Victorian Funeral Customs
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Zombies, ghosts, skeletons and ghouls – we may get dark and creepy about death once a year with Halloween on October 31st, All Saints Day on November 1st, and today, November 2nd, being All Souls Day or Day of the Dead, but we've got nothing on the Victorians. While people of the 19th century were wildly repressed about many things, their comfort with death is a far cry from modern sentiments.

Nowhere is this more evident than in British mourning etiquette during the time of Queen Victoria's reign (1837 to 1901). The death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861 ushered in a rigorous display of mourning that set the stage for the general culture to follow. What became customary mourning of the time, seems to be by today's standards downright macabre and morbid. So in honor of this week, when things turn spooky and spine-chilling let's take a look at what was once the ghoulish-norm of Victorian funeral customs.

When Prince Albert died, Queen Victoria went into a period of deep depression and basically withdrew from society for the next 10 years. Not accepting her husband's death, she ordered that his private quarters be kept exactly the same as the day he died. Even to the point that hot water was brought in every morning for his daily shave. Victoria wore mourning clothes, or mourning weeds as they were called, for the next forty years until the day she died, setting the standard for mourning attire.

A widow's bonnet was of heavy black crape and could have a small white border. The veil was to be worn over the face for a minimum of three months, at which time the veil was worn from

the back of the bonnet. After a period of one year and one day, the veil could be removed; however, the widow was expected to wear dark mourning clothes for a minimum of another year. A sudden transition at the end of the period of mourning from black to glaring colors would not have been made. Any change would be gradual such as going to gray, dark purple or blue. Widowers were also expected to wear morning weeds; however, only for a period of a year as opposed to two years for a widow. The widower mourning attire consisted of a black suit, black gloves and necktie, and a black crape band on his hat. Men could continue working after a loved one died, but women were expected to be isolated at home avoiding places of amusement for at least a year.

The length and type of mourning attire worn depended on the mourner's relationship to the deceased. For parents or children, deep mourning attire was worn for a year while for a brother or sister the period was six months. For uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents, black suits without crape were worn with the length of time to be determined by the mourner.

To announce that death's angel had entered into a house, a wreath of laurel, yew, or boxwood tied with crape or black ribbon was hung on the front door. Callers deferred from ringing the doorbell if it was possible to bring the attendant to the door without doing so, since the clanging of a bell was a noisy reminder of active life. In many houses, the hall door was left ajar so that friends could enter quietly. Invitations were sent to friends to attend the funeral. In cities and towns where death notices were inserted in the newspaper, the words "Friends invited" was sufficient invitation to the funeral. But in smaller places, it became necessary to issue invitations to those whose presence were desired. The invitation were engraved on small-sized note paper with wide black border and delivered by private messenger. It was also clear that an invitation to a funeral was not to be slighted.

Before the introduction of embalming, flowers and candles were used during the viewing period and funeral to mask any unpleasant odors of decaying flesh. A tradition that has carried over until today; however, we no longer have to worry about unpleasant odors. Also because there was a great fear of being buried alive, relatives or friends would stay awake during the night to watch for any movement of the corpse. Thus the origin of the term funeral wake. Also coffins had alarms which consisted of a bell attached to the headstone with a chain that was connected to a ring placed on the finger of the corpse. Thus if the deceased was indeed buried alive and woke up he could set the alarm. Thus the saying "Saved by the Bell" arose. Friends or family members would be assigned shifts in the cemetery to watch if the alarm was set off. Thus the origin of another popular saying, "Working the Graveyard Shift". There were even coffins set up with tubes and mirrors so that a person could peer into the coffin and look for movement.

Before the 19th century, the deceased was normally buried wrapped in a shroud. Clothing was expensive and most individuals only had one or two changes of clothing. So it seemed foolish to bury the dearly departed with expensive clothing when another member of the family could use them, thus the tradition of wrapping the deceased in a shroud. During the Victorian period, the manner of caring for the dead grew gradually into a closer imitation of life with the dearly departed lying in a peaceful repose which gave hope to those who viewed them. No longer did the gruesome and chilling shroud enwrap the form. The garments worn in life took its place and men and women were dressed as in life thus giving the mourners a sense of comfort to see them as such.

