

The background features a dark blue gradient with faint, overlapping circular patterns and numerical scales. Some of the visible numbers include 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, and 260. The text is centered in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

OLDER, RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTORS: CAPTURING LIVED EXPERIENCE THROUGH ORAL HISTORIES

WISCONSIN FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

LAKE GENEVA, WISCONSIN

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The background is a dark blue gradient with a subtle pattern of white stars. Overlaid on this are several technical diagrams in a lighter blue color. In the top right, there is a large circular gauge with a scale from 0 to 210 and a needle pointing towards 180. Below it is a smaller circular diagram with concentric rings and arrows. In the bottom left, there is another circular diagram with a dashed arrow pointing left. The word "Why?" is centered in a large, white, sans-serif font.

Why?

STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

- Age:
- Range 49-84
- Mean 66
- Median 67
- Race:
- 100% Caucasian
- Gender:
- 94% male
- 6% female

STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

- Home Community:
- 63% grew up in same town as their funeral home
- 37% grew up in another rural community
- Religion:
- 56% Christian
- 25% Catholic
- 19% Lutheran
- Size of Community:
- Range 400-10,000
- Mean 3, 800

STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

- Employment Status:
- 38% working
- 31% semi-retired
- 31% retired
- Generation of Funeral Homes:
- 38% 2nd generation
- 25% 3rd generation
- 19% 4th generation
- 6% 5th generation
- 13% Private purchase

STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

- Number of Funerals a Year
- Range 30-325
- Mean 126
- Mortuary School:
- 63% in Wisconsin (Milwaukee)
- 37% Out of State (Illinois, Minnesota, and Kentucky)

METHODOLOGY

- Started Study in summer of 2021
- Canvased over 300 rural, Wisconsin funeral homes
- Completed 16 oral histories to date
- Interviews were conducted by telephone
- Interviews were tape recorded with the research participants' permission
- After the interviews were transcribed all identifying information was removed
- How did we define "old" and "rural"
- What will be done with our research?

PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FUNERAL HOME

- People spoke with pride about their funeral home
- Often people cited the generational nature of their funeral home
- It was noted the number of funerals per year
- Individuals related about how the rural funeral home industry has changed over time

PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FUNERAL HOME

- “Well our family history is quite extensive. It overlaps the time and the involving of the industry itself. So, as a generic understanding of how the term “undertaker” went and turned into the role and terminology of ‘funeral director’.”
- “Most of the funeral directors older than I am will know that was very common for the same family to own a furniture store in a funeral home”.
- “In the early days the funerals were done in people's homes so there was no funeral home, funerals were done in people's homes”.
- “Our funeral service business is 142 years old, five generations from father to son”.
- “Our funeral home was established in 1891. By my great-grandfather. And my brother and I were fourth generation funeral directors in our family. My brother retired fifteen years ago. Which at that time, I purchased his shares in the business. Then owned the business until recently selling, this year”.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH DEATH AND DYING IN YOUR OWN PERSONAL LIFE?

- Like most people the individuals in this study have experienced deaths in their own families
- They stressed their occupations do not necessarily make them more equipped to deal the death and dying process.
- The research participants used their own experiences with death and dying to better serve their families during their grief process

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH DEATH AND DYING IN YOUR OWN PERSONAL LIFE?

- “Heard too many stories and seen too many things to know, there is much more than the eye sees. So, the spiritual part, knowing that there is hope somewhere. Beyond this life, it gives you a lot more perspective and makes it a lot easier. That is why ceremony, where if there is a church or not, gives so much more meaning in a death. The support people provide and the spiritual portion of it is very important. Especially in small community. I think it is really healthy and helps people heal. Just talking to people over the years, that is the huge comfort to them. They know that and they cope. I see some of them who don’t have any of that. I think they struggle”.
- “One of the most traumatic, was my grandmother who died in 98’. I was so traumatized, I wept for two days. My wife at the time, couldn’t belief it then I think, while she was always there... she would be the definite example of being the matriarch of our family. While she was there, everything was okay. I think I just had a hard time with letting go of that”.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH?

While many of the people in this study cited specific individuals who died within their families but another concept developed.

Many of these individuals reported their first experience with death from helping their fathers and mothers assist with the many facets of preparing the deceased for visitation and burial.

The experience went from something that was scary to a fact of life and cemented their understanding of the workings of the family funeral home.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH?

