



Digging up funeral home's history . . . was a labor of love for Phillips

Ask Mark Phillips if he knows anything about the history of the William J. Burke & Sons Funeral Home and he doesn't need to consult a book for the answers.

The facts are all in his head --and with good reason: One of the first projects Phillips tackled during his early years as a funeral director was that of compiling a detailed history of the almost 125-year-old business.

Phillips praises the late Jim Burke and Dick Stone for sharing their

records and personal recollections with him, insisting "they really deserve the credit" for the special project entrusted to his care in 1978.

"It's hard to believe a quarter of a century has passed since I typed that last page. It seems like it was yesterday, but in the year 2003, we mark our 125th anniversary, so I guess it's time to get writing again and bring this record up to date."

And what an incredible record it is! One needn't read far between the lines to realize that in addition to being a history of one of Saratoga County's oldest funeral homes, it is also a history of the times in which Saratogians lived and died.

Phillips found it fascinating that William J. Burke was originally employed as a cabinet maker and left Saratoga Springs for a time during the late 1870s to work for a coffin manufacturer in New York City. Only after returning to The Spa City for health reasons did he become interested in undertaking.

Burke began his apprenticeship with undertaker Ebenezer Holmes, owner of the firm of E. Holmes & Co. in 1878. That business had been started in 1854 in a three-story brick building at 12 Church Street in downtown Saratoga. The office, showroom and morgue were on the first floor, with living quarters occupying the other two floors. A stable area was located in the rear.

"The Holmes firm conducted many notable funerals in their years of business," wrote Phillips, "and in 1885, they assisted in the preparation of and arrangements for the funeral of former United States President General Ulysses S. Grant." The famed Civil War hero had passed away on July 7, 1885, at nearby Mount McGregor.

In those days horse-drawn dead wagons carried bodies to and from the funeral home. In the case of Grant, the body was subsequently transported by special train from Wilton for a long journey through the state capitol in Albany and to New York City for eventual interment.

Phillips learned that according to James Burke (son of William J. Burke), the senior Mr. Burke was, indeed, present during the embalming of President Grant. To what degree he assisted -- or whether he was merely a witness to the historic event -- is not known.

What IS known is that in 1882 he returned to woodworking and was employed as a house carpenter at Mt. McGregor for six years.

During that period, he was employed in the construction of the Hotel Balmoral on the mountain as well as at Grant Cottage. In addition, he worked on the Claredon Hotel, once situated on South Broadway, near St. Peter's Church in Saratoga Springs. Another entry tells of the dark, sad months when the flu epidemic of 1918 swept through The Spa City.

While employed in carpentry, Burke was approached by Jack McCabe, an employee of Holmes, beseeching him to take his place while he took a short vacation from Saratoga Springs.

For reasons unknown, McCabe never returned, leaving a vacancy at the Holmes funeral parlor which Burke apparently decided to fill.

Upon returning to the undertaking profession in 1888, Burke formed a partnership with Ebenezer's son, C. Howard Holmes. That partnership lasted until 1893 at which time Holmes sold his interest in the partnership to Burke.

Burke had also married Mary Agnes Madden in 1888 and the newlyweds lived above the Church Street funeral home for several years. Indeed, three of their six children were born at that address, including William Joseph Burke, Jr., who would many years later take over the operation of the business from his father and operate the funeral home with his younger brother, James Madden Burke. (The other three Burke children were born in a large house at 60 Woodlawn Avenue.)

The growing business later moved to more centrally located quarters at 457 Broadway. In 1906, William J. Burke, Sr. purchased the three-story brownstone building at 465 Broadway (next door to the main branch of the Adirondack Trust Co.) where it remained in operation until the mid 1980s.

