

by Sandra Cook



copybycook@gmail.com

ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

► A Houston-based writer, Cook writes for regional, national and international publications on topics such as architecture and design,

arts and culture, gardening, fitness and more. An expert on life and leisure in the Houston area, she is the author of “Relocating to Houston and Surrounding Areas,” and the former the editor of Houston House & Home and the Houston Visitors Guide.

► The **National Museum of Funeral History** is located in Houston, Texas. For more information, call 281.876.3063, or go to www.nmfh.org

How you can spread the word about the museum

- Promote the museum with a link to the museum’s website on your website, via email communications and on Facebook. Follow the National Museum of Funeral History’s Facebook page to receive the latest news and happenings.
- Contact the museum to obtain brochures to be displayed and distributed at your location.
- Request to be put on the priority list for the museum’s upcoming membership program.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

At this museum, funeral directors can learn more about their own profession’s history, but more important, the general public can gain an appreciation for the importance of funeral service and memorialization.



The National Museum of Funeral History, located in Houston just a few miles from Bush Intercontinental Airport, features more than 30,000 square feet of exhibits showcasing the history of funerals and the need to acknowledge loss and celebrate a life well lived.

Funeral museum showcases the importance of what we do

Introduction by ICCFA President Fred Lappin, CCE

Most of my colleagues have visited the funeral museum (as it is popularly called) at least once. If, like me, you made your last visit several years ago, you’re in for a big surprise, because this one-of-a-kind landmark has expanded and is gaining an enviable reputation in the museum profession as a world-class institution.

So I think it’s time we take a new look at this public treasure that has more antique automobiles than many car museums, more U.S. presidential memorabilia than many historical sites and more papal accessories and artifacts than you can find short of taking a trip to the Vatican.

The National Museum of Funeral History is a living tribute to two centuries of men and women who dedicated themselves to caring for the beloved deceased and their grieving families. Everybody who works in our profession should support this monument of service.

How do you demonstrate to the public, as well as current and future funeral industry professionals, the importance of funerals? How do you transport a person’s heart and mind to that moment of being the surviving family member faced with burying a love one?

The National Museum of Funeral History (www.nmfh.org) offers 12 permanent exhibits that do just this in its more

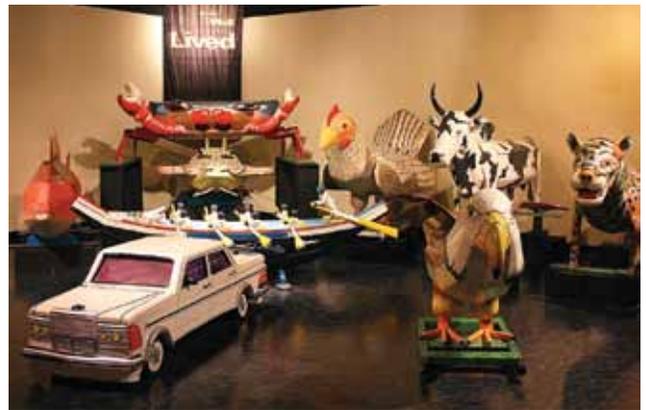
than 30,000-square-foot facility. The word “facility” is quite appropriate, as the museum facilitates conversations on the often awkward and unspoken topic of what to do when a loved one dies.

Opened in 1992, the museum is now the largest educational center on funerary customs in the United States. Its diverse exhibits underscore the importance of funeral services, burials and remembrance of the

PUBLIC RELATIONS



Gain a true sense of attending a pope's funeral by touring the "Celebrating the Lives and Deaths of the Popes" exhibit, which includes a full-scale replica of St. John Paul II's original crypt, an exact reproduction of the coffin used in the funerals of three previous popes as well as replicas of other papal vestments by the tailor shop which has made the vestments of the last seven popes.



Above left, the "Historical Hearses" display ranges from elegant 19th century funeral carriages to the actual hearses used in the state funeral services of U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford, as well as the funeral of Grace Kelly.

Above right, "A Life Well Lived: Fantasy Coffins by artist Kane Quaye," displays 12 coffins, each uniquely created to capture the essence of the departed, whether a character trait, an occupation or a symbol of one's standing in the community.

dead for people and cultures across the world.

Does the National Museum of Funeral History illustrate the importance of the funeral service industry? "Most definitely, it does," says Robert M. Fells, ICCFA's executive director and general counsel and a member of the museum's board of directors. "And it is more eloquent and persuasive than any form of advertising could possibly be."

The extensive exhibits offer touchstones

for all walks of life, connecting people to the cultural significance of funeral services. The sensational collection of vehicles in the "Historical Hearses" exhibit instantly grabs the attention of antique car admirers.