- “I grew upstairs over the funeral home. We didn’t have a bathroom upstairs in our apartment. We had to go to the bathroom down in the funeral home. I would play with my little cars downstairs. I would go with my dad and visit neighboring funeral homes and talk to guys for some reason another. I’d be right in there, in the embalming room with my dad and his buddies. Looking at some guy with his head cut open. It just never bothered me”.
- “We had an apartment right above the funeral home. So, we saw a lot of it just as we grew up. You know it’s downstairs and you go through areas where there’s like a chapel or the casket room or the whatever room. We witnessed it as we grew up. So, it makes a difference I guess how you observe funeral service versus somebody that has never been near a funeral home.”

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH?

- “Well, I can recall I think it was a Saturday or Sunday. My dad said, “ I need some help. A lady died and we are going to go to her house and bring her back to the funeral home”. And he said, “ when we go there, just think of this lady as your mother. We treat her with respect and dignity”. I did what I was told and helped move her from the bed to the removal cot. And in all my education for funeral service, that was probably the most important part of thinking of the deceased people as “ this is somebody’s mother or dad, brother or sister”. Instead of, “ I gotta pick up this body”. I thought like that throughout my career. That, some funeral directors would just refer to them as “I gotta get this body ready”. But we made a practice that we need to say, “We need to get Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Jones dressed or whatever”.

HOW DID YOUR FAMILY COPE WITH THE LOSS?

- Many people expressed that their family coped with grief and loss like an average family.
- Some asserted these individuals are better prepared for loss but that was not consistently reported.
- Most individuals stated their families spoke about death in an open and frank manner.

HOW DID YOUR FAMILY COPE WITH THE LOSS?

- “I have experienced death in my own personal family, and you are no different than anyone else. You grieve the same and there as a lot of people might think you might be a little colder or more acceptable... but no, just like everybody else. Your emotion is based on the love for your family”.
- “One would say that you may have had a better understanding or perspective when losing a family member and knowing “how the process would work”. However, that is not to say that you are not human”.

HOW DID YOUR FAMILY COPE WITH THE LOSS?

- “We coped with in loss in the traditional manners of having visitations with the open casket. It's been my experience that it is helpful and important. Especially my experience with my mother's funeral last year how important that was...coping as a family supporting each other being together at a time of death and loss. Knowing that the deaths were coming a majority of them were expected. One death that I can think of was very unexpected. So just supporting each other being together as a family and relying on friends. Appreciating the concern of friends”.

HOW DID YOUR FAMILY COPE WITH THE LOSS?

- “Like any family, quite frankly. It is ironic to have all of this education and studying and experience, and then watching your family go through similar experiences with death and those symptoms, not necessarily symptoms but you know, it is just like “oh yeah, sure enough you have this type of illness, and you get this medicine, and this is your result”. Just because you are in the death industry, does not mean you do not grieve any different from anyone else”.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS PROFESSION?

- Most participants cited the generational competent of their funeral business to their entry into their chosen profession.
- These individuals spoke with pride about attending mortuary school.
- Attending mortuary school was a financial investment for these generational funeral homes
- None of the research participants expressed regret about their chosen profession.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS PROFESSION?

- “I guess... no day is the same. No matter what you do, or where you are at, you never have two days that are the same. You are dealing with different people, different circumstances, different ethnic backgrounds.”
- What drew you to the profession?
- “Family. I haven’t known anything else other than funeral service. Ha-ha, I did work in a grocery store when I was in high school. I also worked with my dad at the same time too. I was a busy boy in high school”.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS PROFESSION?

- “Well, there was the family business right there. I didn’t have siblings who could do it. My dad needed help and I needed a job. Teaching jobs in comparative literature aren’t too common. So, I just took doing funerals and reading books”.
- “I guess I just went into it cause my dad did it before me and I thought I'd give it a try. and then I did it and I liked it it's been just about 40 years already”.
- “It was in the family business, grew up in it. Was not sure if that was what I wanted to do. I did not go immediately into this. It did draw me back, seeing my dad and my uncle. Really seeing how caring and supportive they were in their community. It was very appreciative of what they did and you knowing helping people through tough times is not always easy.”

HOW DO YOU COPE DEALING WITH DEATH WHEN SERVING FAMILIES?

- The research participants used their own experiences with death and dying in the midst of serving their clients
- Some cited they had a “job” to do and not lose sight of this obligation
- Noting their services had the potential for their clients to better address their loss through their services and funeral rituals.

HOW DO YOU COPE DEALING WITH DEATH WHEN SERVING FAMILIES?

- “Well, you know, you have to not get harden to it so to speak. You have to do your job. As you get older it almost gets worse than when you were younger because I’m constantly dealing with what used to be close friends. About 2 years ago one of our real closest friends just tipped over out in his yard... It’s emotionally hard but you just got to force yourself to handle it”.
- “I have always looked at funeral service as a profession that you are providing a service for the people in the community. As a professional providing that service, you have to let your emotions not dictate your actions”.

