"Good Grief!"
Said Charlie Brown:
The Business of Death
in Bygone St. Paul
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They Played for the Love of the Game
Adding to the Legacy of Minnesota Black Baseball

Frank M. White   *Page 3*

John Cotton, left, was an outstanding athlete and second baseman for the Twin City Gophers, his Marshall Senior High School team, and other professional teams in the 1940s and '50s. He and Lloyd "Dulov" Hogan, right, and the other unidentified player in this photo were part of the thriving black baseball scene in Minnesota in the middle of the twentieth century. Photo courtesy of the Cotton family. Photo restoration by Lori Gleason.

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

History reminds us of change in a vivid way. Just a few decades ago, de facto segregation reigned even in the North, and black players could not play baseball in white leagues. Frank White presents a valuable account of the talented St. Paul players who joined the Negro Leagues, barnstorming in the 1930s through 1950s and staying in private homes because they were not welcome in many public accommodations. After Jackie Robinson became the first black player in the major leagues in 1947, black players still found St. Paul to be a valuable training ground, which could act as a steppingstone to playing major league baseball. Also in this issue, Moira F. and Leo G. Harris explore the business of death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using primary source material, they have documented such customs as long funeral processions, mourning cards, and the advent of ready-made coffins when railroad traffic could bring them to the Twin Cities. Elaborate funeral customs may have reflected the reality of earlier death, when disease and accidents cut short the lives of many Ramsey County residents. But these traditions have a graceful legacy in the headstones of Oakland and Calvary Cemeteries, which are well worth a visit even after the tributes and ceremonies that mark Memorial Day.

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

"Good Grief!" Said Charlie Brown
The Business of Death in Bygone St. Paul

Moira F. Harris and Leo J. Harris

Inspiration for this article has come from many hours spent examining the archives of the Albert Scheffer family, which are currently in a private collection. Even though this essay concerns a particular line of endeavor which, to many readers, may at best provide squeamish reading, students of the history of St. Paul and Ramsey County might want to keep the words of that redoubtable St. Paul historian, Henry Castle, in mind. In 1912 he opined that

> . . . no line of work requires more tact or consideration for the feelings of others than does that connected with the undertaking business. The records of St. Paul, Minnesota, show that the funeral directors of that city are fully abreast of modern scientific progress and discovery, and that the men belonging to this, one of the most important of the professions, rank with the foremost in the state.[1]

In the paragraphs that follow we will examine various aspects of funerals. Omitting on purpose any discussion of formal secular or religious ceremonies, we will present curious snippets of information about various participants, paraphernalia, and funeral practices in St. Paul from the last half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Funeral Cortege

Following the funeral services, the usual procedure was for family and mourners to accompany the body of the deceased to the cemetery. Funeral processions, escorted or led by units of the police, were customarily given right-of-way over other traffic. In 1875 the largest funeral procession then ever to be seen in St. Paul went from a home on Summit Avenue to Oakland Cemetery by way of downtown.

That day, the Stillwater newspaper reported, "Business was almost entirely suspended, flags on various buildings were displayed at half mast, and people turned out *en masse* to do honor to the memory of one of the noblest of men."[2] That man was Charles Scheffer. The funeral cortege, led by a platoon of police, went from Summit Avenue to Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard), then turned north on Robert Street. On entering Oakland cemetery, the procession went to the Finch-Scheffer plot adjacent to burials of the Finches (the family of the deceased's first wife) and of his brother Albert's family.

After the police unit came the Great Western band, the Musical Society, the Mannerchor and the Liederkranz singing societies, all of which counted Scheffer as a member. Fifty-two employees of Auerbach, Finch, and Scheffer, the wholesale firm, marched in two columns; each man was dressed in black, wore black gloves and a piece of black crepe around his left arm.[3] In horse-drawn carriages (perhaps as many as 300) following the hearse rode the clergy, the pallbearers, family, relatives, former and current state officers, and friends.

All continued to the Finch-Scheffer grave site where arbor vitae and oak trees had been planted around an Italian marble monument of a grieving woman. As the casket was lowered into the ground, the Great Western band played Chopin's "Marche Funébre" and the Mannerchor sang "Saenger's Gruft" and Kreutzer's "Abendglocken."

Why did so many people attend the funeral of a man who died suddenly at the age of forty? It was probably a combination of several factors. Charles Scheffer was a banker, businessman, and

Charles Scheffer (1835–1875). Stillwater Gazette *photo. Photo courtesy of the Washington County Historical Society.*

Minnesota's first elected State treasurer, chosen by the Republican Party to represent the German community on their slate. He was well-known in St. Paul (he was said to have given most of his treasurer's salary to charity), and active in musical societies in both Stillwater and St. Paul.[4] His rise from poverty as a newly arrived immigrant playing the bandoneon on the streets of New York City to the posts of bank president and state official in Minnesota had been swift and his demise just as rapid. Those riding in the cortege or watching from the sidewalks may well have been friends, but others "never knew him except for his worthy deeds."[5]

Charles Scheffer came to America from Germany in 1848 and came to Minnesota (via Fond du Lac, Wisconsin) in 1856. He first worked as a clerk, rising to president of the First Bank of Stillwater in 1859. He was married twice, to Kate Finch in 1862, and after her

death, to Jennie Goodrich in 1874. On a trip to Washington, D. C., after his second wedding, he survived a railroad accident when a runaway engine crashed into the sleeping car he was in. His injuries healed, but severe pain persisted.[6] Evidently convinced that he would never regain good health, he carefully wound up his affairs. He bade family and friends what they later realized was a final good-bye, purchased a Colt pistol at the M. F. Kennedy arms shop, and then walked to Oakland Cemetery.

