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PREFACE

Upon hearing the proposed topic for this PTFS, many people responded to me with the same reaction: Why? Death does seem like a rather unusual subject for an entire publication, doesn't it? Not if you check your local library. The shelves are stocked with books on burial customs, studies of the process of dying, cemeteries, and cultural and religious beliefs about the afterlife from all over the world. Still, people weren't sure about the idea when they first heard it. Death is almost something you just don't talk about. At the same time, no one really seemed turned off by the subject. Most were quite interested. They all began to immediately suggest ideas for papers, or they at least shared death-related stories. I understand the mixed feelings, but I hope that no one gets too hung up on the morbid topic, or feels that it was chosen solely for its creepiness or some cheap shock value.

There are many reasons why I made death lore the focus of an entire volume. First, it's a fascinating topic. Everyone has ideas about what happens when we die, and no one really knows for sure. Death is a mystery, and it will remain so forever. No matter how much we can learn about disease and why people die, what happens after is purely a matter of belief—and faith, in many cases. Also, as an organization that preserves and presents folklore, we haven't done much research on the lore surrounding death. There've been a few articles—some on cemetery or funeral customs, roadside graves, and ghosts, as well as this year's throwback article by Hortense Warner Ward: “The Yellow Flower of Death,” from the 1948 PTFS *The Sky Is My Tipi*—but only relatively few in sixty-four previous books. And there is a lot to write about. Again, check your local library. With so much lore surrounding the one event that affects us all, why haven't we done more on it?

Perhaps it's because the topic is so personal. This volume produced some very interesting submissions, but not all were chosen for publication. Some were simply *too* personal. We all have our

own individual views of death, how we should honor the dead, and what happens after we die, but I wanted to include articles that not only showed the private feelings and experiences of the contributors, but also ones that expressed the common view, the lore of the folk that we could all relate to. Many of these stories and articles reveal intimate memories of loved ones passing, as well as customs, rituals, superstitions, and beliefs of the afterlife that are deep-rooted and, therefore, will surely live on through generations to come.

Death lore involves our most sacred, oldest traditions—yet, it is vital to our everyday twenty-first-century lives, and even to the future. Rhett Rushing told me of a blog he does that provides regular updates on Texas ghost stories for the San Antonio *Express-News*. A recent (May 4, 2008) article in the Nacogdoches newspaper, *The Daily Sentinel*, told of a Waco cemetery that had been relocated in the late 1960s to make way for the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. It seems the gravestones were relocated, but not all of the remains of the deceased. As you'll learn in this volume, strict rituals are to be followed when graves are moved, and because those rituals were ignored, the present generation is being connected to ancestors long forgotten.

Because death lore covers so much, I've done something I haven't done for any previous publication: I've included an Introduction, which serves as the first chapter. This Introduction is not intended to be the end-all source for every custom or belief related to death; instead, it is an overview of the most common lore, along with some historical background. The second chapter looks at cemeteries—how they hold mysterious and yet valuable information about our past, and also how they function as sacred places which should be treated with respect and care. The next chapter focuses on how people die and what happens afterwards, including the rituals we practice before and after death, as well as the ceremonies and, yes, even the humor that comfort us when we've lost loved ones. The fourth chapter explores unanswered questions about death; it covers not only ghostly accounts of the spirit world, but also bizarre deaths and other experiences we can't explain. The

final chapter is more philosophical, offering contemplative views of the value of visiting the dead, and reflections about time spent with the living. This book offers a variety of death lore, and I hope you find it thought-provoking and useful.

As always, I thank all of the contributors who wrote articles for this book. I also thank my colleagues at Stephen F. Austin State University, as well as some key administrators who helped the TFS keep running smoothly over the past year: Jerry Williams, Interim Chair of the Department of English and Philosophy, and Brian Murphy, Dean of the College of Liberal and Applied Arts. And of course, many thanks go to all the folks at the UNT Press.

This publication is dedicated to Janet Simonds. Her work as office secretary is invaluable to me. She assists with nearly every stage of the publication of these books, but she has been especially helpful with this one. In addition to formatting the submitted texts, corresponding with contributors, and reworking the photos for articles, she also designed the cover—exactly the way I envisioned it. Her hard work allows me to focus on editing, which can be challenging while dealing with the countless issues that face an untenured faculty member in a department that has had more than its share of complications and administrative difficulties recently. When you come to Nacogdoches at Easter in 2009, remember to tell Janet what a good job she does.

