

CELEBRATING A HUNDRED YEARS
Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN
11 February 2003

She looked to the horizon of the illimitable future' — my goodness, how obituaries have changed!

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They say the only things that remain constant in this life are death and taxes. But in the newspaper business, the way death is reported has changed quite a bit over the years.

Writing obituaries is one of the least pleasant parts of reporting the news but, unfortunately, it's a necessary one. Today, however, obituaries are much like brief news stories, short and matter-of-fact, giving only essential information about the life of the deceased and not even touching (with a 10-foot pole) opinions related to the hereafter.

Not so in 1903, when the Putnam County Herald was founded.

Back then, obituaries were elaborate affairs that told a great deal about the deceased and how they were regarded by their community, as did the following example taken from the March 4, 1903, obituary for Delia Holman:

“She was a true Christian, and was ever ready to ‘weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice.’”

One for J.E. Copeland, printed March 25, 1903, also tells us something about the deceased.

“Mr. Copeland was of a kindly disposition and was very highly esteemed by all who knew him. Verily, a good man has gone from among us.”

Next to this obituary is one for Henry P. Davis which tells us that the man “was one of the most widely known and best loved citizens of this section, and his death causes a loss that can never be filled. He was a model citizen, loyal friend and neighbor, a loving husband and indulgent father.”

We are told in the Jan. 19, 1922, obituary for the Honorable M. D. Rickman that “He was a man of firm convictions and could always be found on the moral side of every issue.”

On Jan. 26, 1922, we learn that Byrd C. Lindsay was “a splendid citizen and enjoyed the confidence and esteem of all who knew him... The deceased was a man of unusual intelligence and wide information but was of a quiet and unassuming temperament.”

Some obituaries — such as Mrs. Holman's — read more like a eulogy or funeral sermon, instructing loved ones on how to cope with the loss and even including poems.

“We would say to the bereaved ones — Weep not for her but live so that when called to appear before the throne of God, you can say as she might have said:

‘Before me loom the dark, untrodden hills,

Which in the night, led by an unseen hand,

I soon must pass, although what joys or ills

May lie beyond I do not understand.

The faith of all my years is with me still.

Calm and content, I wait the last command.”

Perhaps most unusual to those who are familiar with the customs of today’s obituaries, those of yesteryear speculated about the voyage of the deceased into the hereafter, as in this passage from the July 1, 1903, obituary for Carrie Wilhite:

“Today we mourn a genial friend, but she has learned the mystery of living and dying; she has measured the boundaries of time; she has tested the verity of the hereafter and looked to the horizon of the illimitable future and crossed the borderland of the eternal world. These things have been hers to know and enjoy. We shall meet tomorrow what she has met today.”

And obituary writers came up with all kinds of euphemisms for dying. A Jan. 19, 1922, obituary for a little boy named Roy Campell tells us that he “entered the larger life Saturday evening after an illness of about two weeks.”

Death itself is a vivid character in many of the writeups. Death is said to have entered the family of Mrs. Holman when she died, and on March 25, 1903, we read that “The dread reaper claimed another mortal life in Cookeville on Sunday when J. E. Copeland breathed his last.”

A 1920 obituary headline reads: “Mrs. Nancy Denny Summoned by Death,” and the front page of the Feb. 9, 1922, edition features a list of six obituaries grouped under the headline: “Toll of the Grim Reaper.”

Obituaries of yesteryear also told readers a great deal more about the cause of death.

An obituary for Henry P. Davis in the March 25, 1903, edition tells us that he died “from a complication of diseases, his fatal illness being brought on from exposure and getting wet while attending the funeral of Capt. Walton Smith two weeks ago.”

Obituaries printed in the Feb. 9, 1922, edition tell us that Douglas Elrod died “from the effects of pneumonia”; J.M. Morgan Sr. died “from the effects of a paralytic stroke”; and Mrs. Lizzie Brazzell died “from an attack of influenza.”

In fact, even suicides — which today’s obituaries do not usually disclose — are described in unflinching detail, as in this example from Dec. 15, 1910, about a C. H. Edwards:

“C.H. Edwards took his own life in his room at the hotel in Baxter last night, shooting himself in the breast three times with a pistol about one o’clock and dying at six this morning.”

Some even strike a poignant chord by telling the alleged reason for the life-taking. This, from the July 22, 1915, edition of the Herald:

“Ike Pincus committed suicide at his home in Nashville on Tuesday afternoon by hanging. He had become despondent over the continued illness of his wife.”

One obituary from March 13, 1941, even told what Minnie Avery McClain, who died of a heart attack, did on her last day: “The last day of her life was an especially busy one. In the afternoon she had attended a meeting of the Dry Valley Women’s Club... On the night preceding her death, she had held in her home a child welfare conference, attended by ministers, teachers and social workers.”

But not every Herald obituary was reported in such great detail. In the early 1900s, many deaths are reported in one or two lines along with the rest of the community news. It appears that the “big” obituaries were written for prominent citizens or for especially tragic deaths, such as those of children or mothers who left young families behind.

As the years passed, the obituaries in the Herald-Citizen became less and less elaborate. By 1920, most of the icing was gone and obituaries, for the most part, resembled those of today.

Rhetorical flourishes — though more subdued — were occasionally added, however, for very prominent citizens, such as judges, up through the 1940s. But even those obituaries were not nearly as fancy as those of the early 1900s; they remained rather factual, except for passages like, **“Seldom has this community experienced a greater shock than that caused by the sudden death of Judge [O. K.] Holladay, who for the past 43 years had been one of Cookeville’s most active citizens.”**

Today, the obituaries of well-known community figures are sometimes featured on the front page, but even then, the writeups stick generally to the times, dates, family members, achievements and affiliations of the deceased, perhaps with laudatory quotations from acquaintances, but not the editorial comment of years ago.

Yes, gone are the days of journalistic sentimentality, at least where death is concerned.

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