The funeral service itself was likely held at the house of the bereaved. The family was expected to view the remains before guests arrived, which made it imperative that guest arrive at their appointed time and not earlier. The family would be seated in the order of relation to the deceased, closest relative at the head of the line, and whenever possible, they were seated in a

separate room thus protecting any show of grief from the eyes of their guests. If the service was to take place at the deceased's home, the coffin would remain open so that guests could view the body before the start of the funeral; however, it was not opened in a church unless the deceased was so prominent and beloved that the house wouldn't be sufficient to provide an opportunity for viewing by the guests. After the service concluded, the guests would remain in the house or church until the family and those attending the interment were escorted from the building in preparation for the procession.

Victorian England is when funeral directors first came into the picture. One of the primary duties of the funeral director was to arrange the funeral procession which would vary based on the cost factor associated with the funeral. The first carriage in the procession would contain the clergyman and the pall-bearers, six (maybe eight) intimate friends of the deceased who carry the coffin. Pall-bearers were provided black gloves and crape for the arm, but white gloves and white crape was used for a young person. The next carriage would be the hearse, followed by the carriage of the nearest relatives, which would be followed by more distant relatives and friends. If any societies of masonic bodies were involved, they would precede the hearse in the procession. If the deceased did not have enough mourners for a decent procession, no problem. The funeral director would hire mourners to follow the hearse looking despondent waiving ostrich feathers.

The basic Victorian hearse was an elaborate carriage, black with glass sides and silver and gold decorations. This basic layout could be dressed-up according to the prominence of its occupant or the purse strings of his family. Embellishments included multiple black horses drawing the carriage, velvet coverings for the coffin and the horses, ostrich plumes decorating every corner and horse, or even an entire canopy of ostrich feathers covering the hearse. Flowers surrounded the coffin and would be visible through the glass windows. There were also smaller

white hearses designed just for children. They were pulled by ponies and accompanied by mourners on foot instead of in carriages.

The Victorian era heralded the convention of burial in park-style general cemeteries. Concerns for community health in Great Britain led to the closure of churchyards for most burials from 1855 and in response, landscaped public cemeteries were established. Such sites well illustrate Victorian responses to death. The elaborate headstones and wordy epitaphs erected as memorials to the deceased provided a mechanism by which family and friends might express their grief and love. The use of symbolism was also incredibly important in headstone and grave design in the Victorian period. By interpreting Victorian headstone symbolism, information about the life and times of deceased individuals may be established. For example, the depiction of the thistle, carved into a headstone, hints at a deceased's Scottish heritage; similarly, the shamrock for the Irish and the rose for the English. An anchor might denote maritime connections in life; a broken column, symbolizing a life cut short, might decorate the grave of a young person or child. Symbols of death, such as a broken chain, weeping willow, ivy vine or laurel wreath, were favorite decorative elements for graves.

Funeral biscuits became popular during the Victorian period which were small cakes wrapped in white paper and sealed with black sealing wax and given to guests as favors. Like wedding cakes, funeral biscuits were a staple of the bakery business, and competition for customers was brisk. Some bakers' newspaper ads addressed the suddenness with which most people had to organize funeral details and promised funeral biscuits made to order on the shortest notice. The commercial biscuit wrappings were ornately printed with bakery advertisements as well as uplifting biblical quotes and poems. Like church holy cards, they served as a keepsake of the event itself. The rapidly-evolving technology of printing enabled bakers to offer increasingly

detailed designs and custom messaging on the wrappings. If the family of the deceased could not afford bakery made funeral biscuits they could make their own. One recipe called for 50 pounds of flour, 20 pounds of sugar and 10.5 pounds of butter for 300 cookies delivered to the funeral in bushel baskets.

Another custom that would be considered morbid today was postmortem portraits especially of infants and children. Postmortem photography may be the single creepiest element of Victorian death and morning. Because photography was not common, the family may not have a picture of their dearly departed. Thus to have something to remember the deceased, a picture would be taken with different options of posing the body to choose from. The most obvious pose is that of the deceased laying in state in the coffin itself or in the bed where the body was placed on display surrounded by flowers. Although this seem the most appropriate pose to us, it was the least used by the families of the decease. Amother common pose used for infants was in guise of sleep. Babies would be dressed and laid out as it they were napping for the photograph; however, while common, this one still wasn't used as often as we would think.