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May 18, 2008

INTRODUCTION

THE LORE OF DEATH

by Kenneth L. Untiedt



Contrary to what Captain Kirk told us at the beginning of every *Star Trek* episode, space is not the final frontier. Nor is the ocean, which many scientists believe warrants more research and promises more potential life-sustaining solutions for our planet than does any place outside our atmosphere. No, death is the real final frontier. It is the true unknown, and it is the only adventure everyone must ultimately face. A select few people have been to outer space, and their travels have been thoroughly documented. Each day scientists answer more of the questions we have about our material world and the universe in which we live. However, no one knows for sure what will happen when death occurs. The mysteries of death make the lore that surrounds it unique for two reasons. First, because death is universal and occurs without regard to culture, gender, social status, ethnic background, country of origin, or any other factor, it is the focus of more folklore than anything else. Also, because no one knows what awaits them after their inevitable death, much of the folklore related to dying is generated by fear.

Some burial customs and superstitions regarding death go back centuries—indeed, to earliest man. Contemporary cultures maintain a strong connection to this lore, more so than to any other kind. Younger generations are more likely to retain death rituals and customs than they are other life cycle events, such as births and rites of passage celebrations. With divorce rates averaging well over fifty percent, couples may adhere to wedding customs the first time, but the second or third time around, most folks don't worry as much about following tradition. Especially here in America, as families continue to spread apart in a vastly transient society, fewer people embark on cross-country trips to see newborns or celebrate sixteenth birthday parties, sometimes for grandchildren or other

relatives they've visited in person only a few times. The baby can be seen via a live video feed on the Internet from anywhere in the world, and videotapes or DVDs and digital photographs are easy to produce and share, again because of computer technology. A death in the family, however, still calls for a personal appearance. We don't honor the dead through a web cam.

One reason death customs continue when others fade away is that we are able to rely on an organized, regulated institution to help keep them alive: the funeral industry. Funeral homes, no matter how corporate they've become, still promise to assist families with every part of the burial process—even providing counseling on how to grieve properly, but also almost certainly explaining all the most common rituals and burial customs, at least for that particular local culture. A more important reason, though, is that death is final. We remember little if anything of other life cycle events such as our own birth, learning to walk, or first days of school. And almost everyone looks forward to those occasions that, in many cases, have become more about clever marketing and commercialism (Sweet Sixteen birthday parties) than they are about achieving something meaningful. On the other hand, no one overcomes death, and the loss of a loved one often affects people more powerfully—and personally—than any other event.

To understand more about dying and what might follow, people study the folklore related to death. They can learn about rituals from cultures all around the world, as well as how they originated and have changed. Many books (and now web sites) repeat much of the same information, providing only variations of many different cultures over time. One can compare specific examples of superstitions, rituals, customs, and beliefs of ancient man, as well as those within contemporary cultures. Each culture's beliefs surrounding death are an important starting point for such study, for they are at the heart of all death lore (and all folklore in general). Shared beliefs are a substantial part of what defines a culture. The idea that people *believe* in something is what makes them continue the practice with which it is associated. While the origins may have

been lost, people find comfort in the rituals, superstitions, and customs that support what the larger group believes.

Man's attempt to learn more and satisfy curiosities about his surroundings and his future demonstrate his civilized nature. His comprehension of his inevitable death and his desire to understand it is what separates him from other animals. According to Edward Martin, "The earliest belief of what may be termed 'mind' was that a ghost dwelt inside the body, making the body alive and conscious. At death this ghost or spirit permanently withdrew from the body."¹ Simple reasoning explains why primitive man first imagined such a spirit exists. "On a cold morning he could see his breath. He did not understand the oxidation process. Vapor arising from fresh blood meant the same to him, for too much loss of blood meant death."² However, most people even today believe there is a spirit within us that will venture on to some other place—either good or bad. Perhaps every known religion has incorporated such beliefs. According to Martin, "This belief in a conscious 'spirit' that leaves the body at death still persists in present-day religions."³ These beliefs from those early times continue to shape our customs and superstitions, regardless of whether the original purposes for them have long since been forgotten or replaced with others. Nothing in science can disprove them, for there is no way to objectively study the afterlife. Death is *the* great unknown.

Effie Bendann notes there are numerous problems with the various methods of studying death customs of ancient or primitive cultures. Comparison of similar practices in different cultures does not always include the reasoning behind such practices. Other schools of thought, including psychological studies and the theory of diffusion, present their own unique limitations to fully understanding a particular culture's death-related lore.⁴ Bendann contends that the best method scholars can offer is a purely historical approach of looking at individual periods in specific societies to examine which customs have survived and how they've been altered over decades, or even centuries. Such a study will reveal "the fact that there are certain common features in all areas, such

as the causes of death, the significance of burial, the dread of the spirit, the specific attitude toward the corpse, mourning rites, taboos, the potent power of the name, and feasts for the dead.”⁵ These features are essentially universal, and this introduction provides an overview of the origins of some of the most familiar death-related lore.

