

April 9, 2014

TOURING SULLIVAN COUNTY'S MUSEUM ... while dusting

Treasures abound in a museum, any museum. But sometimes the treasure is a living person, imparting the long ago history on a variety of subjects. Dick Holcombe is just one of those types of treasures. His "Reflections" writings give us a glimpse into history from a first hand point of view with personal insights that enlightens the reader. Early last year while visiting Dick for clarification on something, this writer spied an unusual piece of didn't know what. Upon questioning Dick, a whole new world opened up. You see, Dick's father Vell



Burr Holcombe, born in 1871 had come to Dushore in 1893 and began working as a bookkeeper for Samuel Cole until in Dec. of 1898 he formed a partnership with Henry Obert. They'd purchased the joint business of furniture and undertaking from Emil Tubach. Mr. Obert was the financier of the project and Vell went to school for embalming. The partnership lasted a year with Mr. Obert opting out and Charles Lauer of Laporte purchasing his interest to form a new partnership with Vell Holcombe. Then in 1907 Mr. Lauer sold his interest to Mr. Holcombe, who continued in business until 1947 when it was then conducted by his son Richard Holcombe and son Vell C. operating the undertaking business. [Later to become McHenry's Funeral Home.] In the midst of all this, Vell Holcombe served six consecutive terms, beginning in 1920, as an elected member of the General Assembly. He died in May of 1952 with his funeral being held at, you guessed it, the Holcombe Funeral Home.

Now, back to the unusual piece; it's an embalming table with the year "1881" formed in its design. This design includes the maker and their location and a sort of quilt print, all done with just holes. The table actually has three sections, one 27" and one 36" with a middle section of 7" that acts as a sort of 'hinge' between the two larger. It also has extensions on each end for taller bodies and then the whole thing folds up like a collapsed suitcase in order to store during transportation and get it into homes. The table is surfaced with three layers of 1/16" birch plywood. This embalming table was purchased by Vell Holcombe to use in his funeral business. In those times and even until the mid 1900's, wakes and viewings were held in the home with services being conducted for the person "laid out" right there. The embalming table would have been used much the same as an ambulance gurney or stretcher to bring the now prepared body into the house with a purple velvet cloth put first on the table with enough excess material to drape the body up to the neck. There is also the capability to elevate the upper torso and head for viewing on the 27" side. Although no longer with the table, Dick tells of adjustable rods that could be raised as high as three feet above the table to support bottles of embalming fluid that would replace the natural fluids during the embalming process. More often than not, this procedure would be done in the home. By 1941, Dick tells that they had a modern preparing room at the store in Dushore, but funerals were still conducted in many a rural home.

This piece of history from Dick Holcombe brings to light his own family's background but also encompasses the history of our area and its ancestors from a time long past. The telling of this article reminds this writer of our home in Elkland Twp. where my husband's grandmother died at the age of 26 during childbirth in 1913. When we first met in 1983, there were still people living who remembered that funeral, held in the living room alcove with a glass oval on top of the casket allowing the viewers to see her and the infant as though they were sleeping. That memory so indelibly etched in their minds to bring to recall seventy years later.

To see this new addition on display, contact the museum for an appointment by phoning 570-946-5020 or emailing museum@scpahistory.com or stop in on a Tuesday or Thursday. Also, visit our website at scpahistory.com and see us on Facebook.