

B. C. MATHES & CO.

Street

ALBION, N. Y.

UNDERTAKERS

Lady Assistant when desired



INTERIOR VIEW OF MATHES STORE.

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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By C.W. Lattin, Orleans County Historian

Coffins

4-16-04

In an old scrapbook, I found this clipping from the Medina newspaper dated 1938:

"In the early days, there were no regular undertakers in Medina. Caskets, universally called 'coffins' then, were made by the local cabinetmaker at a cost of about \$5 and the friends and neighbors did the rest. The community owned a bier on which the coffin was carried to the local resting place. A fee of 25 cents was charged for its use and between times the bier was stored in the basement of St. John's Church. In return for this, when an Episcopalian died, no charge was made for the bier.

From this circumstance, the story came down through the years that the basement of the church had once been used for the storage of 'beer,' but it wasn't spelled that way."

Certainly, from the fact that cabinetmakers had the right materials and tools, it was only natural they would make coffins. By the late 19th century, it was customary that furniture dealers were also the undertakers.

But before we had professional undertakers, as the clipping notes, family, friends and neighbors did the rest once the coffin was procured.

Embalming commenced during the Civil War period, but it did not come into common use until the late 19th century.

Undertakers used a display coffin with an ice tray underneath to keep bodies cool until burial, when the corpse was placed into the actual burial

coffin before interment.

Often the deceased person was simply laid on a sofa for the calling hours or "wake." In the 19th century it was common for people to sit up all night in the parlor with a deceased relative. Hence, the term "wake" for being awake.

My grandfather, Nahum Lattin, told that when he was about 14 years old (1879), a neighbor lady died and he and his mother and others sat up all night in her parlor with her laid out. He was holding a lamp and fell asleep. Consequently, the lamp tilted and the chimney fell off, smashing on the floor. This was cause for an anxious moment or so as it scared the "dickens" out of them. His mother also was pretty cross with him for having drifted off.

J.B. Merrill operated the first funeral home in Orleans County at Holley in 1922. The McNall brothers opened theirs in Albion in 1929. Before this period, funerals commonly were performed from the family residence or church.

Today's illustration is taken from the 1905 Souvenir Book of Albion, which shows an advertisement placed by B.C. Mathes and Co. The store seen here was located in the Pratt Opera House Block.

I should end with one thing. Biers are still being used today by funeral directors. They are the piece of furniture or collapsible dolly upon which the casket is placed.