Reporters for the local newspapers theorized that Scheffer had probably spent a number of hours in the cemetery before finally sitting at the foot of an oak tree in what was then known as the German Lutheran cemetery, and shooting himself. After a massive search his body was discovered the next day.

Sympathy and Flowers

It was always possible during the short Minnesota growing season to gather flowers locally for funeral floral tributes. Yet Minnesota had a nursery business as early as 1851 when Lyman M. Ford opened his Groveland Garden & Nursery, on 160 acres along the St. Anthony Road. In 1856 Truman Smith began selling hardy roses, fruit plants, and evergreens on Dayton's Bluff.[7] But organized, year-round commercial preparation and sale of such funeral displays in St. Paul did not occur in the earliest days. Peter Damian Bellis mentions another businessman named Langeman as St. Paul's first florist. His firm, the Pioneer Greenhouse, was located in Merriam Park and included a "bouquet maker" to create funeral arrangements.[8] Even by 1874 a listing of nurserymen, florists, and gardeners of Minnesota names only two St. Paul floral businesses, that of L. M. Ford and J.C. Flesicher.[9]
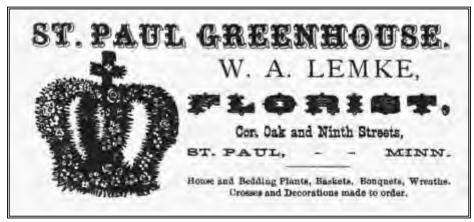
By the 1890s, however, there were nearly fifty steam-heated, glass greenhouses in the Twin Cities. In St. Paul these operations included Christian Bussjaeger at Charles and Dale streets, Henry T. Puvogel on Summit Avenue, and Edmund Behrens at 160 Kent Street. Elof P. Holm and O.J. Olson had greenhouses on Duke Street and a retail store on Fifth Street.[10] Things were radically changed by 1905,

however. Even the Oakland Cemetery operated greenhouses,[11] and the "Flower Market Reports" of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society indicates in its "notes from the 'Twin Cities'" that "demands for funeral designs are quite plentiful, and during the past month the supply of cut flowers, roses and carnations in particular, has not even begun to equal these demands."[12] Bellis quotes Christian Bussjaeger's grandson, Gene Eckel, who commented that roses and carnations were often shipped and could be purchased at the St. Paul City Market, which opened in 1902.[13] The same year taxidermist A.L. Zimmermann advertised in the *St. Paul Globe* that he preserved funeral flowers.[14]

In a catalogue issued in 1916 florists

An advertisement for the St. Paul Greenhouse from the 1885 St. Paul City Directory. *Ramsey County Historical Society.*

Holm & Olson stated that funeral flowers were a specialty. They employed "expert help, who devote their entire time to the creating of new designs, arranging new effects in flowers for funeral occasions."[15]

During February 1915, several St. Paul and Minneapolis newspapers carried the obituaries of Marie Margaret Dreis Scheffer.[16] The public was informed that a funeral mass would be held at Sacred Heart Church with burial following in the family plot in Oakland Cemetery. Mrs. Scheffer was the widow of Albert Scheffer, the St. Paul banker who had died in 1905. Prior to her death, she had lived with four of her children at 267 Marie Street on Dayton's Bluff.

Her children preserved a small metal box of correspondence which offers testimony regarding the customs and practices

of dealing with death in St. Paul before the First World War. Two types of communication were saved: calling cards and condolence notes.[17] The cards were either left at the home when friends called following her death or accompanied, tied by ribbons, floral tributes sent to the church. Her children wrote the names of the flowers received on each card. The flowers selected not only suggest what was seasonally available, but what was considered appropriate.

All except one of the sixty-six condolence notes were written in English, although all of the Scheffers could have read words of sympathy in German. How did the writers learn of Mrs. Scheffer's passing into "the great beyond from which no traveler ever returns," as two individuals wrote? They read the newspaper announcements or were informed by telephone or by telegram.

Most of the writers used monogrammed notepaper, some bearing the embossed names of Schuneman and Evans, Mannheimer, or Field-Schlick, the St. Paul department stores where the stationery had been purchased. Only one writer used a black-bordered sheet and envelope which may reflect the sentiment expressed in an article in *Harper's Bazaar* that only those in mourning should use such paper.[18]

Sentiments expressed by the writers ranged from the formal and brief to lengthy and sympathetic remembrances of the kindnesses of "Aunt Maggie." Several writers enclosed poems they had found helpful in their own bereavements.

Following the death of Marie Dreis Scheffer in 1915, Mrs. William Dawson (Maria Rice Dawson), the daughter-in-law of Albert Scheffer's former partner, sent a black-bordered calling card with her condolences to the family of Mrs. Scheffer. Photo by Moira F. Harris. Albert Scheffer archives.

Hers was a "Good Death" in Victorian terms. The health of Mrs. Scheffer had worsened gradually so that death came as no surprise, and her children were with her and had witnessed her last words. Thus, in modern terms, there was grief but also closure.

