

Martin Funeral Home – A brief history, part 3

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 1, 2011)

Let's continue the history of the Martin Funeral Home family business as shared with Bill Wilcox and me by Nancy Martin Harper on a recent Sunday afternoon. First we look at some unique aspects of the funeral home business. Then note the expansion of the family business into LaFollette.

Nancy has continued to help with these stories as they were being written. She has shed light on several interesting aspects of the funeral home business.

One such insight came when she told how her grandfather, Frank Martin, attended a funeral service "up north" when his wife, Rose's half-sister Rachel died. Rachel had married a man and moved away living her whole life up there in the north. Rose and Rachel had maintained contact all those years and when she died in the 1960's, the family went to the funeral.

Nancy, her father, Paul, and her grandparents attended the funeral. Nancy said Frank was shocked to learn that the funeral home closed at 9:00 PM. He was even more amazed when the burial had to be put off until Monday because they did not bury on Sunday!

These were unheard of practices to the Martin's as the rules in southern funeral homes were such that families often sat up all night with the deceased and the burial was completed on the third day, whenever it fell. So, this might give further insight into what Sam Martin said about introducing the two-hour visitation in the evening with the funeral following. The Martins may just have brought some new ideas back from "up north" in the 1960's.

In addition to establishing Martin Funeral Home's in Coal Creek (later Lake City) in 1929, Clinton in 1944, Oak Ridge in 1950, Frank Martin established a funeral home in LaFollette in the J. A. Cecil home on West Central Avenue in June, 1962. As in other locations, expansion and remodeling took place over the years in LaFollette as had been the case in all other locations.

The move to open a funeral home in LaFollette was not one that was to the liking of Frank who felt they already had three funeral homes and did not need to open a fourth. With only Frank, Paul and Sam being the Martin men in the family and the rest being women, he wondered about who would manage the LaFollette operation.

Although both Rose (Frank's wife) and Nancy (Paul's daughter) worked long and hard in the family business, the Martin's must have worried about the lack of men to carry on the family name and business. That is just the way things were viewed in those earlier years. Even today, finding a woman directing a funeral home might still be a bit hard to do.

However, Paul decided to open a funeral home in LaFollette, even when there were already three or four funeral homes there. He convinced Frank it was the thing to do, even when Frank was not overjoyed at the prospect.

One main reason Paul used to convince Frank was because the Martin Funeral Home in Lake City was serving a lot of families from LaFollette. Many families from the area of Campbell County that bordered Anderson County were coming to Lake City.

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Nancy said, "These families had been talking to Paul for several years, asking him to open a funeral home in LaFollette, so he finally decided to do so."

Paul bought the J. A. Cecil home on West Central Avenue in 1961. This was on the main road through town and a prime location. It is still there today and is called the Wilson-Martin Funeral Home.

Nancy said, "Daddy promised Mrs. Cecil a home for life. So, he built a garage and an apartment on the back of the property and Mrs. Cecil lived there, rent free, until she died."

Paul needed a manager for the LaFollette location and hired Claude Wilson. Nancy said that Claude is still there today, although retired. She indicated that Claude lives with his wife, Carole, in the apartment built by Paul for Mrs. Cecil. Carole worked there as well and for a number of years Claude and Carole owned the funeral home.

In 1979, the LaFollette funeral home was described in the *50th Anniversary of the Martin Funeral Homes* publication as having "...grown from a small facility into a large and accommodating funeral home. The most recent addition has been the construction of a large and beautiful new chapel this year. Claude Wilson, the manager has been with the LaFollette home since its opening day."

The publication went on to say regarding all the Martin Funeral Homes, "Each of the funeral homes provides an apartment for the resident managers. Each has a large chapel equipped with Hammond organs. A family room and spacious visitation rooms are provided for the comfort of the family. Large paved, well-lit parking lots surround each funeral home."

Only in Oak Ridge was a building constructed from the start to be a funeral home, but each location was well designed and each chapel well furnished. The Martin Funeral Homes were all proudly promoted as among the most modern funeral homes in the area.

The Oak Ridge Martin Funeral Home story began with Sam Martin in 1944 as he agreed to provide ambulance service to the Manhattan Project and then Frank Martin, Sam's uncle, arranged to build a new funeral home in 1950. Sam continued to operate the funeral home until he retired and Stone Hennessee (Nancy's husband) took over.

Stone's death in the car wreck on December 5, 1981, changed everything for the Martin Family. Sam came out of retirement, his son, Larry came into the business to help his dad. Nancy's grandmother, Rose, at age 84, was still trying to manage the funeral home in Clinton. Nancy's father, Paul, was trying to manage both the Lake City and Lafolette funeral homes.

Nancy got her funeral director's license and began working at the Clinton funeral home. Rose died very soon thereafter and Paul's burden grew even greater, both in managing the business and in leading the Martin family. Nancy had two small children, Marty (Martin Stone Hennessee) was 10 years old and Mary Paulette Hennessee was six.

It was at this juncture that Paul received his first offer, in 1991, to purchase the Martin Funeral Home business. He had already sold the Oak Ridge funeral home to Sam Martin. Paul discussed the offer with Nancy. A primary reason for the decision to sell was the lack of male members of the family to take over the business. Stone had been their hope for male leadership.

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A footnote: I can't find a good way to include this small story, so I am just going to put it in here. Once, when Nancy took Marty, at age nine or 10, to the Oak Ridge Playhouse to see the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, Oak Ridge's first and most famous Mayor, Al Bissell, who had a walk on part, sat down next to Marty. Marty exclaimed to his mother, "Hey Mom! Look, here is Alford Hitchcock!" Marty has continued to be involved with the playhouse over the years.

I hope you have enjoyed the history of the Martin Funeral Homes. The sale of the business took the Martin's out of the funeral home business. They had had a long run and had provided exceptional service to the area.



The Lafollette branch of the Martin Funeral Homes opened in 1961

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Martin Funeral Home in Oak Ridge as it appears today