Why do people have so many beliefs, superstitions, and customs and rituals about dying? The main reason is that we fear death more than anything else, although a secondary reason is respect—for the dead, and for what happens after we die. The fear of dying consistently ranks among the top of people’s most common fears. We may say that we don’t fear death, but the origins for the rituals and customs themselves suggest otherwise. According to Bertram Puckle, “Fear of the dead is the origin of almost every funeral custom which has come down to us today; from the pomp of the procession to the laudatory epitaph on the tombstone, to propitiate the acute sensibility of the departed.”⁶ Effie Bendann refers to the “dread of the spirit,” which she clarifies is a fear of whatever inhabited the deceased and not the corpse itself.⁷ Archeological research shows that “the big idea of burials was to defend the survivors from the very dangerous discontented souls or ghosts of the recently dead.”⁸ It’s the spirit that we really worry about. The corpse we can study—we can see it, and examine it from a medical standpoint. What was inside, and presumably leaves for another unknown world, is what we don’t understand and, therefore, fear.

While fear is the main impetus for death lore, our modern, more educated culture also takes into consideration an increasingly evident respect for the process of dying. Healthcare professionals understand that terminally ill patients are fearful of their impending deaths.⁹ Nurses commonly have a more intimate relationship with dying patients than do doctors, and the healthcare industry realizes how important the nurse’s role is in assisting the dying with their transition. Therefore, nurses are schooled in ways to communicate more compassionately with patients so they can better attend to those who know their lives are ending and ease their

worries. Such training can help prevent nurses from revealing to their patients their own superstitions or fears about death; it can also help them with the grieving process and personal feelings which they feel naturally after having bonded with the patients.¹⁰ Everyone involved in another's death needs to believe in something to resolve the anxieties and emotions it triggers.

Our fear of death leads to countless superstitions about it. These superstitions, in turn, generate customs, rituals, festivals, and other lore to protect against—and celebrate—the dead. Except in some cases of the terminally ill under close care of a doctor, no one knows when death will occur. Therefore, folklore regarding signs of approaching death comprises entire chapters of books. Puckle states, “Many of the superstitions . . . are obviously nothing more than a chain of associated ideas. . . . ‘Death warnings’ as they are called, have nearly all an obvious origin.”¹¹ Some death warnings are commonly known in many cultures, as are the reasoning behind them. Breaking a mirror is believed to cause seven years bad luck because ancient people thought the reflection was the soul, and breaking the mirror would destroy it; the sign of impending death when a bird flies into a house stems from birds being able to fly to the heavens, and the superstition that they would carry away a person's soul.¹²

Modern man understands polished glass and the source of a mirror's reflection, as well as the limitations of a bird's flight, but other superstitions remain just as popular despite how commonplace their occurrences are. The following are but three examples: “A white moth inside the house or trying to enter means death”;¹³ “If you shiver it is said by the gossips that ‘someone is walking over your grave,’” and “If you dream of nursing a baby and the baby cries, you will either die yourself or lose a near relative.”¹⁴ No matter how often such simple events occur, some people maintain their beliefs that death is sure to follow.

Whether we can predict it or not, death *is* inevitable, and once it occurs we want loved ones to find peace in whatever comes afterward. We take measures we hope will ensure that they can arrive at any eternal destination that awaits them. Each culture has specific

rituals to facilitate the transition of the deceased to the afterlife, from the preparation of the corpse to its burial and all else related to death. Early Jews believed the dead were unclean, hence their rituals of purifying the corpse as well as its burial clothes.¹⁵ According to Puckle, “No doubt the origin of the custom of washing, anointing and clothing the corpse in garments suitable to its rank was instituted in the dim ages, when it was believed that the departed required such attentions to enable them to appear at their best in a future material state.”¹⁶ Each culture’s rituals for preparing corpses have their own reasoning. Margaret Coffin states, “Southern Negroes, like many others, used a cooling board for laying out their dead and, in the past, placed a plate of salt and ashes beneath the board. The ashes were put there to absorb disease and, at the committal service, were placed in the grave.”¹⁷ Many Native Americans (among other peoples) go a step further and believe the deceased must have all their body parts intact to travel in the next world.