In addition to the Good Death, one writer sent her thoughts on the Afterlife, ideas which Drew Gilpin Faust noted were common from the Civil War times onward.[19] To the Scheffer family this friend wrote

> Perhaps, even, she may be with you, invisible it is true to our grosser sense, but none the less herself, loving, watching wishful, unable to take herself away from the dear familiar home and loved ones. People have told of such impressions of nearness and departed dear ones and I am sure she would wish to cheer and comfort if she could.[20]

The eighty-two floral tributes sent to the family ranged in size from small bouquets to larger sprays, wreaths (including one on an easel), and a floral cross. Even in the depth of a St. Paul winter, local florists could seemingly supply almost anything. Favored colors were yellow, white, pink, and violet. The preferred flowers were roses and tulips, but carnations, lilies of the valley, orchids, and violets appeared. A woman named Violet was pleased to be able to send flowers bearing her name to her friend. The Loyal Legion, the association of former Union army officers to which the late Mr. Scheffer had belonged, sent a wreath of

ivy; other wreaths contained laurel leaves among the flowers.

In 1915 it was still the norm for friends and family to send flowers in memory of the deceased even if the obituaries said no flowers, or "Bitte Keine Blumen," as the *Volkszeitung* notice for Marie Scheffer read. Today's obituary directive, "Memorials preferred" had not yet become common. St. Paul florists have always felt, as Patricia Hampl wrote in her memoir, that you had to have flowers at a funeral as they were "the insignia of death and the hope of resurrection."[21]

Marie Dreis Scheffer (1848–1915). Photo by Charles A. Zimmerman. Albert Scheffer archives.

In the Undertaker's Shop

Charles M. Flandrau was a prominent St. Paul author, businessman, and Minnesota Supreme Court justice in the nineteenth century. In his 1911 book entitled *Prejudices,* he ruminated upon the word "undertaker":

> It is really a comic, a grotesque word, whether it means that the man to whom it applies merely "undertakes" in a general sense, or more specifically, undertakes to

take one under. I decided to look this matter up in a dictionary when I went home, but I neglected to, of course, and it is still one of those philological mysteries through which we write and speak and have our being.[22]
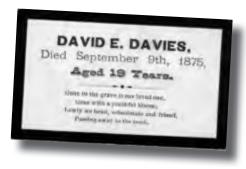
A feature article in the February 2, 1890, *St. Paul Daily Globe,* contained this headline:

ABOUT UNDERTAKERS.
Some Striking Peculiarities About This Grave Business.

The writer reflected upon the state of the industry and asked, rhetorically, "what does it all cost the family of the deceased?"

> Well, this question can be answered the same as a tailor answers his customers when they ask what it will cost to make a suit of clothes. It depends all on the purchaser, or more properly, the person that defrays the expenses. The undertaker is like the dressmaker, who can make a dress out of calico for $1.25, or out of silk for $200. However, he has no caskets for $1.25 but he has plenty for $200, and one can even go as high as $750 if his purse will allow and his conscience so dictate.[23]

The *Globe's* writer has adroitly led us to an examination of the economics of a typical St. Paul undertaker. Nicholas Gross and his son Joseph operated a rather small St. Paul funeral parlor, commencing in 1873 and ending well into the twentieth century. Gross had various outside partners in the early years, and the premises of his business changed several times, starting at 356 Third Street, and by the end of the nineteenth century having moved to 148 West Seventh Street.

DAVID E. DAVIES,
Died September 9th, 1875,
Aged 19 Years.

This mourning card for David E. Davies, who died in 1875, included a short poem. Courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.
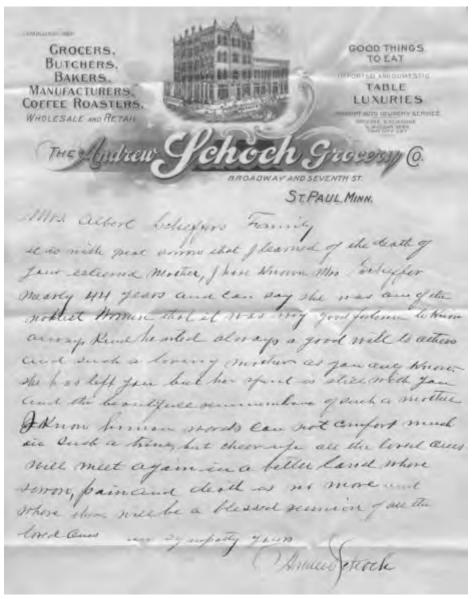
While the Gross funeral parlor was not one of the major undertaking businesses which catered to the affluent in nineteenth century St. Paul, the preservation of a number of its financial ledgers gives us a rare look into the functioning of a typical undertaker of that era. Such information is not otherwise readily available. For example, the total charge of $292.00 for the funeral services[24] provided for decedent William Deng of 1732 Summit Avenue, who died on May 14, 1915, were detailed as follows:

Casket	$125.00
Published notices	$2.50
Embalming	$15.00
Chairs	$10.00
Steel burial box	$50.00
Carriages (10)	$54.00
Burial suit	$15.00
Hearse	$8.00
Gloves for pallbearers	$4.00
Grave device & dirt	$8.50

An examination of various Gross funeral invoices indicated that the cost of caskets ranged from $6 to $175. A selection of other typical charges for funeral services included the following:

Flowers: A pillow Cross	$14.00
Slippers	$3.00
Reverend D. D. Mitchell	$5.00
Death certificate	$ .50
Black hat bands	$2.00
Cremation	$35.00
Services at the church	$5.00
Suit	$15.00
Candles	$1.00
Opening grave	$9.00
Underwear	$1.50
Removal ambulance	$8.00
Robe	$12.00
Photographs	$7.00

The operation of a funeral parlor was not inexpensive, even then. An inventory of the Gross business, as of August 24, 1877, at cost, included metallic caskets ranging from $46 to $80 and wooden caskets from $7 to $21. The hearse was valued at $1,100, while a horse, wagon, and sleigh for winter use were worth $300. Funeral accessories listed included assorted casket handles at $91.06, assorted escutch-

Andrew Schoch, a prominent St. Paul grocer, wrote this letter of condolence to the family of Marie Scheffer following her death in 1915. Photo by Moira F. Harris. Albert Scheffer archives.

eons (ornamental plates that could be engraved with the name of the deceased), and a number of coffin screws.

