

Martin Funeral Homes – a brief history, part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 11, 2011)

On a recent Sunday afternoon, I spent a delightful few hours in Bill Wilcox's home visiting with Nancy Martin Harper. She told us about the history of the Martin Funeral Homes of Lake City (formerly Coal Creek), Clinton, Oak Ridge and La Follette. What an amazingly interesting conversation. Let me share some of it with you.

Nancy began by introducing us to David Franklin "Frank" Martin who opened his first Martin Funeral Home in November, 1929, in Coal Creek, TN. For several years Frank had tried several occupations ranging from coal mining to farming and had settled in to running the only ESSO Service Station on this part of the new Highway 25. It was located on Main Street right in the middle of Coal Creek, TN.

When the station burned and took their home with it, Frank was looking about and trying to decide what to do. He needed a home for his family and wanted to continue as a businessman in Coal Creek.

One of the other businessmen in Coal Creek observed that there was not a funeral home in the town and said, "Frank, why don't you open one?" There had been a funeral home in Coal Creek operated by a Mr. Weaver until he died. But for some time there had not been a functioning funeral home service.

During this time any deaths would have been handled by the family and ministers. Lewallen's Furniture Store made the coffins. Most of them were just pine boxes, but some might have been made of hardwood. There was no embalming service and the bodies had to be buried quickly. This made it difficult to hold funeral services or to allow the family time to be comforted by friends and relatives.

They had to spend their time dealing with the practical aspects of getting a coffin and dressing the body. All this must have been hard on the families of Coal Creek, so it is easy to see why the businessmen of the town encouraged Frank to open a funeral home.

Frank agreed. He bought a house on the other side of the main street and over a street or two, according to Nancy Martin Harper, who is Paul Martin's daughter and Frank Martin's granddaughter. Frank did this to provide a place for his family to live after their house burned. He then set about converting the burned out house next to the ESSO Service Station into the first Martin Funeral Home

Although some information on the history of the Martin Funeral Homes seems to indicate a move in 1931 to a four room house, known as the "Jess Murray home," at 225 North Main Street, Nancy does not recall it that way. She thinks the original funeral home was located at 225 North Main Street and has remained at that location all the time.

Nancy recalls the two buildings (the ESSO station and the funeral home) were very close together with only a very narrow space of about 18 to 24 inches separating the buildings. She used to get into trouble when she got caught squeezing between the two building, which she and her friends "thought was great fun!"

This location is much deteriorated today, but for many years it was the flagship location for the historic Martin Funeral Homes. The first "high post front porch" was added to this first Martin Funeral Home and was to become somewhat of a theme for other funeral home buildings of the Martin Funeral Home group.

The first hearse was a 1929 Studebaker and Frank later added a 1935 Pontiac. Luke Hatmaker, a licensed embalmer and funeral director, helped Frank with his first effort at running a funeral home. The business was doing well even with the difficulties of the "depression days" of the late 1920's and early 1930's.

In 1933, Frank moved his wife, Rose Lee Luke Martin (who was from the "Wye" community) and only child, a son named Paul (Nancy's father), into the funeral home where they both took an active part in its operation. Paul graduated, in 1935, from the Gupton-Jones School of embalming in Nashville, TN. He returned home to assist in the growing business of the Martin Funeral Home.

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In 1942, Paul married Ruby Wilson of Briceville, TN. Paul was classified "4F" because of a heart condition that Nancy said was a "heart murmur." Even with this official classification by the draft board, Paul was drafted into the Army. Something Nancy recalls with an obvious frustration that it happened but also with a bit of glee at how it all turned out eventually.

Nancy said her dad was drafted when a powerful man in the community had an interest in opening a funeral home so she believes he may have influenced the draft board. Paul did not stay in the Army long because of his poor health and heart condition. He was given a medical discharge in 1944 and returned to Lake City.

The thing that causes Nancy excitement is what happened after her father was discharged from the Army. Not long after his discharge a highly unusual accident occurred and all the local funeral home directors gathered at the request of the military to make arrangements for handling the dead bodies from that tremendous train wreck.

On July 6, 1944, the famous Troop Train Wreck at Highcliff, TN, near Jellico happened and some 34 people died and close to 100 were injured. This required a tremendous effort on the part of all local authorities and hospitals. All pitched in to help, civilians and military alike.

The military commander in charge of the operation said to the gathering of local funeral home directors, "We are not going to try and coordinate who gets all these dead bodies we are just going to give them all to one funeral home." He then said, "Are any of you funeral home directors veterans?" Only Paul Martin held up his hand. The commander said, "Alright, you have them all."

Nancy likes this part of the story as it seemed to compensate for her father getting drafted and then discharged with a medical. He brought the dead bodies to Clinton where his father, Frank Martin, had just purchased what was described as the "beautiful old brownstone Richards' home" on Main Street in Clinton and planned to open a Martin Funeral Home in it. The stone had been taken from the Brown farm south of the Clinch River.

Dave Richards was married to Ethel Brown. Do you reckon the term "brownstone" came from the color of the stone or maybe from the location from where the stone was taken, the "Brown farm?"

According to Anderson County historian Katherine Hoskins' historical newspaper account, Dave Richards was the son of Joseph and Anne Thomas Richards. Joseph was a Welshman who emigrated from Wales to America. He settled in Oliver Springs and along with his sons was instrumental in expanding the mineral springs vacation spa for the wealthy that had been created by Richard Oliver, for whom the town is named, having first been known as Winter's Gap, named for the first settler there, one Moses Winter.

In 1873, Joseph Richards bought Richard Oliver's land and built the first resort hotel. In 1894 he replaced this hotel with a large 150-room hotel. Unfortunately, in 1905, the hotel burned and was never rebuilt.

Dave Richards and his brother decided to move to Clinton and brought the knowledge of producing electricity with them. The first electric lights in Clinton came to life on March 31, 1906, when enterprising Dave called the local newspaperman and suggested he look out his window and then threw the switch turning the lights on. Richards died in 1931.

Back to the Martin Funeral Home in Clinton, the key reason this place was selected was the fact that the spacious lower floor of this house was underground and thus provided a cool place that could be used to properly store the large number of corpses. They were embalmed and stored there until the next of kin could be notified and the bodies shipped by rail to the waiting families.

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Nancy's mother, Ruby, who was eight months pregnant with Nancy at the time, made many phone calls to notify the shocked families of the deaths of their young men. The Anderson County Red Cross also provided assistance to the response to the tragedy.

More on the history of the Martin Funeral Homes in coming installments of *Historically Speaking* as we next learn how the Martin Funeral Home group came to be in Oak Ridge.



Nancy Martin Harper shows Bill Wilcox the elaborate scrapbook she has kept that contains the treasured photographic history of the Martin Funeral Homes – they are looking at a prized photo of Frank Martin, founder of the family business

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First Martin Funeral Home in Coal Creek, TN opened in 1929