

Fall, 2007

Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Virginia Blue Ridge



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Annual meeting features popular historian

“The Civil War and the Rise of Embalming in America”

Dr. James (Bud) Robertson, Distinguished Professor, and Executive Director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, gave an informative and entertaining talk on the many innovations brought about by the Civil War and how these shape our lives as Americans today. He touched on such topics as standard time, canned food, paper money, paired shoes, ready-made clothing, income tax, and large descriptive tombstones. He

showed how much of our culture is derived from the Civil War — from poetry, to literature, to music.

Before the Civil War, it was often a hardware store owner who acted as undertaker. Before embalming, a device called a cooling board would be used to preserve the body for a few days.

Embalming, p. 3

Hospice, another end-of-life choice

Our new pamphlet on how to choose a hospice has been written by two former hospice workers: **Cynthia Luke** and **Marcia Bailey**, both executive board members. Marcia is a former social worker and Cynthia is a nurse who has not only been a hospice worker, but is also a current hospice volunteer. With help from some other members, one of whom is a palliative care physician, Marcia and Cynthia’s collaborative efforts produced this useful advice for

people facing end-of-life care and for their care givers.

Many people wait too long before becoming a hospice patient. Yet hospice care can enhance the quality of life for those who are terminally ill.

Families often feel hospice is a death sentence, but it can be a gift of comfort both for the patient and for their loved ones. Sooner is often better than later when hospice is suggested by a health care worker.

It's not easy being green



Our members and the public have been showing a lot of interest in green, or natural burial. Sadly not many options are open to the public in this area for such a choice. Two of our members, **Harriett Cooper** and **Morton Nadler** recently appeared before the Westview Cemetery Committee in Blacksburg to propose setting aside some space in Blacksburg's municipal cemetery for green burial. Unfortunately this suggestion was not accepted. "It's not easy being green," at least not in Blacksburg.

Even if there is no green cemetery available to you,

don't despair. Just follow these tips for a greener, ecological friendly burial even in a commercial cemetery: Forego embalming. It's never routinely required by law for funerals, and cemeteries don't require it for burial. Select a biodegradable container for a casket, such as soft-wood, cardboard, silk, or bamboo. Even a shroud or blanket might be possible. Often an inexpensive container used for cremation will fit the bill. If a vault is required by the cemetery, request that the vault be set upside down without the lid so that the bottom is open to the elements. If you have your

Green, p. 3

Annual meeting highlights



Executive Board elects officers.

President Marcia Bailey welcomed visitors to our annual meeting. After Dr. James Roberston's presentation, the annual business meeting was held. The slate of executive board/trustees presented by the nominating committee was elected unanimously. These individuals, **Marcia Bailey**, **Gary Schroeder**, and **Jenny Schwanke**, will serve for a three-year term.

Complete minutes of the meeting are available at our website or a copy will be mailed upon request. See the enclosed sheet for the activities of the year.

The Executive Board met to elect officers for the coming year. **Marcia Bailey** was elected president; **Alan Bayer**, vice-president; **Harriett Cooper**, secretary; and **Darrel Clowes**, treasurer. The Board appointed **Isabel Berney** to continue as executive director.

Embalming *from 1*

When the War resulted in so many casualties in one place, embalming came into vogue. Embalming insurance was sold and those who bought it wore a tag around their necks so their bodies could be easily identified as insured individuals. This was the origin of the dog tag. Prices were based on rank - \$25 for a private, \$50 for a lieutenant, and as high as \$150 for other officers.

Thomas Holmes, a medical school dropout, perfected arterial injection using a formula of zinc chloride and arsenic. This actually petrified the body. Lincoln's body was so preserved. Thomas's fluid sold for \$93 a gallon, equivalent to \$600 at today's prices. Thomas was a very wealthy man by war's end. His one stipulation upon his death was that he not be embalmed.



The Civil War continues to shape our lives.

Green, *from 2*

own rural land, check your local zoning laws for any rules on home burial. It's allowed in Virginia. Some private cemeteries and family cemeteries in our area do allow burial with no vault or grave liner, but they are not generally open to the public and so are not included in our cemetery survey

In his book, *Grave Matters*, L. A. Times columnist Mark Harris

reports that going into the grave with American bodies every year there is enough wood to build 3,500 homes, more than 90,000 pounds of steel, and about 820,000 gallons of embalming fluid, most of it containing toxic formaldehyde. The idea of natural burial is to allow the body to return to the elements as simply as possible. This is also the most ecological choice; "going green saves green."

When someone digs up a grave shortly after burial and takes the corpse, he is called a "grave robber." When someone does the same a hundred years later, he is called an "archeologist." FCA member Kirk Petersen, Eldorado Springs, CO

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Upcoming biennial funeral home survey

Do you have one hour to devote to making one visit to a funeral home near you? As we survey area funeral homes to revise our funeral home information, we always need people who are willing to make one visit to a funeral home and request a General Price List. According to federal regulations, all funeral homes are to supply such a list to anyone coming to their door. Prices must also be supplied to those making a telephone request. We make the initial request by letter, but those funeral homes that do not to respond to this request need a personal follow-up, either a visit of phone call.

If you are willing to call on one funeral home, please call our phone number at 540-953-5589 and leave your name and number or email us at fcavbr@bev.net. Your help will assist us in providing the complete and accurate information which we distribute to members and to the public. The funeral home survey is one of our most requested items.