In 1880, besides Nicholas Gross, there were seven other St. Paul undertakers then in the business: Guthunz & Rockstroh; McCarthy & Donnelly; Henry Myerding; D. O'Halloran; Aug. Roedler; H. H. Schroeder; and Stees Bros.[25] This last firm was perhaps the most prominent.

"Can You Wonder That the Undertaker Is a Pessimist?" was the two-column headline for an article in the August 23, 1903, issue of the *St. Paul Globe.*[26] Speaking on their behalf, the writer noted St. Paul undertakers have

never descended to the depths of the ambulance chaser, nor are any of its members charged with making inquiries at the hospitals prior to the demise of an anticipated subject.

The writer, clearly acting as a shill for the industry, estimated that if deaths totaled ten per each thousand people, and St. Paul's population was 200,000 people, then there would be approximately 2,000 funerals each year conducted by local

undertakers.[27] Since, he noted, there were twenty undertaking establishments in St. Paul in 1903, there could logically be 100 funerals for each establishment. But that was not the case since five or six did the great bulk of the business.

Nevertheless, seventeen of the undertakers maintained downtown premises and paid high rent. In all likelihood, they would also have had on their payrolls, at substantial salaries, qualified embalmers, and most would have maintained elaborate rooms akin to modern churches for public funerals. They also maintained modern morgues and had hearses and wagons, and kept their respective drivers on the payroll. What, then, were the financial rewards? The writer for the *Globe* noted that funeral billings ranged from $5 which the city and county paid for indigent burials, to between $300 and $400 for regular funerals. "Good times," the writer concluded,

> have not been accompanied by elaboration of funeral expenses. . . . No, the lot of the undertaker is not one unbroken path of sunshine and roses.

Cremation

Cremation was not a widely accepted alternative to burial of remains in early St. Paul.

In 1897 the first recorded crematorium was built at Forest Cemetery, on Edgerton Street, near to a station of the Wisconsin Central Railroad. "The apparatus in use here is said to contain all of the improvements up to that time known for conducting incinerations, for the carrying out of which about an hour and a half is required at each operation." The New England Cremation Society boasted that in 1899 "two hundred and seventy-four bodies were consigned to the earth of the cemetery, the number of incineration was twenty-seven. It is doubtful if this ratio, nearly one to ten, has been surpassed in any one year, even if it has been equaled, anywhere else on the continent."[28]

Wooden Overcoats

In Minnesota's Territorial days, furniture and coffins were built locally by carpenters, on demand, and very few items were in the inventory of stores. The first furniture store in St. Paul, at

Third and Minnesota Streets, was operated by Captain W.M. Stees in 1851. The building was a shanty about 20 by 40 feet, one-story high. It did not contain much:
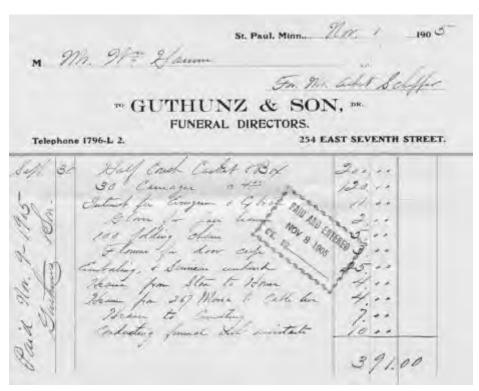
> Two dozen chairs, as many bedsteads and tables, were deemed a considerable stock of furniture. Six chairs, a bedstead and table was quite a bill of sale in those days. Selling a bureau was an event to be talked about.[29]

Thomas McLean Newson noted in his 1886 book that Captain Stees was also the oldest undertaker then in business in Minnesota. His first "case" was the corpse of Franklin Steele's child. Stees is described as making a "gable end" coffin, with "split roof" and working all night in order to have it finished in time. "The idea of keeping ready-made coffins on hand in those days would have been deemed a sacrilege and the party doing so liable to a lynching."[30]

The coffin of Charles Scheffer, whose cortege was referred to previously, was supplied by Messrs. Stees. It was appreciatively described by the *Saint Paul Daily Pioneer:*

> In the centre of this lovely scene, upon the gloomy bier, lay a massive casket covered with rich black cloth, and bound, upon its corners with heavy mouldings of silver. At its sides and ends ponderous handles hung, representing hands grasping a solid bar. The lid was two panels of crystal glass and beneath them lay, upon his pure white couch of satin silk and lace, all that remains of Carl [*sic*] Scheffer, the successful, the faithful man.[31]

Eventually, but clearly by the 1870s as railroad shipping facilities became more efficient and inexpensive, both furniture and coffins were shipped into Minnesota. For a limited time thereafter furniture stores would build and stock such items, but eventually funeral parlors maintained an inventory of coffins extensive enough for the carrying out of their trade. Such coffins more than likely were constructed of chestnut wood. That wood was deemed handsome, substantial, and moderately durable. It also was inexpensive when compared with mahogany.[32] Metal coffins from out-of-state sources also became more and more popular through time.