HOW DO YOU COPE DEALING WITH DEATH WHEN SERVING FAMILIES?

- “Concentrate on the honor that it is to help the families. Concentrating on the that you are benefiting the families. That you're helping them and what an honor it is that they have trusted you and asked you to help them. So that's probably the greatest thing concentrating on the benefits you're giving the people and the honor that they're giving you”.
- “Well in a small town like this you tend to know everybody. so sometimes you know it can be a little bit emotional if you know if you grew up with someone and they suddenly passed away from something. and unlike in a bigger city where you pretty much wouldn't know most of the people that came through”.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME CHALLENGES WITH BEING A RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- Research participants cited many challenges face by rural, funeral homes such as:
- A lack of staffing on many levels
- Inability to take time away from work
- The concept of their time off as being not their own
- The large geographic area covered by their funeral home.
- Only “show” in town
- The death of community members they have known for years.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME CHALLENGES WITH BEING A RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- “The worst challenge is getting so busy that you really have a difficulty trying to help all the people at once and of course nobody makes appointments. They just come when they feel like it so to speak”.
- “I see a trend in funeral service where... this is not just funeral service. We see it with farming, the small ones are going to disappear. The small ones are going to get gobbled up and it will be larger regional areas”.
- “Sometimes the weather. I have gone in huge blizzards to get people. Picked people up that were killed in snowmobile accidents. You know, 2 or 3 miles off the road to get to the bodies. Dealing with small, rural churches. There are a lot of things there. The whole, rural lifestyle use of that, the volume, you need a higher volume to support a business”.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME CHALLENGES WITH BEING A RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- “Well definitely not being free with your own time. The constraints and cancelled plans with being a funeral director”.
- “When I was you know just starting out, they didn't have cell phones. You could imagine a world like that. so, we the phone would ring at our house, so someone had to actually sit by the phone. You couldn't go and do anything because well someone had to answer that phone in case somebody died”.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUNERAL HOME INDUSTRY CHANGING IN RURAL WISCONSIN?

- Many funeral home consolidating or being bought out with larger corporations.
- Loss of generational funeral homes
- Decreased people choosing a career in the funeral home industry in rural communities.
- Increased use of cremations due to costs or other factors.
- Younger people choosing to leave their rural communities to work in urban communities instead.
- Seeing the “aging in place” increasing in rural Wisconsin

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUNERAL HOME INDUSTRY CHANGING IN RURAL WISCONSIN?

- “The lack of employees, lack of funeral directors is a problem. I believe that the future is going to involve more people that are licensed as an apprentice, or they can help the funeral home out with doing removals”.
- “It’s already been changing from when I started. It was rare to have cremation. Now that’s probably 60/40 where people are being cremated. The traditions have changed because I would say cost and the religious aspect. People were more traditional and have a funeral at a church a years ago”.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUNERAL HOME INDUSTRY CHANGING IN RURAL WISCONSIN?

- “I think the little communities might not even have funeral homes anymore. They will go to the next biggest city, and I think that will be a huge loss...what I have been told by people. How wonderful that we are here and how lucky we have... not a lot of little communities have one. At least we have been here for people. You know, of course cremation rates are rising. It is more convenient for people in some ways. Some say for cost wise, and those things are changing. Also, the type of ceremonies people are having are changing or if they are having any at all”.

HOW DOES YOUR AGE INFLUENCE YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF BEING A RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- Some participants did not perceive changes as they have aged.
- However, what they can or are willing to do has changed for them with age
- The physical demands of their work may change over time.
- Some individuals report to being “semi-retired” by filling in on as needed basis.
- Others have completely stepped away for their careers.

HOW DOES YOUR AGE INFLUENCE YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF BEING A RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- “I am very thankful to be in a small town where we are sheltered by some of that negative change. It will get here eventually. As I age, I see friends and people I have known well, die. Many of them, it makes you reflect a lot and how life moves quickly”.
- “When I first started making funeral arrangements, these were for all old people. And then later on, it becomes, “These people aren’t too much older than I am!”. And now with my friends who are dying. There is quite a change in perspective. When I started making funeral arrangements, it was not unusual that the person was born in the 1800s”.
- “I think your age kind of dictates what you can do no matter what job you're in. as you get older you find out that you can't quite do stuff at 60 that you could do at 25”.

PLEASE DESCRIBE HOW YOU FEEL THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC HAS IMPACTED THE RURAL, FUNERAL HOMES IN WISCONSIN?

