



Todd Van Beck

**W**e might well remind ourselves that in the 1898 Sears & Roebuck catalogue any person could purchase a monument. In fact my grandfather purchased his first wife's monument in 1918 from Sears & Roebuck. The monument is still standing in the Graceland Cemetery in Avoca, Iowa, and has held up in a mighty good way. The monument cost \$45 and \$2 to set the stone. The local undertaker, the Blust Bros., who as mentioned before sold everything else concerning life, interestingly and oddly did not sell monuments.

Many years ago I had a dear friend and mentor by the name of Burdette K. Roland who owned a funeral home in Atlantic, Iowa. Burdette was a funeral director's funeral director; he was one of the best. In fact during his career there were sometimes several funeral home competitors in Atlantic but Burdette would consistently do 150 funerals a year and the others would have maybe a dozen or so funerals.

Burdette had a wonderful funeral home, just right for south-western Iowa – not too big, not too small. There was something else however, something that made a tremendous impression and impact on the communities he served that was very attractive to people – anyone could purchase a casket for a song. He sold his caskets at basically near the wholesale price and he started that practice way back in 1925. In fact he just put the invoice from the casket company in the casket as the price card that the family would see. He took his total profits on his services, and because his casket charges were unbelievably low he had some impressive caskets being used by the families he served simply because people could afford better merchandise under his system. The casket company he purchased from was extremely happy.

I asked Burdette one time how he developed this novel merchandising plan and he told me that he was taught to merchandise this way by a funeral consultant by the name of Francis Andrew Manaugh from California. Mr. Manaugh is a name that has totally disappeared from funeral circles and is never mentioned these days, but in the 1920s, '30s,

# Wal-Mart

## Part III

By Todd W. Van Beck

*The genuine bedrock foundation of funeral service is in the capacity of one person to provide services to help people walk through the valley of the shadow of death to help solve problems that death creates; this unique capacity of being a caretaker of the dead and a caregiver to the living is a capacity that is offered by funeral/cemetery professionals.*

'40s and '50s Manaugh was a premier funeral consultant and in great demand by a few select visionary risk-taking funeral directors.

In preparation for this work I pulled out of my library the book by F. A. Manaugh entitled *Thirty Thousand Adventurers* that he wrote in 1930 and was published by the Times-Mirror in Los Angeles. The book is a gem concerning funeral service pricing and merchandising. I believe what Manaugh had to say 80 years ago harkens to us today with the advent of Wal-Mart and others who will surely be crossing over into our time-honoured boundaries and territories. Here is what Manaugh had to say starting on page 126 concerning funeral directors and their relationship to merchandise, and particularly caskets. Pendants and other memorial accessories were not in the funeral lexicon or available in 1930.

**“Regardless of the harm done in the past by fallacious and unwise pricing, I find no occasion for anyone to work himself into a lather about it. The morticians themselves**



should rejoice that sufficient progress has been made along professional lines for them to merit as much appreciation as has been manifested by the public toward them. **THEIR PROFESSIONAL STATUS IS THEIR GREATEST ASSET AND IT SHOULD NOT BE INVOLVED OR LOST IN THE CONTROVERSIAL ATMOSPHERE OF THE RETAIL MARKET PLACE.**

I am willing to forecast that the time will come when the funeral director, mortician, or shall I say individual – for who knows what he may be called then? – will not sell caskets or any other materials for profit and that whatever is used in the way of dress or encasement for the body of deceased persons will be procured entirely separate from the place where mortuary work is done and where funeral services are held. Should this occur, merchandise will be interpreted – as material things should be interpreted – and priced independent of any more service than is reasonably expected from capable merchandisers at level commensurate with sound business judgment.

Such a movement should be looked upon with favor by manufacturers and morticians as an opportunity to free themselves and their products and services from the confusion that now exists. New and more irresistible competition for both sides of the industry will draw closer to them as long as the present order continues. This newer competition is influenced by and feeds upon the prejudices of the public mind brought about by the Jekyll and Hyde position of the mortician trying to be both professional and tradesman at the same time. The product of the manufacturers will continue under extreme disadvantage as long as the mortuary and its interpretation is a by-product of the mortician's terminology. The problem of credit between manufacturer and mortician could be entirely eliminated, and the costs of selling under the present economic scheme would support display stocks and display marts for the public's convenience with such variety and refinement that indices would elevate through the natural appeal of improved opportunity and better surroundings.

Complete elimination of merchandise from the mortician's responsibility to his clients would permit savings in mortuary operating costs far above any calculation yet

made public. However, economic improvement is not the prime requisite or major quality of the plan. To free professional services from the shackles of merchandising adventure would encourage from the public an entirely new evaluation of morticians. Thus the naming and collecting of substantial fees for services would be made possible from that part of society which restricts itself to engage professional service on the **BASIS OF REPUTATION THAN PRICE.**"

Manaugh wrote these sentiments 80 years ago, and when I reread his thoughts in light of the Wal-Mart flash and flurry I felt chills going down my spine. If we judiciously filter Manaugh's conception that funeral directors take their profits only on their services and add this with Burdette's undeniable success in operating a funeral home and then pass this idea through the veil of 80 years of time – there is certainly something here for thoughtful, careful and searching funeral professionals to ponder. Manaugh has a point – does he not?

The genuine bedrock foundation of funeral service is in the capacity of one person to provide services to help people walk through the valley of the shadow of death to help solve problems that death creates; this unique capacity of being a caretaker of the dead and a caregiver to the living is a capacity that is offered by funeral/cemetery professionals. I doubt it highly that Wal-Mart or any other multinational corporation will ever have the capacity or even the interest to respond to a child's death and offer helpful services; respond to a suicide and offer helpful services; or respond to any death situation and offer caring, compassionate, careful and helpful services. The watch word is "services."

Wal-Mart might well be skilled and able to merchandise anything – no matter what the product – no matter what form of retail sale. They will not however be skilled and able, or even possibly interested, in offering funeral services, in doing things for others, in leaving a mark on a person's life, in having a mission in life that by its very nature supersedes anything that any retailer and tradesman can provide. If the mission of service in our profession is not right, then nothing is right.

Anyway that is one old undertaker's opinion. 