When Albert Scheffer died in 1905, the firm of Guthunz & Son sent this invoice for his funeral expenses to Scheffer's son-in-law, William Hamm for payment. Photo by Moira F. Harris. Albert Scheffer archives.

Undertaker H. H. Schroeder had this advertisement printed in the 1885 St. Paul City Directory to promote his furniture and casket business. Ramsey County Historical Society.

In the 1890s or thereabouts Charles Flandrau went downtown to purchase a coffin.

> As far as I could see, there were no coffins in the room in which I had expected to find an embarrassment of choice, but, resting a protective palm on my shoulder as if to shield me from a sudden shock, Mr. Murksom pressed a button in the room's white paneling, and lo! A natty three hundred and fifty-dollar receptacle turned a sort of somersault and landed, so to speak, at our feet. It was exactly like opening, or letting down, the upper berth in a sleeping car, except that these berths were on end instead of on their sides. Before I had made up my mind, we had pressed buttons and lowered upper berths all around three sides of the room.[33]

Clearly the acquisition of a coffin had changed markedly in just a few decades in St. Paul.

Embalming, Dressing, and Moving of the Dead

The practice of embalming was carried on since Territorial days in St. Paul. In its lengthy coverage of his death, the *St. Paul Dispatch* carefully described the remains of Charles Scheffer, whose funeral cortege and coffin were previously mentioned:

> The body was dressed in a neat black shirt of fine broadcloth complete, and fine white bosomed shirt, with a black neck tie. It was embalmed by the Messrs Stees, under whose direction the funeral arrangements were made, and the face had resumed an extremely natural

appearance, his serene, ample forehead and benignant countenance showing the impress of nothing but repose and peace—a fact that will be long cherished by those friends who were permitted a last view.[34]

St. Paul undertakers were able to purchase state-of-the-art hearses by mail order as early as 1889 from a Cincinnati manufacturer. The model which is illustrated was nearly thirteen feet long, was painted black, and had glass-striped gold leaf. The interior metal was silver plated, a rug was on the floor, and the glass windows were curtained in heavy black French cloth with gold tassels.[35] At the Minnesota State Fair in 1902 there was an extensive display of fine carriages and vehicles in the Machinery Building. "A feature deserving mention was the display of hearses and funeral cars, which would have been more complete had we been able to provide suitable room."[36]

For rural customers, mail order giants Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward stocked such items as embalming fluid:

> A Minnesota consumer, anxious for embalming fluid for a near-death husband, wrote Montgomery Ward at the turn of the century: "When you send the stuff please send instructions with it. Must I pour it down his throat just before he dies, or must I rub it on after he is dead? Please rush."[37]

Carriage makers Sayers and Scovill of Cincinnati, Ohio, used this illustration to advertise a hearse that the firm offered for sale in their 1889 catalogue. Photo by Moira F. Harris. Albert Scheffer archives.

Prior to 1905 there was no statutory requirement for the qualifying of embalmers in Minnesota. At that date, under procedures established by the Minnesota State Board of Health, there were 143 licensed embalmers in St. Paul.[38] One can

only wonder if this number is somewhat excessive, when there were only twenty-one funeral parlors in St. Paul that year.

Misadventure and Mishap

Coffins were also used for other, unexpected purposes. In 1853 one Henry McKenty of St. Paul was interested in bidding for a parcel of land. Hearing that another party was also interested in the land

> . . . he went to a cabinet-maker and ordered two coffins, both painted black; then to a livery stable and procured a bus; then secured a band of music, and with the coffins and the musicians and flags and the people (free ride) he drove to the place where the bidding was to be … and arriving amid a great crowd placed the coffins on the ground, and on the coffins laid two huge pistols, and then mounted one of the coffins he called out aloud—"now go on with your bidding!"

Apparently under the circumstances nobody else placed a bid, and McKenty got his land.[39]

Charles Fillmore, the half-brother of President Millard Fillmore, lived for several years in St. Paul, and passed away on July 28, 1854. A particular accident happened at his funeral, which for the time being shocked the community.

> While the hearse was passing along Fort street, now West Seventh, and when ascending a small hill, the back door of the vehicle burst open and the coffin fell to the ground, or partially so, and of course the event threw a gloom over everybody, but it was soon replaced without harm, and the procession moved on.[40]

A Dying Art

The pioneer marble tombstone carver in Minnesota was J.F. Tostevin. He commenced his business, the Minnesota Steam Marble Works, located on Robert Street, on August 1, 1855. The circumstances were then somewhat discouraging:

> The people of St. Paul were too poor to buy gravestones, in fact, they were almost too poor to die.[41]

Listed in this 1881 history of St. Paul were three other early artisan creators of marble monuments and headstones: Moritz Vollner, John Fandel, and L.C. Cummins.[42]

This tree-stump monument in Oakland Cemetery in St. Paul is a memorial to the Thomas family. Photo by Moira F. Harris.