While photographing a dead body, in any pose, makes modern sensibilities a little uncomfortable, the third and most common form of posing was to place the deceased in a position as if they were still alive. This pose might include propping the decease up on a stand in the midst of a family portrait or placing him or her in an environment that the deceased would likely have used in his or her lifetime. For example, a carpenter might be propped up on a stand in his woodshop with tools in his hands. For children, this type of posing would include flowers, favorite toys, and even family pets. Families and photographers would often go so far as to prop the eyelids open or paint eyes on the outside of the deceased individual's closed eyelids. They might also add

makeup to create the illusion of rosy checks. Some of these special effects would be added to the print after the photograph was taken and developed.

As there were rules concerning the type of clothing to be worn during the mourning period, there were also rules concerning the type of jewelry that could be worn by women. During the period of deep morning, no jewelry was to be worn with the exception of jet. Jet is a type of fossilized wood which would eventually become coal. It was utilized widely during the Victorian era as jewelry of mourning. In addition to jet, another material became quite common in jewelry making of the time, the loved one's hair. This seems slightly creepy to us today, but it was perfectly acceptable in the second stage of mourning. The hair would often be woven into jewelry itself such as a necklace or encased in another form of jewelry such as a locket or pendant.

In the Victorian era, funerals became grand and expensive affairs in the same vain as weddings are today. For the wealthy, the burial of a loved one was as much about "being seen" and doing things "properly" as it was about the process of grief and mourning; however, things were different in the lower classes. Child mortality rates were so high, that many lower-class parents saved money so that if their child did die, they could provide an appropriate funeral. Funerals were so costly, yet so important, that lower class families often went without the necessities of life because the family refused to spend their funerary funds on things like food, clothing, and shelter. Ironically, by refusing to use the money at their disposal to help ensure the survival of their children, families were almost ensuring that they would need their funeral funds. This seems completely foreign to us – how could parents starve their children to ensure that they could bury them?

Families who were unable to provide for a proper funeral and burial of their loved ones were forced to rely on the local Poor Union who would provide the bare minimum in burial – a

pauper's funeral. The Poor Union buried those unable to afford their own services in a common pauper's grave, without a headstone and with very little ceremony. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* gives one of the best literary descriptions of a pauper's funeral when Mr. Sowerberry, the undertaker that the orphaned Oliver was sold into apprenticeship to at the age of nine, arranges the burial of a poor woman in the parish, which includes the bare coffin, the workhouse pall bearers, and the morning garb (a ratty looking cloak) lent to the husband and mother of the deceased.

An even worse fear was that of grave robbing, which was at an epidemic level in the early 1800s. The great fear lies in the Christian belief that there would be a physical resurrection of the whole body, and the worry was that dissection could have been detrimental to the process. Families went to great lengths to ensure that the eternal rest of their loved ones remained undisturbed. Iron fences were erected around burial plots and graves were often bricked over or a large slab of stone placed over the grave to prevent disinterment. People were buried in double and even triple coffins and a wide range of different gadgets were also invented and used to prevent the prying off of the coffin lid. Also grave watchers were hired as grave robbery, often done by doctors themselves, to provide medical schools needed fresh cadavers for dissection classes. All of these safe-guards were expensive and out of the reach of many of the lower classes; however, they could minimize the chances of body-snatching with a proper burial.

Another very real concern was due to the Anatomy Act of 1832 which was enacted to combat body-snatching. This law legalized the dissection of people who died in prisons, asylums, or workhouses. Unless a relative came forward within seven days of an inmate's death, prepared to pay for a coffin and a churchyard burial, the inmate's body could legitimately be sent to a teaching institution for dissection. This "donation" would be made in return for a fee to be utilized in the institution from which the body came or pocketed by a corrupt institution official. Because

of the incredibly high demand for cadavers, there was a great deal of corruption existing in the system. This law and shady practices which accompanied it made it much more likely that lower class individuals without the money for a proper burial would end up on a dissection table, leading greater fears about the final fate of a deceased family member.

In light of these fears, burial clubs cropped up. These clubs helped many families afford proper funeral services for their love ones. These clubs were founded on the fear that poor working-class families might not be able to pay for proper funeral services and burials. The clubs operated on a premise similar to today's insurance policies. Members of the club made weekly payments which ensured that the club would cover the burial expenses, regardless of how long the individual had been a member. Rates were based on things like age of those covered and the type of funeral requested. The clubs would collect their fees weekly, either at the members' homes or a local public venue. Unfortunately, just like most things these clubs were abused and mismanaged, leading to their collapse and dissolution. There were suggestions that parents would enroll their sickly children in several clubs, each of which would pay the assigned benefits without knowledge of the others. There were even reports of parents neglecting or downright murdering their children for the club benefits; however, many of these reports suggest more sensationalist reporting and overstated middle-class concerns than actual evidence.