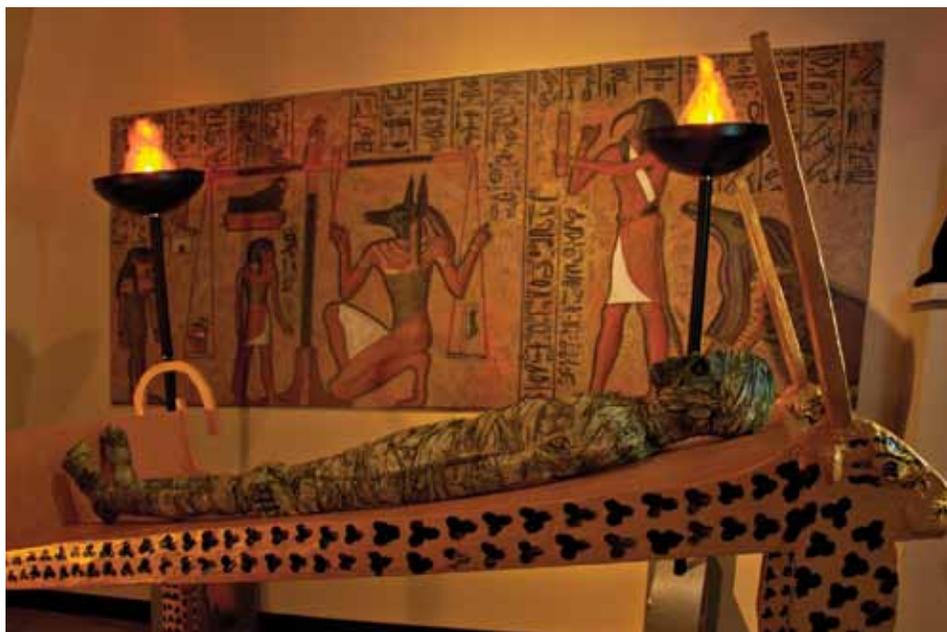
Those who like to learn about centuries-old religious customs can explore the extensive "Celebrating the Lives and Deaths of the Popes" exhibit featuring the formal traditions and protocols of papal funerals,

which includes that of the recently canonized St. John Paul II and St. John XXIII.

For American history buffs, the "Presidential Funerals" exhibit walks visitors through many critical periods in United States history, with each featured president's funeral reflecting the customs, mindset and methods of the era.

Additional exhibits include the popular "Thanks for the Memories" display, featuring

If you operate a cemetery or a funeral home and you don't have brochures for the National Museum of Funeral History readily available to your families and visitors, you're missing an important opportunity to promote your own business."—*ICCFA Executive Director Robert M. Fells*



"The History of Embalming" chronicles the preservation of human remains, from the mysterious rituals of ancient Egypt to the first techniques used in America during the Civil War and into the early 20th century.

memorial folders, memorabilia and other tributes to public figures, celebrities and famous animals from stage and screen.

The more technical "History of Embalming" traces the meticulous practice from ancient Egypt through the early 20th century.

Visitors gain insights into global cultures through the "Ghana and Fantasy Coffins," "Day of the Dead" and "Japanese Funerals" exhibits, while remembrance of fallen soldiers moves hearts through the tribute to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and "Reflections on the Wall," featuring poignant images from the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial obtained from the Smithsonian.

This past summer, the museum featured the temporary exhibit "The Rural Family Funeral Home: Four Generations of Service and Sympathy," which focused on 100 years of funeral industry memorabilia from the Redinger Funeral Home in Seiling, Oklahoma, and highlighted the shift we are seeing in which many people entering funeral service today are first-generation professionals rather than the youngest members of family-run firms.

Funeral director now museum guide

Former funeral director Robert Hahn volunteers at the National Museum of Funeral History because it feels like home. "I grew up in a funeral home, my father was a funeral director and I went to school and ran my family business for a number of years," said Hahn. "When I closed my funeral home in Pennsylvania a few years after my father died, I donated many things to the museum. It was a place I knew could help future generations understand what this business is all about."

Hahn now lives in Houston and volunteers as a docent, guiding groups on tours of the exhibits. "The museum takes visitors on a fascinating journey into not only where we came from as an industry, but also through the trends, customs and traditions from around the world," he said.

The museum hosts a variety of groups on a regular basis. Group tours for high school students, medical and nursing students and professionals, senior citizens and groups organized by funeral homes explore the museum throughout the year. Each visitor takes away a deeper understanding of the role of funerals, memorials and cemeteries in our culture.

"Our visitors span all ages and most come back several times, bringing each generation along to experience what we have to offer," said Hahn.

