

## Martin Funeral Homes – a brief history, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 25, 2011)

Last week we learned from Nancy Martin Harper how the Martin Funeral Homes had its beginning in Coal Creek (now Lake City), then opened in Clinton and Oak Ridge and later in LaFollette. She told us how David Franklin “Frank” Martin opened his first Martin Funeral Home in November, 1929, in Coal Creek, TN. Now let’s follow Nancy’s family history of funeral homes as the family business continued to expand.

The Martin Funeral Home in Clinton was opened in 1944. The family business was expanding. Frank left his son, Paul Martin, and wife Ruby Wilson Martin to manage the Lake City operation. He and Rose moved into the David C. Richards ancestral home at 375 North Main Street, the “brownstone” one.

The Harry F. Miller home next to the Richards’ home was incorporated into the eventual structure that became the Martin Funeral Home in Clinton. This expansion established the funeral home as one of the major businesses in Clinton and continued to be a key element in the city for years.

Another expansion of services had begun earlier when Sam Martin, Frank’s nephew, had operated an ambulance service in Oak Ridge. The government would not allow a funeral home in the Manhattan Project’s Clinton Engineer Work’s town of Oak Ridge, but would allow Sam to live there and provide the ambulance service.

Sam and his wife, Mary, came to Oak Ridge in February, 1944, right in the middle of the Manhattan Project. They lived first in Gamble Valley, then at 170 West Tennessee Avenue and finally at 145 East Vance Road. He operated the ambulance service in support of the new hospital but worked out of his home.

Interestingly enough Frank Martin took over the ambulance service in September, 1946, as transition was being made to the Atomic Energy Commission. The Martins continued to provide that service for the Oak Ridge hospital until 1970.

The only location that had been deemed by the Roane Anderson Company for a funeral home was on Tyrone Road. The Martin family did not like that location and wanted another one to be made available.

A combination of William Sharp, owner of Sharp Funeral Home in Oliver Springs, and Paul Holley, owner of Holley Funeral Home of Clinton, in 1949, decided to build a funeral home on the designated spot. The funeral home closed in 1951.

As early as November 6, 1948, Frank Martin took out a full page ad in *The Oak Ridge Lions News* promoting a future funeral home. The ad had a large sketch of the building and noted that the Martin family had been providing Oak Ridge ambulance service for the past two years. You just have to know some interesting maneuvering was taking place regarding how to provide funeral home services in Oak Ridge.

Helped by the U. S. Representative Howard Baker Sr., Frank Martin was allowed to lease property at 1017 Oak Ridge Turnpike. In January, 1950, the new Martin Funeral Home in Oak Ridge opened and on August 25, 1950, an open house was announced in *The Oak Ridger*.

Sam Martin was selected to operate the new modern facility. In 1956, he received his funeral director’s license. In 1957, Frank Martin was allowed to purchase the property he had been leasing.

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In 1979, Sam retired and turned the operation of the funeral home over to Stone Hennessee, who had come over from Clinton to help with the business in Oak Ridge. Stone was married to Nancy Martin, Paul and Ruby Martin's daughter.

In 1981, Stone was killed in an automobile accident and Sam Martin came out of retirement to again manage the Oak Ridge operation for the Martin family. By 1982, Sam and his son, Larry Martin had purchased the business and for the first time, Sam owned the business he had taken from an ambulance service for the Roane Anderson Company to one of the finest funeral homes anywhere around.

In an interview published in *The Oak Ridger* in October 1982, Sam reflects on his long career in Oak Ridge and noted some changes he had seen over the years. He took credit for introducing what was by then becoming common practice – the two-hour evening visitation practice, with the funeral following.

Sam also recounted a story in the same interview that Nancy enjoyed telling Bill Wilcox and me as she sat in Bill's home on that Sunday afternoon a few weeks ago. It was a "gypsy funeral" that lasted two weeks.

The interview stated, "Sam said, 'A gypsy died in ORINS (Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies) and the family camped out here while they were waiting for other members of the family to come in. They came from all over the United States,' he says with exaggeration in his voice. 'I thought they would never leave.' 'How did you get rid of them?' was the next obvious question. 'We buried the man,' he answers flatly."

Nancy added some interesting details to the "gypsy story" that were not captured in the newspaper interview with Sam. She said the leader of the gypsies told Sam that "we will pay you and we won't steal a thing!"

Evidently many of the gypsies stayed all the time with the body and held a great feast that lasted for over a week. Nancy said that Sam had to fumigate the funeral home after the large group left.

Sam told Nancy that when they buried the man, the gypsies put thousands of dollars and lots of whiskey in the casket. He said, "If I wasn't a good Christian, I would go dig that thing up!"

Nancy also told of an unusual burial in Lake City where a man's family insisted he be buried in his bib overalls and put in the casket on his side as he "never did like to sleep on his back." She said they did as the family wished.

Then there was the family who came in after their mother had died. There were eight children and they insisted that all eight of them wanted to participate in all decisions about the arrangements and that all eight of them would split the cost.

When it came time to go upstairs to pick out the casket, one of the men had gotten about half way up the stairs. He looked back down and said, "Earline, come on up here. You know we all have to agree on the selection of the casket and such."

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Earline replied, "I am not coming! No, I am not picking out anything and I'm not paying nothing neither. I never was for sure she was even my mother!" And she just up and walked right out of the funeral home.



Oak Ridge Martin Funeral Home as it appeared in 1958

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Oak Ridge Martin Funeral Home as it appeared in 1980