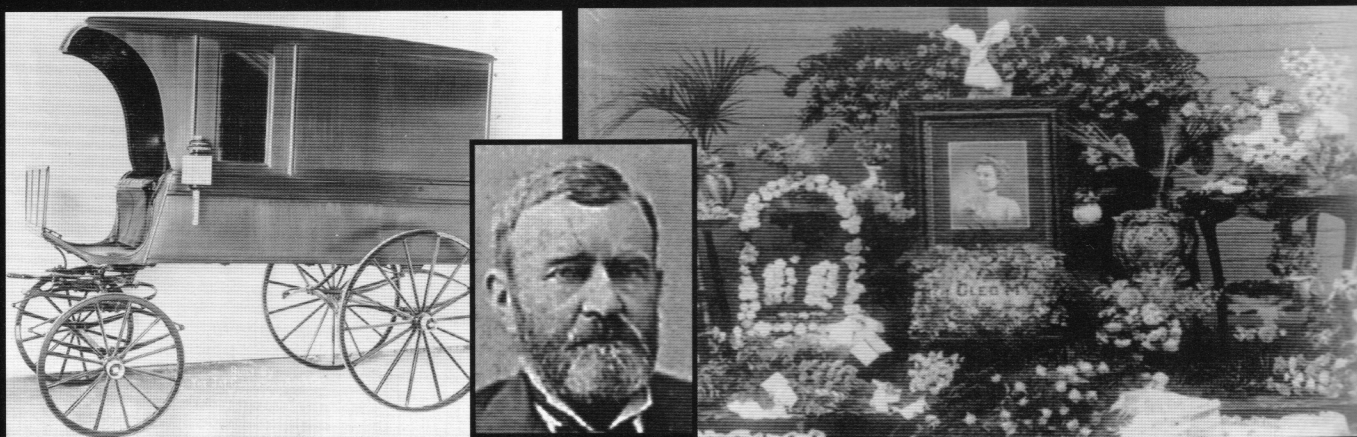
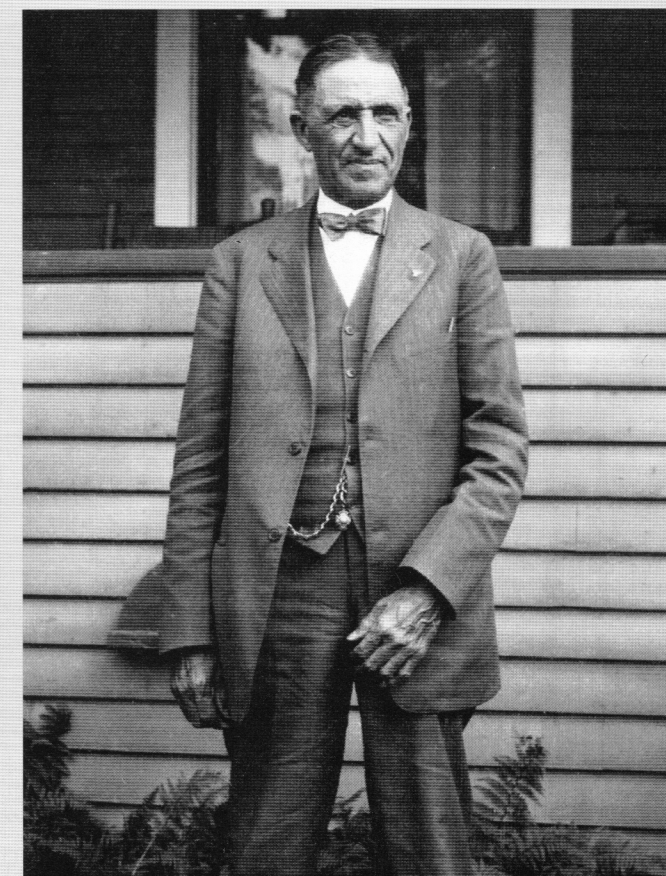
Each Broadway location included a store front which were festively decorated in keeping with the holidays where Burke could display beautiful hand-crafted coffins.

Ultimately, the funeral business relocated to what might be called its present and "final resting place" at 628 North Broadway, a short walk from downtown Saratoga Springs and Skidmore College.

