



BRADFORD-O'KEEFE

FUNERAL HOMES

THE LEGACY OF THE O'KEEFE FAMILY

by Nancy Marchbanks

The first O'Keefe, Edward, arrived in America through the port of New Orleans, from County Cork, Ireland in 1819. He was quite poor, as most immigrants were, but he came to this country with a serious work ethic. He settled in South Mississippi, and began to work. Edward earned enough money to become a land owner, and purchased property in Ocean Springs in 1859. He married Mary Tracy that same year, and two children came from their union.

In America, most funeral home operations evolved out of other businesses that were already established. These two businesses were carpentry and or livery services. For example, a cabinet maker or carpenter had the skill and the materials necessary to build furniture also were employed on occasion to build coffins when needed. Edward O'Keefe operated a livery stable to transport tourist around town and subsequently was asked to transport coffins or caskets to the site of burials. Ocean Springs was a favorite destination for tourists, because of the bountiful Artesian springs. The springs were thought of to have special "healing powers" and were a huge draw. The guests arrived by steamboats, trains and stagecoaches. The livery stables provided

another service, which was to meet the steamboats and pick up the visitors and goods that came in from other parts of the country. Edward, always the enterprising business man, opened the O'Keefe Boarding House because he also saw the need for accommodations for all the weary travelers.

Edward died in 1874. Mary continued to run the livery service with the help of her son, Jerry, which paid off handsomely, as their assets nearly doubled. Jeremiah was in the first graduation class of St. Stanislaus College. Mary O'Keefe operated the boarding house, and had a surrey meet every passenger train to bring them into town. In 1888, Jerry married Alice Cahill. Alice and Jerry had five children, four boys and one girl. Jeremiah II (Ben) took over the ownership and management of the Livery stable and the Undertaker business. Quite remarkably, the original boarding house, and livery stable still stand today, and currently serve as of one the most elegant funeral homes and arrangement centers in the South. The house is regarded as one of the finest examples of Beaux-Arts (polite) architecture in Ocean Springs. Upon Jeremiah's death, his sons took over the business. The Biloxi Funeral Home was opened by Ben, John, and Joseph O'Keefe in 1923. Ben married Theresa Slattery, and they had four children together.

Son, Jeremiah III, was a Marine fighter pilot in World War II. It was documented that he shot down five enemy planes in one day. After the war, he became involved in state and local politics. He served in the Mississippi Legislature for four years, and as Mayor of Biloxi for eight. Jeremiah III joined his father in business and acquired the business in 1953, and he later purchased the Bradford Funeral Home Company. It was decided to merge the two companies, resulting in the present, Bradford - O'Keefe Funeral Home, Inc. The company also owns and operates four other funeral chapels, two cemeteries and a crematory along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The company has been serving this area for five generations and the sixth generation is now in training.

As is the case in much of the business world today, there are evolving changes that take place in the business of Funeral Service. Cremation is growing trend becoming more and more popular each year. This trend is driven by a number of reasons - mobility, convenience, cost, and space. The way loved ones are memorialized today has also evolved. The individuality of the person is a point of focus. The ceremonies can be, and are encouraged to be, specific to the individual. A celebration of the loved ones life, is often the choice families are making now which adds personalization to the traditional viewing and funeral ceremony. Arranging these services in advance of need is also quite popular. Statistical data is gathered, as well as family biographical information, and finally the individuality of that person is discussed for the purpose of designing service preferences. This service is beneficial all the way around, and is an on going offering of Bradford-O'Keefe. "We encourage individual memorialization, there are any number of ways to remember loved ones - butterfly releases, dove releases, balloon releases, special songs or religious passages to be read. Families value photographic memories so the display of pictures or photo boards can exemplify the life of the individual. Another option is taking the photographs and creating a memorial video. These memorial videos can be special gifts to friends and or extended family as a keepsake. These memorial videos are often played during visiting hours or at a Chapel or Church service.....Most importantly, it is about personalization of that individual," Jeffrey O'Keefe, President of Bradford-O'Keefe, said.

Online obituaries memorials are a wonderful new way to memorialize a loved one. The practice of placing obituaries online has grown tremendously in recent years and is also evolving just as other businesses evolve. Jeff continued,

"Sometimes people are unable to travel for services at the loss of a loved one. The reasons could be for economic, illness, or perhaps their

employment prevents one from traveling. Today people can go online, sign a registry, leave a personal message, or even upload photos of their own. This online Guest book opens a venue regardless of location. There is a definite need for a daily source of information as it pertains to obituaries. In the mid 1800's before newspapers were printed on a daily basis, a notice of a death was printed as a flyer and pinned to telephone poles. Today the internet has a huge usage. It is a lead source of information and daily communication that is constantly evolving. The memories of a loved one are extremely important and families find value in these memorials. Toward that end, it is our goal to be able to provide offerings that families find meaningful, as a tribute. Tradition is still very important, particularly in this part of the country."

In closing, Jeffrey O'Keefe is intensely proud of his family's rich history in the coastal communities. He respectfully carries on the traditions and work ethic of his forefathers. Jeff has three son's and his oldest, Jeffrey Jr. is now in training. Bradford-O'Keefe is about helping families in their time of need, and being a source of helping families plan for memorialization. Their goal is to continue to grow in South MS, and to provide services to families for generations to come. "We continue to strive to bring the highest level of service, personnel, and facilities to the families we serve along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We are committed more than ever to our future, and the future of helping families in their time of need.