William Schoenrock, whose firm is still located on Jackson Street, across from the cemetery's side entrance, was a prominent provider of cemetery monuments for Oakland Cemetery by 1898.[43]

The Cities of the Dead

In 1852 a cemetery association procured for the city's first cemetery eighty acres on what was previously known as "Nigger Lake," a beautiful forest-covered hill to the right of Como Avenue. It was called Oak Hill, and several burials were made there before the scheme was abandoned and the land returned to the original owners. The sites of the graves made there were soon obliterated and abandoned.[44]

Two of the largest St. Paul cemeteries, Calvary (owned and operated by the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis) and Oakland (a privately operated nonsectarian cemetery associa-

tion) are among the oldest (and perhaps most interesting to visit) in St. Paul.[45] In addition to Calvary and Oakland cemeteries, as of 1880 there were also the German Lutheran Cemetery (at Cedar and Grove streets), Mt. Zion Cemetery (at Eurastus [Front] and Sylvan streets), and Zion Lutheran Church Cemetery (at Cortland Place; most of the street that parallels Oakland Cemetery was later renamed as Jackson Street).[46]

Prior to the opening of Oakland Cemetery in 1853, a number of burials were made in the general area, also known as "Jackson's Woods." Friends and relatives of those interred nearby without the formality of purchasing a lot were asked to come forward and identify them; the remains would then be interred in a common grave. This did not always occur.[47]

The Oakland Cemetery board of trustees hired Horace W. S. Cleveland to design the grounds, at a cost of $5 per acre. Cleveland was one of the foremost landscape architects of his day, who would later be asked to design Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis.[48] What Cleveland planned on the rolling terrain was a park with roadways which turned and climbed, allowing visitors and mourners glimpses of tree-studded, often flower-decorated, lawns with monuments at irregular intervals.

In his 1857 book about Minnesota, John W. Bond waxed poetic about what St. Paul and its citizens would be like at the turn of the twentieth century:

> There are men living here now who may behold that day, but their dark hair will then be thin and silvered o'er, and their eyes so bright now with the energy of youth, will be dimmed with the shadows of many years. Numerous familiar names will be registered upon the white tombstones of the "Oakland Cemetery," which is now an almost untenanted field, beautiful, solitary and still.[49]

Currently, the population of Oakland Cemetery is estimated to be in excess of 48,000 souls.

At the north end of Oakland Cemetery are many of the oldest monuments: the obelisks, columns, and pedestals supporting mourning figures. Some families

A portion of the Soldiers' Rest section at Oakland Cemetery. The presence of a small American flag at each marker indicates that this photo was taken during the annual Memorial Day observance at the cemetery. Photo by Moira F. Harris.

chose square or rectangular slabs on which to engrave names and dates of the dearly departed; these can stand vertically or be set in the ground. Plain markers outnumber elaborately carved ones. Thus figures of angels or grief-stricken ladies stand out among the elements of architecture and furnishings, such as draped urns, which were favored symbols of grief.

Oakland has a few examples of a favorite Midwestern type: the tree stump tombstone usually carved of Bedford limestone from Indiana. It represents a tree of life with its broken branches suggesting lives ended. Spaces are left barkless so that either open pages of a book, a scroll, or simply the names of the deceased may be carved. Often ivy, or lilies of the valley, wind about the tree trunk. Other symbols may be added to remind viewers of the deceased: a small train or a child's hat. Tree-stump tombstone carving was popular from the 1840s through the 1920s.[50]

Areas in many cemeteries were set aside for burials of members of a group: policemen, firemen, nuns, veterans, or for those who belonged to fraternal societies such as the Elks or the Masons.

Soldiers' Rest at Oakland was the designated resting place for Civil War veterans whose families could not afford to make other arrangements. These were not usually men killed in battle as bringing bodies home from the battlefield had proved to be one of the greatest problems of the War Between the States.[51]

Markers in Soldiers' Rest, provided by the United States government, measure 24 inches high, 4 inches in depth, and 12 inches wide with the veteran's name, dates, rank, and unit carved in the stone. The Women's Relief Corps contributed a stone vase which is filled with flowers on Memorial Day when an American flag is also placed in front of each marker. Soldiers' Rest began when the cemetery's board of trustees set aside land for the burials in 1878. Later more land which was "doubly what they asked for," was given, according to a letter written by the commander of Acker Post No. 21 of the G.A.R. In this letter Charles J. Stees acknowledged the gift of land with gratitude. The new plot was formally dedicated on May 30, 1894.[52]

Next to Soldiers' Rest, on a high pedestal is another monument honoring the memory of a group. This is the firefight-

ers' statue, installed in 1891. The mustachioed fireman wears his double-breasted uniform coat, pants, and helmet. In his left arm he holds a baby dressed in a nightgown and in his right hand is a lantern. The statue was modeled by Caspar Buberl and sold by J. W. Fiske Iron Works, a New York firm.[53] Another model of this statue was placed in Calvary Cemetery, following a contest organized by the city's Board of Fire Commissioners, and suggested by Alderman William A. Van Slyke. Although the statue could have been supplied in other metals, even in bronze, both St. Paul cemeteries had their firemen cast in zinc.

Closer to the main entrance family monuments take on the form of small

In 1891 artist Caspar Buberl executed this cast-zinc figure for the Firefighters' Statue located in Oakland Cemetery. A portion of the Solders' Rest area is visible behind the monument. Photo by Moira F. Harris.

temples. Permission to build the first mausoleum, for David Shepard and his family, was given in 1892.[54]

It has been said that "the best monument to the memory of any man in Oakland Cemetery is the beautiful Mortuary Chapel, built of Minnesota stone and on an entirely original plan, different from anything in existence." The architect was David Day, pioneer St. Paul settler, architect, postmaster, and businessman. ". . . [T]hrough his persistent and earnest efforts that the Chapel has an existence, and there it stands, and there it will stand for ages as a grand monument to his memory—artistic, useful, beautiful, pleasing."[55]

Those in the real estate business have long been jealous of cemeteries. Their land was said to be "purchased by the acre and subdivided by the foot." Burial lots in cemeteries are treated exactly as residential real estate which is subdivided into blocks and lots. Cemetery lots are deemed to be real estate which were, at the time, conveyed by deed and filed with the county Register of Deeds (now the County Recorder).

