiday marked as the start of Summer to some, but a day of remembrance to all – Memorial Day. To undertakers, the Civil War also shaped the modern day funeral service.

Of all the history written about the Civil War, very little has been written about the undertakers, without whom the war could have been an even greater horror than it was. Prior to the war, methods of “saying goodbye” to the dead consisted of ice-cooled or airtight receptacles with a glass window to view the face of the recently departed. If any means of preservation was done, it was primarily for sanitation, specimen preservation and medical studies, not for the use of what we would refer to as a visitation.

To this point, the role of an undertaker was simply to transport the deceased, prepare the body for burial and interact with the family for ceremonial preparations. During the Civil War, a majority of the soldiers who were killed in battle were immediately

buried. With the lack of identification, mostly due to the enemy removing all valuables from the deceased, it was often impossible to properly identify the fallen for burial. Nearly half of the soldiers were placed in graves marked unknown. There were no metal caskets provided by the government like we see today. Rather, a wooden coffin had to be crafted by who else but the undertaker, and it was difficult to build them in a timely fashion with so many casualties occurring during the war.

The undertaker of that time needed a change, and it was Thomas Holmes who provided it. Holmes created a process, which would evolve into the modern art of preservation. He had developed a safe embalming solution that prevented the need for immediate burial of the dead who could be identified. The solution was sold to the Civil War embalmers to help preserve the fallen veterans so that a proper burial could be performed in their home town, open to family and close friends to say goodbye to their loved one. The process of chemical injection was performed by men with medical training who partnered with the undertakers to perform embalming techniques. Nearly a decade after the war, this process of preservation morphed into a one-person job – that of the undertaker.

In 1861 the industry received notoriety for this new method of preservation with the death of Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth. During the viewing time, with many senators and Cabinet members passing by his body in repose, First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln remarked that the colonel’s face looked as natural as if he were sleeping. This caught the attention of Washington newspapers. A year later she would lay to rest her son and, in 1865, her husband, Abraham Lincoln, both of whom were embalmed.

With this new procedure of caring for the deceased becoming more popular, it opened the door for federal regulations. In 1865, just one month prior to the assassination of President Lincoln, the War Department issued a general order entitled “Order Concerning Embalmers.” This gave birth to the license

requirement, which is still mandatory today in most states, for embalming and transporting the deceased. It represented the first major effort in the United States to define professional requirements for undertakers.

Not only have the skills required to be an undertaker changed quite a bit since the Civil War, but

the terminology of this role has as well. The term “undertaker” was largely replaced with “mortician” in the early 1900s since it sounded less gloomy, even though the Latin root of ‘mort’ means death.

The Civil War in general affected many things in our daily life, from ambulance services, to ID tags, to the formation of national cemeteries. But the undertakers of today ultimately view the Civil War as being the birth of modern day undertaking that we have come to know as the funeral service.

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