The museum gives visitors a much needed understanding of the funeral industry, Hahn said. "They can see how customs were started, and why the embalming process was so important in many parts of our history. The exhibits also show how taking care of our dead is an integral part of how we cope with loss. We tend not to look at death until it is directly in front of us. At that point, it is a painful and often emotionally taxing time. Our museum demonstrates how caring for our decedents has allowed the grieving to grieve and life to continue and grow."

Voices of museum visitors

It makes sense that those working for or with the museum have good things to say about the museum, but how about the visitors? We talked to some of those who were touring the museum on a Wednesday afternoon this past June.

Wayne Rischel of Smithfield, Pennsylvania, opted to visit the museum on the recommendation of his cousin, who owns a funeral home. "I think it's fantastic. There is a lot of history here. It's very, very interesting to see how they did things way, way back and how they are done now. It's similar to how doctors have revised their methods over the years."

"It makes you realize all the culture and history of how society mourns," said Amy Hearn of San Antonio, Texas. "Seeing the various caskets on display can stimulate a discussion with your family." Hearn, who lost her father last year, says it is comforting to walk through the museum and realize that for every individual funeral represented in the exhibits there was a family that went through the same emotions of loss and grief that she did.

"This place is awesome," said Larnya Walker, a hospice nurse from Houston. Walker said she is a trivia and history buff, and spent much of her visit exploring the "Presidential Funerals" and "Thanks for the Memories" exhibits.

"It's fascinating how beautiful and

detailed the carriages are for the horse-drawn hearses,” said Cindy Ortiz of Houston. “It’s interesting to see how funeral history has evolved.”

Brent Peavy, a mortuary student from Dallas, Texas, took time to visit the museum after hearing his classmates rave about the exhibits. “I could have spent hours and hours in the “History of Embalming” exhibit,” said Peavy, who had to leave to catch a plane. “Visiting the museum is very educational, excellent for anyone in the industry. I will absolutely be back.”

A resource for everyone

The museum’s role as an industry-wide resource is exactly what its founder envisioned. “The museum was started by Robert Waltrip, a third-generation funeral director, because he saw that the history of the funeral service industry was disappearing,” said Robert Boetticher Sr., the museum’s CEO and board vice chairman. “Originally the museum was developed as a resource for funeral directors, but over the years, it has evolved, with most of the exhibits now geared toward the public.”

“The museum has become an educational center for the public to understand the human need to have funerals and memorials and to grieve as a community, and the therapeutic value of acknowledging loss and the life well-lived,” Boetticher said.

The museum’s library has grown to include back issues of Mortuary Management magazine in a bound collection dating back to 1914. The archives also contain back issues of ICCFA Magazine, American Funeral Director and Southern Funeral Director, as well as numerous books and video archives on the subject of funerals, burials and memorials.

“The library collection is just scratching the surface of its potential,” said Boetticher. “For 22 years, the museum has established itself as a resource for the industry and the global community.

“I hope more people across the funeral industry will come and experience the museum for themselves. They will see the museum is a place to learn about death, how to cope with death and how ceremonies and funeral traditions celebrate life. It also gives a glimpse into our profession. You can see what funeral directors go through to help families, guiding them through the process.”

“Not just anyone becomes a funeral director,” said Genevieve Keeney, museum

president and COO. “The museum’s exhibits demonstrate how funeral service is a time-honored profession that is still evolving. There’s a continuity of compassion over the centuries that maintains a certain level of respect and dignity.”

Hahn encourages members of the industry to make the effort to visit the museum. “We are constantly growing and offering new exhibits and experiences. As an industry, it is important for us to be open and share our traditions, our processes, our history.”

“Funeral professionals can learn a great deal by visiting the museum,” said Boetticher. “I’ve been a funeral director for 49 years, and if I hadn’t been involved with the museum for the past 20 years, I wouldn’t know much about the early years. The museum helps industry professionals and the general public learn the meaning behind the terms, practices and traditions of the industry and our culture.”

Keeney and Boetticher encourage individuals and organizations to make donations, whether of money or funerary items, as well as to spread the word about the

museum and its purpose. “We’d love to see more industry support through attendance, donations and membership,” said Keeney.

“The museum has become a repository, filling the needs of the industry and the general public to form a collection that gives significance to singular items,” said Boetticher.

Getting more members of the general public to experience the museum will have a positive effect on the industry, Fells suggested. “The impact on the public is different in the sense that individuals vividly experience the importance that funeral service has had throughout history. Nobody wants to be forgotten, and funeral service, together with memorialization, fulfills a need that is instinctive in people. The goal should be simple: if you want more funeral customers, you need to let more people know about the funeral museum.”

“The museum as a whole represents the purpose of celebrating a life well-lived,” Keeney said. “This is the profession’s museum; it belongs to funeral directors and industry professionals all over the world.” □