To learn more, please visit www.burkefuneralhome.com.



Funerals were incredibly somber occasions with black and gray color schemes when these photographs were taken by those affiliated with the Saratoga funeral home founded by William J. Burke, Sr. in the late 1800s. The very fact that something called a "dead wagon" was used to transport the deceased and that those who arranged the funeral services were dubbed "undertakers" speaks volumes about how such rites of passage were perceived by society in that bygone era. Among those who were prepared for burial at Burke's was former US President Ulysses S. Grant. Prior to moving to its present North Broadway location, Burke's had a storefront next to what is now the main branch of the Adirondack Trust Co. That's William J. Burke, Sr. (seated) with early associates Ray Dennin (with derby) and John Haberlain (holding straw hat) in the front window when it was decked out for the holidays a century ago. William J. Burke, Sr. is also shown by his front porch later in his life. Burke's son, William, Jr., eventually took over the business from his father. Motorized hearses like those shown here were introduced in the early 1920s.





Photograph by Antonio Bucca

Contemporary FUNERAL DIRECTORS

*help loved ones celebrate
the lives of those who have passed on*

By Ann Hauprich

**HIS BRIGHT SMILE,
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If Phillips seems too vibrant to be spending long hours inside a dismal funeral home, it's because neither he nor any funeral director he knows bears the slightest resemblance to the grim-faced morticians depicted in most Hollywood productions and the funeral home he has long been associated with is anything but dark and dreary.

While the setting inside the doors of the meticulously maintained Victorian mansion on North Broadway in Saratoga Springs is dignified and respectful, the heavy somber drapes of yesteryear are long gone, replaced by lighter, more colorful prints that help set the tone for services that are a celebration of life.

"A funeral is a rite of passage like other ceremonies when we recognize an important event that distinguishes our lives . . . it commemorates the life that has been lived and is intended to be a source of

solace for families and friends as they recall their loved one and a life well-lived," notes Phillips, a fourth generation Saratogian and father of two who has given generously of his time and treasure to the YMCA, the Elks, the Saratoga CARE Foundation, Community Hospice of Saratoga, the Knights of Columbus, the St. Clement's Horse Show and the Saratoga Central High "Beyond the Classroom" Foundation.

Phillips is quick to note that R. Thomas Armer, Lance Evans and Dan DeCelle, his fellow funeral directors at the William J. Burke & Sons, Bussing & Cunniff Funeral Homes -- formerly the William J. Burke & Sons Funeral Home -- are also involved in a variety of community causes.

All four licensed funeral directors encourage those involved in what they refer to as "end-of-life planning" to consider incorporating music, photos -- and more recently videos -- into the wake, funeral or memorial service.

"We've worked hard to modernize the interior decor as much as possible to create an atmosphere that is uplifting and are pleased when people tell us that they don't feel like they're inside a funeral parlor when they're here. The whole idea is for them to feel as relaxed and as much at home as possible," observes Phillips.

It is perhaps not surprising then that friends and family members often bring in volumes of photo albums and boxes filled with tapes and CDs. The funeral home also provide easels for those who wish to create photo collages, a screen in one of the four parlor rooms for those with old home movies and a close circuit TV for videos.

Since installing a CD and tape system in

the 1980s, the staff has heard everything from contemporary religious songs and the classics to the Big Band swing music of Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey to Broadway show tunes to The Beatles -- especially their hit "Let It Be." Sinatra's swan song, "My Way," is also quite popular. One day, a small orchestra performed live music on the front porch of the funeral home. Another time it was a jazz band.

Family and friends have also gone so far as to arrive at the funeral home with golf clubs, canoes, motorcycles -- whatever was important to the deceased person in life. "Once we had vintage classic cars and another time a fully operating John Deere tractor was brought up and placed on display because that's what the family



knew that person would have wanted."

In many cases, a fraternal, religious or military organization to which the deceased belonged may be invited to conduct a brief ceremony during visitation hours or at a funeral or graveside services. Doing so enables mourners to recall the life of their loved one with honor and prayer.