Along with Victorian funeral customs, superstitions concerning death became prominent. Many of these superstitions have no rhyme or reason, but then again does any superstition make sense? Some of these superstitions are:

- When a family member dies, close the curtains and cover the mirrors so that the deceased image doesn't get trapped in the looking glass, thus preventing it to go to heaven.

- The deceased should always be carried out of the house feet first so that they won't look back into the house and beckon someone else to go with them.

- If the deceased has lived a good life, flowers will bloom on his grave; but if he has been evil, only weeds will grow.

- If several deaths have occur recently in the same family, tie a black ribbon to everything left alive that enters the house, even dogs and chickens. This will protect against deaths spreading further.

- Never wear anything new to a funeral, especially shoes.

- It is bad luck to meet a funeral procession head on. If you see one approaching turn around. If this is unavoidable, hold on to a button until it passes.

- Large drops of rain indicates that there has just been a death.

- Stop the clocks in a house where a death has occurred or you will have bad luck.

- If rain falls on a funeral procession, the deceased will go to heaven. If you hear a clap of thunder following a burial it indicated the soul of the departed has reached heaven.

- If you hear 3 knocks and no one is there, it usually means someone close to you has died.

- If you smell roses when none are around someone is going to die,

- If you see an owl in the daytime, there will be a death.

- If you spill salt, throw a pinch of the spilt salt over your shoulder to prevent death.

- Never speak ill of the dead because they will come back to haunt you or you will suffer misfortune.
- Two deaths in the family means that a third is sure to follow.
- Opening an umbrella in the house means that there will be a murder in the house.
- A dog howling at night when someone in the house is sick is a bad omen; however, it can be reversed by reaching under the bed and turning over a shoe.

Now that we have a better understanding of the funeral customs that were prevalent during Queen's Victoria reign, let's take a look at her funeral. Queen Victoria was the second longest reigning monarch in history, only to be surpassed in 2015 by her great, great granddaughter, Queen Elizabeth II. Queen Victoria ruled the United Kingdom from 1837 to the time of her death on January 22, 1901 at the age of 81, thus signaling the end of the Victorian Era.

Queen Victoria left very detailed instructions consisting of twelve pages of how she wanted her funeral. The instructions included very specific things she wanted placed inside her coffin. High on the list was a plaster cast of Prince Albert's hand, which was made shortly after his death. The plaster cast was to be placed in the coffin and situated so the Queen's hand would be clasping the hand of her beloved husband for all eternity. Her coffin – custom designed and enormous for such a small person – was nearly filed to the brim before her body was placed inside. Among the contents of the Queen's coffin was one of Albert's dressing gowns and sentimental mementos from loved one and friends such as shawls, books, all forms of jewelry, photos and fresh flowers. Victoria even specified who was to lift her body into the coffin including her trusted doctor, Sir James Reid, her female secretary/chief lady-in-waiting, her son and heir the new King Edward

VII, her grandson, German Kaiser Wilhelm II, another one of her sons, Arthur, Duke of Connaught, and three more of her devoted servants.

Queen Victoria wore mourning clothes from the time of Prince Albert's death in 1861 to the time of her death in 1901; however, she insisted that she be buried wearing her white bridal veil which was worn at the time of her wedding to Albert in 1840. It was actually Victoria who started the tradition of brides wearing white on their wedding day symbolizing purity. The bridal veil was a symbol of the happiest relationship of her life and of her hope that she would join Albert in heaven as his eternal bride. Certainly in life she remained attached to her veil and dress as both she and Albert posed in their wedding attire, including her veil, years after their wedding.

Once the body had been placed in the coffin and the wedding veil placed over her face, Dr. Reid stayed behind as the others departed and placed on Victoria's right ring finger a wedding ring belonging to John Brown's mother. John Brown was a Scottish Royal Groom and Servant that the Queen developed a very strong relationship with after Albert's death. There are many theories as to the extent of the Queen and Brown's relationship. Even a popular movie entitled *Mrs. Brown* explores the relationship between the two. Reid also placed in Victoria's hand a picture of Brown and a locket of his hair, which he covered with some flowers. When all was ready, the coffin was closed and then covered with Britain's flag, the Union Jack.