- Clearly, urban and rural communities have been impacted by the COVID pandemic but with some differences.
- It was reported the whole services of the funeral home were dictated by the the realities of COVID 19 and family preferences.
- Many funeral home directors cited this COVID 19 time period as one of the most challenging episodes of their professional careers.

PLEASE DESCRIBE HOW YOU FEEL THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC HAS IMPACTED THE RURAL, FUNERAL HOMES IN WISCONSIN?

- “Because of the virus and the dangers of it, cremation would be the best way to go. For public health reasons. Which I have to agree with that in many, many circumstance. You could still do the traditional, but I have to admit, people were afraid. Justifiably so. People were not venturing out for anything at all. Funerals bring people together and COVID did just the opposite”.
- “We were averaging a death call a day. We did 60 death calls in 60 days. Through those two months. Like I said, we have never experienced that volume of death in our firm. With the lack of licensed funeral directors, the lack of help... it was very challenging. COVID was extremely challenging. Quite frankly, it pushed me to a point of “I don’t want to do this anymore”. I was already in the pursuit of an exit strategy, but that certainly put me in the frame of mind of “ it is time to get out”.

PLEASE DESCRIBE HOW YOU FEEL THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC HAS IMPACTED THE RURAL, FUNERAL HOMES IN WISCONSIN?

- “A lot more private family services and a lot more cremation. Rather than burials. Cremation with a memorable service. We actually are doing some now that a person has died last year... so, it is hard on the families. To have to wait so long to have to go through the process”.
- “To a degree it seems like there's a larger volume of deaths the last few months since COVID began. They're not all necessarily COVID related but yeah you tend to be more cautious. You tend to you know wear enough protected gear to make sure you don't come down with something. And then you have to deal with the family on the other end where you got to be cautious with them. And so yeah there's been a lot of impact of COVID on the funeral business”.

WHAT WERE THE RESPONSES FROM YOUR CHURCHES DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC?

- The research participants cited a varied response to deaths in their communities.
- Some churches functioned as long as COVID protocols were followed.
- Other churches did not offer any church services or after funeral meals.
- Some individuals felt churches let their flock down in a time of need.
- Some questioned how effective virtual services were and if they truly functioned like a traditional service.

WHAT WERE THE RESPONSES FROM YOUR CHURCHES DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC?

- “We had nothing. That is one of the key topics, for me. The churches had turned their back on the suffering of people. They needed spiritual help. They needed them, and what did the church do? They closed the door! And they think virtually. Well, I got news for you, when people are in a state of anxiety if you will, or whatever. When they are in that state, they need someone, one-on-one. You can pray on the phone until you are blue in the face, but you need to have contact”.
- “They were not having any services at that time. That they were not doing any Sunday services, worship services online. They were not gathering at all. Therefore, funerals were not an option. That was probably a good majority of the churches that we have in this vicinity. So, therefore we started doing graveside services. Because they would let you gather not indoors, but they let you gather outdoors. So, the funeral industry adapted a little bit to it. Things that we weren’t typically doing, we started doing. Like, having a visitation at the grave site with the casket opened”.

WHAT WERE THE RESPONSES FROM YOUR CHURCHES DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC?

- “They shut down you know and said we're not open and then slowly started opening up and they would like block off every other pew. They would you know insist everyone wearing mask. At the beginning no handshaking...you'd have to you know use hand sanitizers. Well overtime the fully the closing off every other pew kind of went away and the masks went away so it's pretty much back to normal. One exception, that's the ladies that typically would put on the church funeral lunches, every church has kind of a group of ladies that are you know like little organized lunch and put together and make sandwiches and all this stuff and have a really nice meal for the for everybody at the end of the funeral...a few of them have started doing it again, but I'd say at least half of the churches aren't offering that service anymore”.

WHAT DID YOUR FUNERAL SERVICES LOOK LIKE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC?

- COVID clearly impacted funeral home services in rural communities
- Cremations became more common
- Limited church and funeral home services
- Graveside services were more common and in-depth given the lack of traditional services and visitations

WHAT DID YOUR FUNERAL SERVICES LOOK LIKE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC?

- “We’re finding less and less people that are very highly associated with any church or anything. So that seems to also reduce the amount of effort in the funeral. We’ve even had some that do the service, if you want to call it a service or the celebration of life type of thing at a supper club or bowling alley or something like that. It’s something that’s unheard of 35-40 years ago”.

WHAT DID YOUR FUNERAL SERVICES LOOK LIKE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC?