Nowadays, stresses Phillips, people can even take advantage of "on-line condolences" via the Internet. He can't even imagine what changes the next decade will bring.

"Preparing the deceased for burial or cremation is certainly part of what a funeral director does, but a large portion of each day is devoted to meeting with the families of those who are being laid to rest, assisting with end-of-life planning, comforting and attempting to console," explains Phillips, who began working at William J. Burke & Sons in 1971.

He first became interested in funeral directing while a student at St. Peter's Academy (now Saratoga Central Catholic

Junior-Senior High School) on South Broadway.

"I often served as an altar boy at funerals and was always impressed by the service inside the church -- the music, the readings, the eulogies. Later I got a summer job cutting the grass at St. Peter's Cemetery and when the funeral processions arrived, all the workers had to shut the mowers off. Naturally, like anyone, I began to ask a lot of questions."

Luckily for Phillips, Jim Burke and his partner, Richard Stone -- then the funeral director at Burke's -- were more than happy to provide the answers.

"Dick Stone had a healthy and optimistic outlook and explained the scientific side, practical and personal aspects of a funeral director's life to me. He was a great mentor . . . he was incredibly patient and more than generous with his time. He was a role model for the community . . . a gentleman through and through, a modest man. I couldn't hold a candle to him. Looking back I know I learned more from Mr. Stone than I ever

did at college."

For a time in his teens, Phillips pondered a priestly vocation, but ultimately decided that wasn't for him. He could also put the values and ideals he had learned from the Sisters of St. Joseph who schooled him from kindergarten through Grade 12 into action by demonstrating compassion, courtesy, kindness and understanding to families coping with the death of loved ones. The Burkes had a well known and respected business reputation.

"There are certainly spiritual overtones to being a funeral director," reflects Phillips. "It is a business and a profession, but we are also charged with a very sacred duty and adhere to a very strict and expected code of ethics."

Indeed Phillips, who marked his 30th year in the profession last year, received his state license as a funeral director and obtained National Board Certification in 1975.

He remains an active member of the New York State and Adirondack Funeral Directors Associations as well as being past chairman of the annual state convention memorial services. Phillips is also a Region Two member of the National Disaster Mortuary Response Team, the NYS State Disaster Task Force and the Saratoga Springs Public Safety Disaster Management Committee.

In addition, Phillips has been heralded as a shining example of Christian leadership and was officially recognized as such when he was presented with the Rev. Dominic Ingemie Alumni Award and inducted into the St. Peter's Academy/Saratoga Central Catholic High School Hall of Fame at the turn-of-the-millennium.

A lifetime communicant of St. Peter's Church, Phillips serves as an usher and member of the pastoral council's cemetery committee and assists at many parish receptions, fundraisers and special events. He is a former board members of both Catholic Charities and the Saratoga Springs Senior Citizens Center.

He and his wife, the former Michele DelVecchio, and their two children (John, now a junior at SUNY/Plattsburgh and Margaret, a Siena College sophomore) were honored by the Knights of Columbus as the Family of Year in 1998.

His selfless dedication to the community has also been demonstrated through his past and present volunteer efforts on behalf of the American Red Cross (he is a former bloodmobile chairman and remains a regular donor) and his current duties as a docent at the NYS Military Heritage Institute on Lake Avenue where his bright smile, twinkling eyes and firm handshake bring cheer to young and old alike.

Associate funeral director R. Thomas Armer also has a long and distinguished record of professional and community service.

Affiliated with the Burke firm since 1974, Armer is a second generation funeral director -- one of five such licenced directors in the Armer family of Ballston Spa.

A member and former vestryman of Christ Episcopal Church, Armer is also a member and past president of the Adirondack Funeral Directors Association.

Tom Armer has also donated countless hours over many years to Saratoga County's 4-H program. He is currently serving as president of the Saratoga County Fair -- a wonderful organization we'll feature in-depth in the Summer 2003 edition of Saratoga Living Magazine.