Queen Victoria was laid to rest in the ornate mausoleum she had built years earlier to house her beloved Albert's remains. At his death, she ordered a life-size sculpture of Albert in repose, his head inclining toward the sculpture of his wife which was to be place atop of the sarcophagus at the time of her death. Victoria's matching statue was put in storage; however, when she died forty years later, everyone had forgotten where the statue was stored. So the Queen was buried without the statue, until it was located months later, boarded up behind a wall in Windsor Castle.

Above the mausoleum's doors, Queen Victoria had inscribed "Farewell most beloved. Here at length I shall rest with thee, with thee in Christ I shall rise again." At last, she was once again with her beloved Albert.

When we look at the rigid, rigorous, and macabre mourning and funerary traditions of the Victorians, we like to consider ourselves enlightened and superior to those foolish and superstitious people. The truth, however, is that many of the traditions we carry on in our funerary practices are directly handed to us from the Victorians, especially here in the South.

Funerals are accompanied with an elaborate preparation of the body for viewing. If examined logically, no one should really want to see a dead body, especially the body of someone we barely knew. Yet, we file into funeral homes and march past the deceased and make comments like, "Doesn't she look good?'. Logic says, "No, she doesn't look good, she looks dead." However, we convince ourselves that this is the way things are done. Like the Victorians, our funerals unwaveringly involve the wearing of black, the singing of hymns, and the consumption of vast quantities of food; anything else is simply inappropriate.

Our funeral processions are straight out of the Victorian playbook, except carriages have been replaced by cars. We practice the same order of "carriages" and use the same concepts of pallbearers and the separation of the family from the rest of the guests. As for hair and memento jewelry, this might creep us out, but we aren't too very far from this today. There are companies that offer the chance to turn our loved one into diamonds after his or her death. Granted, wearing a diamond is more appealing than wearing someone's hair, but the premise is still the same.

If all of this seems too confusing then I suggest that you acquire the book, *Being Dead Is No Excuse, The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral*. Not only does it

give advice of pulling off the perfect funeral but it includes recipes for dishes to take to the funeral meal. The author, from Greenville, Mississippi, describes the City's cemetery with the following excerpt from the book:

"The burial most likely takes place at the old cemetery on South Main Street. The old cemetery is one of the best addresses in Greenville. Being buried anywhere else is a fate worse than death. The FFGs – First Families of Greenville – would simply refuse to die if they weren't assured of a spot. Ancestor worship is as valid a form of religion as the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal denominations in the Mississippi Delta. The cemetery is so sacred to the memory of our dead relatives that the whole town was up in arms when the local newspaper did the unthinkable by posing a high school beauty queen in front of one of our most important graveyard monuments for a picture. Nothing has upset us quite so much before or since. For days on end nobody could talk about anything else, and the paper was filed with angry letters to the editor. Old ladies quivered at the thought that the same thing might one day be committed on their graves. The paper had to grovel for forgiveness in print or face a serious dip in circulation. The newspaper was owned by Yankees, and being outsiders, they just didn't know any better."

You may think this is an exaggeration of how Southerns view their cemeteries, but an incident that happened in Elkton back in 1974 confirms that we Southerns do consider our cemeteries to be scared ground. The incident involved someone burying their beloved dog in their family plot at Glenwood Cemetery in Elkton. For days on end, no one could talk about anything else. One afternoon at a ladies card party, one of the attendees, Miss Nora Mae Fox, grew tired of all of the talk. Miss Nora Mae, who never married but dated the president of Elkton Bank and Trust for several decades, was a woman who was not afraid to speak her mind. She was the organist at the Methodist Church in Elkton, pianist at the Elkton Rotary Club and taught music in the local

school system. Finally after hearing all she wanted to about the subject, she said at the card party, "I don't know why everyone is making such a big fuss, this isn't the first time that a bitch has been buried in that cemetery". The Elkton City Council responded to the dog incident by passing an ordinance prohibiting anything except humans to be buried in the City cemetery.

The more I learn about the Victorians, the more I'm convinced that we are they. We have taken the best, and sometimes the worst, that they had to offer and made it our own. The pomp and rituals of death, funerals, and mourning will continue in the Victorian traditions, whether we give them credit for our habits or not.