Funeralia

While handwritten letters and cards of condolence have been mentioned, funeral programs and prayer cards and, eventually, following the funeral, printed remembrances, were used by the beginning of the twentieth century. Paper items associated with funerals are widely collected, especially in the United States and England.[56]

Following the death of Charles Scheffer, General James Heaton Baker wrote *A Song of Friendship. An Elegy on the Death of Charles Scheffer.* Baker's *Elegy* is a thirty-four-page-long poem evoking mythology and German music and literature, suggesting

> Proud are the stones where royal ashes sleep,
> And marble angels over heroes weep.[57]

In his poem Baker attempted to establish his friend's accomplishments and sought to accept the tragedy of his death.

When Louise Buchholz Hamm died in St. Paul in 1896, mourners at her funeral received a large card printed in German lettering and a much smaller lithographed prayer card. Both items noted her birth in

Written in German and printed in a typeface known as Fraktur, this funeral card for Louise Buchholz Hamm (1833–1896) gave mourners a detailed account of her life and a glimpse of her family's grief at her passing. Photo by Moira F. Harris. Authors' collection.

Hasslach, Baden, Germany, sixty-three years earlier, and indicated she had come to St. Paul in 1856 with her husband, the brewer Theodore Hamm.[58]

A four-page memorial to the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge A. F. & A. M. of Minnesota, who passed away on June 7, 1907, laments that those

> solemn notes that betoken the dissolution of this earthly tabernacle have again alarmed our outer door.
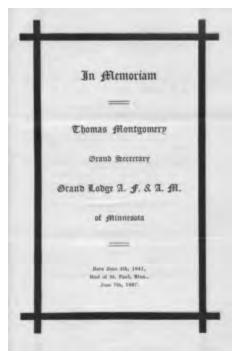
The memorial refers to the death of Brother Thomas Montgomery, a Mason for forty-two years. It exhorts that each lodge read the memorial at a subsequent meeting, "and that the Altar and Jewels at the Lodges be draped for the period of thirty days."[59]

The passing of important business leaders was also suitably remembered. On June 3, 1916, members of the board of directors of the Great Northern Railway sent an elaborately engrossed, four-color memorial to the widow and family of the late James J. Hill. The directors of the First National Bank of St. Paul, Hill's principal banking house, adopted laudatory resolutions at a meeting on June 13, 1916, and these resolutions were beautifully printed as a further memorial for the bereaved family.[60]

At the time of James J. Hill's death, the family issued a statement asking that no flowers or floral tributes be sent to the house. A public service was held at the family's St. Paul mansion, 240 Summit Avenue, but interment would be in private at the family's home in North Oaks, "where a family mausoleum or memorial chapel will probably be built."[61] For Minnesota's wealthiest man, such a building seemed appropriate but that was not what was built. His widow, Mary T. Hill, chose a location on the north shore of Pleasant Lake near their farm home. For both her grave (she died five years later) and his, Celtic crosses of stone were commissioned. The graves were surrounded by a fence and gate, but that did not protect them from vandalism, so in 1944 the graves and monuments were moved to Resurrection Cemetery in Mendota Heights.[62]

Then and Now

We have sought to relate what were common funerary practices in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without comparing such customs to current day usages. But, to summarize briefly, there are clear and obvious differences.

This memorial tribute to Thomas Montgomery from 1907 was typical of the funeral notices of the early twentieth century. Authors' collection.

In the moving of mourners and the deceased to the cemetery, the transportation has gone from horse-drawn to motorized, although the latter vehicle may still be called a hearse. The grave markers newly installed in cemeteries today frequently employ far glossier, more permanent granite for headstones and other markers, and often carry laser-etched images and even actual covered photographs of the deceased.

In St. Paul's bygone days, feature articles in newspapers provided information on better known or more celebrated decedents, while everybody else was listed in space-available, very short notices. Both were gratis to the mourning families. The transition in recent decades has been to paid newspaper obituaries. These are often lengthy and more recently have included photographs of the deceased, both in youth and in old age. In this regard there is an additional quite popular usage of deathly information, as many librarians and historical staff members well know. Their patrons, often after reaching retirement age, become curious about family history and genealogy. They seek information through census and death records, but primarily from informative obituaries.

Another recent trend is that many mourners do not send flowers to homes or churches following a death, but rather, charitable memorials are becoming the norm. Flowers are still prominent in another situation, however, that of roadside memorials. The place where a fatal traffic accident has occurred may become the site of a temporary memorial incorporating flowers, and personal mementos such as teddy bears, or even hockey shirts as one memorial contained following the fatal crash of Minnesota and Olympic hockey coach Herb Brooks along Interstate Highway 35 in 2003.

A final development worthy of mention, but which is occurring far too recently to discuss in a comprehensive fashion, is the impact of the computer and the Internet on various funeral practices. Many funeral homes and parlors today, for example, have a Web site where those who mourn the deceased may chose to leave an electronic note of sympathy or condolence for the deceased's family and any others who care to follow the link to these communications.

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Endnotes

1. Henry Anson Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1912), 720.

2. *Stillwater Messenger,* August 11, 1875.

3. *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* August 11, 1875.

4. *St. Paul Dispatch,* August 9, 1875.