- “Well, they are smaller. They are getting back to no masks. But there were two types of funerals. There were funerals that had masks, and funerals that didn’t have masks. It was not long after I got COVID that I was at one of these funerals that didn’t have masks. There were two types of people there. The only people who had masks were the undertakers. And there I am sitting in a chair, with my mask on. This woman comes up to me and sticks out her hands and wanted to shake hands with me. I said, “Oh, I better not”. She replied, “ OH! You are one of those guys, huh?”. Meaning, you are one of those idiots who don’t shake hands because of COVID? We just get divided up. Then I have been to a couple of funerals where a couple of the daughters were nurses. You had to wear masks, they would bring their own masks, if you didn’t have a mask, they handed them out to you. People were spaced out with chairs. Then there were funerals with only 5 people there, they were selected”.

WHAT HAVE I FAILED TO ASK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS A OLDER, RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- Some people highlighted how services in rural and urban communities differ
- Funeral services have changed due to the technology now available and requested
- Individuals expressed they feel business has become more “normal” with the drop in COVID cases.
- Some participants expressed concerns how long the current rural, home funeral industry will fare given the trend of young individuals and families moving away to more urban communities
- Many view their work as a “calling” and even an art.

WHAT HAVE I FAILED TO ASK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS AN OLDER, RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- “You know the rural funeral home director is no different than city funeral director except, the funeral director in the country or rural, knows his people. You go through all the same steps, but you have a close, personal relationship with most of the folks
- “Like I said, four generations of funeral service in my family. Taking care of my city and surrounding area. The community has been good to us, and it was hard to walk away to be the last person in my family business. It was hard to see it leave after four generations. But I have three children and not one of them wanted to be a funeral director. I have no control over that, or I wasn’t going to have control over that. And that is fine, you got to enjoy what you do. To be the caboose in the family was difficult to do. All good things have to end at some point”.

WHAT HAVE I FAILED TO ASK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS AN OLDER, RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- “Over the years, personalization of funerals, has expanded tremendously. When I started out, everybody had a visitation the night before, the following the day there was a funeral service. They all got buried in the cemetery. Well, that has changed a lot. The services has changed and to make a service more accommodating to the wishes of the family, that is important.”

WHAT HAVE I FAILED TO ASK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS AN OLDER, RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- Interviewer: Do you think being a rural funeral home director is different than say a funeral home in like Milwaukee?
- “There’s a huge difference. My daughter is a funeral director in Milwaukee and when she talks about how you handle people. Here everything is handshake. And you really don’t worry about getting paid. Where there they don’t really get to know the people. We rarely ever had a funeral to this day where we had no knowledge of the family”.

WHAT HAVE I FAILED TO ASK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS AN OLDER, RURAL FUNERAL HOME DIRECTOR?

- “Making money is important, and you need to sustain your business and your family, but you should never be looking to make money as your first priority. If that's what you're trying to do only, you're not going to be successful because people will see through that. You need to really care about the people, and you need to really work to serve the people. I will do everything possible within my power to serve that family and make the funeral service valuable and worthwhile for the family”.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR NEW OR CURRENT FUNERAL HOME DIRECTORS SERVING RURAL WISCONSIN?

- The research participants had several recommendations for funeral home providers.
- They shared providing services in rural communities have unique challenges as well as rewards.
- It is not just about making money
- They feel their connection to their community is a vital part of their business.
- Finally, you must adapt to the changing services requested when compared to the past.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR NEW OR CURRENT FUNERAL HOME DIRECTORS SERVING RURAL WISCONSIN?

- “I think the ideal rural funeral home director, should be from the rural areas. They understand the “small town’ atmosphere. Usually, the folks who come in from the metro area, there are exceptions to that, they want to be back in a metro”.
- “It is such a personal time of life. Nothing is more personal, other than a birth than a death. It is getting to be rather impersonal. You can almost with some people, it isn’t funeral service. Some people would almost use the word “ final disposal”. Which is really, sounds cold and lacks emotion. I want to see them put the humanity back into the profession”.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR NEW OR CURRENT FUNERAL HOME DIRECTORS SERVING RURAL WISCONSIN?

- “Don’t focus on the things, the kind of car you drive. Very few families look at your fancy hearse. They don’t care about that. They just care about how you treat them and sometimes, simpler is better. It is how you treat people. Also, be detailed of course and make their loved one look the best you can. Focus on those important things and not so much on the shiny stuff. I have seen that happen too much”.
- “But what I have noticed is the amount of female funeral directors that have become licensed has really increased since I’ve been in the business. I think that’s wonderful. Obviously, I often wonder how some skinny gal can lift something, like you know. Other than the physical lifting of stuff, they have a natural ability to be compassionate and stuff many times more than a man would. I’m happy that females have become very active in the funeral profession”.

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THANK YOU!!!

Questions or
Comments?