Long before he became a licenced funeral director, Lance G. Evans had a deep understanding and appreciation of what the profession entailed.

A nephew of Tom Armer, Evans has been associated with the profession most of his life -- both through his uncle and the highly respected Armer family funeral business in Ballston Spa.

Evans has been employed with the Burke firm, where he served his residency and received his licence, since 1994. A member of the United Methodist Church, Lance resides in nearby Greenfield Center with his wife Kris and their daughter Katielynn.

A graduate of Hudson Valley Community College's Mortuary Science program, Daniel J. DeCelle was licenced as a NYS funeral director in 1983 and has been associated with the funeral profession in the area now over 20 years.

Married and the father of two children, the Mechanicville resident is a member of Assumption-St. Paul Church and has been involved in the city's youth sports programs for a decade.

DeCelle has served as president of the Mechanicville-Stillwater Little League and is the current District 11 administrator. He is also the spokesperson for the Junior Red Raider football program, a former baseball/basketball coach for the Mechanicville school system and has served as a member of the Mechanicville-Stillwater Chamber of Commerce.

Talk about four lives well-lived!

"It is a business and a profession, but we are also charged with a very sacred duty and adhere to a very strict and expected code of ethics."

Beyond the Classroom Foundation, Inc. enhances SCC programs and facilities

The best educators have long been telling students "the whole world is your classroom."

With this in mind, those invested with enriching the opportunities for learning at Saratoga Central Catholic Junior-Senior High School (SCC) have taken things a giant step beyond what might normally be expected.

Aptly titled the Beyond the Classroom Foundation, Inc., the volunteer committee's mission is to enhance the educational facilities and programs of SCC.

Functioning autonomously from both the South Broadway school and the Roman Catholic Diocese in Albany, the foundation -- led by president Mark Phillips -- has raised thousands of dollars through donations and fundraisers that have resulted in noteworthy improvements, upgrades and innovations.

Working hard alongside of Phillips are Vice President J. Michael O'Connell; Secretary Agnes Pompa; Treasurer Stephanie Ferradino; and committee members Michael Cummings, Bobby D'Andrea, Douglas Joseph, Jake Hogan, Bruce Stiles and Rod Sutton.

Accomplishments to date have included a \$20,000 renovation of the science lab and improvements to the stage facilities for SCC's

Music & Drama program to the tune of \$9,000. The gymnasium's bleachers also sport \$9,000 worth of recent repairs.

Annual fundraisers include the Father Paul Bondi Golf Tournament at the McGregor Links Country Club & Golf Course in Wilton each September which supports the general budget and provides for the funding of projects based upon need during the academic year.

Another major fundraiser is the Spring Fashion Show which benefits the Sister Elizabeth Ann Seton Scholarship Fund. The goal is to build an endowment to provide one full-tuition scholarship of approximately \$10,000 a year at the junior high and high school levels.

A Memorial Program spearheaded by foundation secretary Pompa is providing additional support for Beyond the Classroom.

"We wrote to the directors of all of the funeral homes between Clifton Park and Glens Falls and asked them to consider placing donation information in their funeral parlors," says Pompa, adding: "The response to date has been very favorable."

Those wishing to learn more about the Beyond the Classroom Foundation should contact Cathy Cornell at 587-7115.



Helping families celebrate with dignity the lives of loved ones who have passed on is but one of the many responsibilities shared by four dedicated licenced funeral directors at the William J. Burke & Sons, Bussing & Cunniff, Inc. Funeral Homes. Seated (l. to rt.) are Lance G. Evans and Daniel J. DeCelle. Standing are R. Thomas Armer and Mark T. Phillips.

PHOTO BY ANN HAUPRICH

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PARENTS AND PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS ARE INVITED TO ATTEND OUR

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Snow Date: Sunday February 9, 2003
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SCC Main Building, 247 South Broadway