5. *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* August 11, 1875.

6. His brother Albert and others unsuccessfully sued the Virginia Midland Railroad, arguing that their negligence had resulted in Charles Scheffer's death. The case eventually was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, *Scheffer v. Railroad Company,* 105 U. S. 249 (1881).

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9. "Nurserymen, Florists and Gardeners of Minnesota," *The Minnesota Horticulturist* (1874): 10.

10. Widmer, 16.

11. Castle, 886.

12. *Horticulture,* "Flower Market Reports," August 19, 1905, 209.

13. Bellis, 33.

14. *St. Paul Globe,* April 2, 1905.

15. Holm & Olson, Inc., *Bulbs, Trees, Shrubs and Plants for Fall Planting,* catalogue (1916) back cover.

16. See *St. Paul Pioneer Press, Die Volkszeitung,* and the *Minneapolis Tribune,* all dated February 15, 1915.

17. The cards and notes are contained in the Albert Scheffer family archives.

18. *Harper's Bazaar,* April 27, 1886.

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20. Letter of Sarah Kerr to Misses Martha and Elma [sic] Scheffer and family, undated. Albert Scheffer family archives.

21. Patricia Hampl, *The Florist's Daughter* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt Brace, 2007), 63.

22. Charles M. Flandrau, *Prejudices* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1911), 153.

23. *St. Paul Daily Globe,* February 2, 1890.

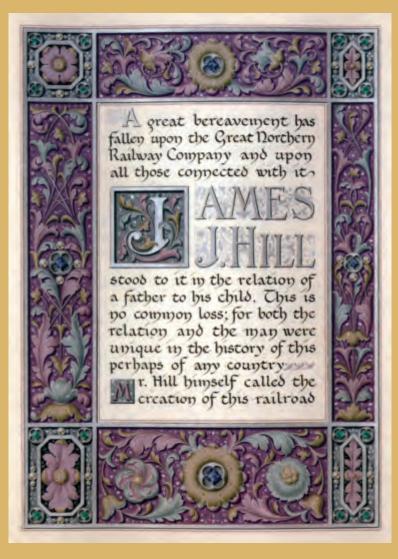24. Nicholas Gross and Family Papers, 1860–1947, Minnesota Historical Society, file 1716.

25. *Classified Business Guide of St. Paul & Minneapolis, 1880–1881*

26. *St. Paul Globe,* August 23, 1903.

27. Each of the paragraphs in the article began and ended with quotation marks, an indication that the article was probably not prepared by the reporters of the *St. Paul Globe.*

28. John Storer Cobb, *A Quartercentury of Cremation in North America* (Boston: New England Cremation Society, 1901), 87.

29. Thomas McLean Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers* (St. Paul: Self published, 1886), 306.

30. Ibid., 306.

31. *Saint Paul Daily Pioneer,* August 11, 1875.

32. Hu Maxwell and John T. Harris, *Wood Using Industries of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota State Forestry Board and Forest Serice, U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1913), 45.

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40. Ibid., 360.

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42. Ibid., 477, 478.

43. Robert Orr Baker, "Oakland Cemetery: 'A Safe and Permanent Resting Place,'" *Ramsey County History,* 16, no. 1 (1980): 21.

44. J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1876), 326.

45. Baker, 5.

46. *Classified Business Guide of St. Paul & Minneapolis, 1880–1881.*

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50. See David A. Brose, "Treestump Tombstones in an Iowa Cemetery," *The Palimpsest* (Summer 1989): 73–74; Susanne S. Ridlen, *Tree-Stump Tombstones: A Field Guide to Rustic Funerary Art in Indiana* (Kokomo, Ind.: Old Richardville Publications, 1999). Professor Ridlen located 2,000 of these tombstones, some in every county.

51. Faust, 127, 128.

52. Letter from Charles J. Stees to Captain Russell Blakeley, president of Oakland Cemetery Association Board of Trustees, May 10, 1894, Oakland Cemetery Association Papers, P812, box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

53. See Carol A. Grissom, *Zinc Sculpture in America, 1850–1950* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 555, 559.

54. Baker, 15.

55. Newson, 110.

56. Funeralia is but one of many hundreds of categories of paper ephemera collected. See Maurice Rickards et al., *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera. A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (London: The British Library, 2001), 155. The collectors' group in this country is the Ephemera Society of America.

57. James Heaton Baker, *A Song of Friendship: An Elegy on the Death of Charles Scheffer* (St. Paul: T. S. White & Company, 1877), 29.

58. Collection of the authors.

59. Collection of the authors.

60. Courtesy of the James J. Hill Library (Hill Family Papers), St. Paul, Minn. These papers are now in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

61. *New York Times,* May 30, 1916.

62. Joan C. Brainard and Richard E. Leonard, *Three Bold Ventures: The History of North Oaks, Minnesota* (Edina, Minn.: Hill Farm Historical Society and Beaver's Pond Press, 2007), 39.

A great bereavement has fallen upon the Great Northern Railway Company and upon all those connected with it. JAMES J. HILL stood to it in the relation of a father to his child. This is no common loss; for both the relation and the man were unique in the history of this perhaps of any country. Mr. Hill himself called the creation of this railroad

Following the death of James J. Hill on May 29, 1916, the board of directors of the Great Northern Railway sent an engrossed memorial to the Hill family that conveyed their sense of loss and condolences to the surviving family members. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. Moira F. Harris and Leo J. Harris discuss this artifact along with other aspects of the business of death in bygone St. Paul beginning on page 14.