Once prepared, the body must find its way to the next destination, which most often involves burial in the ground (although some cultures—or individuals within cultures that typically practice burial—prefer cremation). Martin claims many customs originated to prevent the spirit from reentering the body after it had left. He notes that a corpse is carried feet first so the body can not look back and see the spirit following, thereby allowing the spirit to again inhabit the body.¹⁸ Others believe the feet should go first so the deceased, being envious of the living, will not look back and “beckon one of the family to follow it in death.”¹⁹ The reason for removing a corpse from a home through a window or another opening other than the door is to confuse the spirit so that it can not follow; covering the body with dirt is another way of keeping the spirit away.²⁰ Of course, burials also once kept wild animals from desecrating the corpse, as well as prevented unsanitary conditions as the body decomposed, concerns still valid in some cultures.

It has long been thought that blocking a funeral procession would impede the deceased’s journey, so attempts are made to keep the hearse from stopping on its way to the cemetery.²¹ Contemporary right-of-way customs are still observed and, in fact, enforced by

laws, no matter how dangerous they've become in light of our modern transportation and roadways. Police escorts are often used, even in metropolitan areas and on streets and highways where vehicles must cross high-traffic intersections, all at the peril of those charged with providing safe passage for the funeral procession.

Preparing the dead for burial has generated multiple professions: undertakers, of course, but also “layers out of dead” for public display.²² Now, any such occupations are considered highly professional, requiring advanced study and licensing to perform services legally. Another profession historically partnered with death is that of the cabinet maker. The practice of being placed in some type of enclosure—a coffin, or a “chest”—prior to being interred is Biblical, coming from Genesis 1:26: “He (Joseph) dieth and is chested.”²³ Being buried in this manner was once a distinction of wealth or status; for the poor, a coffin was used only to transport the deceased to the grave site.²⁴ The purpose of encasing the deceased in a coffin, the earliest of which were made of stone, was to preserve them for resurrection.²⁵ The first European-Americans often had no coffins, but were buried instead wrapped only in cerecloth shrouds.²⁶

Standard “ready-made” coffins were available by the War of 1812, but the term “casket” did not come into use until the mid-1800s.²⁷ Scraps from the materials used to make coffins were frequently placed inside out of the superstition that they would endanger the carpenter or anyone else who touched them.²⁸ Related customs involve placing personal items—from weapons to tools to valuables, including putting coins on the eyes of the body—in the coffin, so the deceased may use them in the afterlife.²⁹ During the late nineteenth century, cast iron materials and coffins booby-trapped with explosives were developed to discourage grave robbers who might be tempted to steal such treasures.³⁰ The newest models of coffins offer stainless steel outer vaults encased around coffins constructed of the finest wood, fiberglass, or even other metal.

Funerals were once much more intimate affairs than they are today, when they are advertised in the local newspaper and on the

Internet. For some early American communities, funerals were by invitation only. According to Coffin, “In Dutch New Amsterdam and up the Hudson to Albany, the *aanspreecker*, or inviter, performed his own special service. Clothed in black, with long crape ribbons streaming from his hat, he hurried to the homes of relatives and friends of the deceased—for no one attended a funeral uninvited.”³¹ For some Pennsylvanian Germans, wine and “dead cakes” were delivered when making such invitations; the cakes, which looked like large cookies and often had the deceased’s initials scratched in them, “were not eaten but kept as a memento of the person who had died.”³² For less private funerals, bells were used not only to notify members of a community of a death, but also to scare away evil spirits.³³

Death has played an integral part in the construction of the average home for many cultures. “When the Pennsylvania Germans were ready to build homes, they planned a room called the *doed-kammer* or dead room, where a body lay until time for the funeral. This room had doors broad enough to allow the exit of bearers carrying a casket. The rarely used parlor, always kept neat for a funeral or a wedding, was found in many a New England home, too.”³⁴ The home of the deceased is still where mourners usually congregate, either before or after a funeral. Wakes originated out of watching over the dead in hopes that they might regain consciousness; sometimes, the watchers attempted to “rouse the ghost” by playing practical jokes and “taking various liberties with the corpse.”³⁵ Eventually, these events became times of celebration more than sadness. Irish wakes turned into parties where the corpse was propped up to observe the celebration, and Southern funerals were social occasions where people everywhere within a fifty-five mile radius were expected to attend.³⁶ Texas is exposed to the customs and rituals of many different cultures, from Halloween celebrations of European tradition (although now much altered from the original) to the Hispanic variation of All Souls Day (*Día de los Muertos*).

Regardless of cultural background, black is recognized practically everywhere as the proper mourning attire. The reason again is

related to our fear of death. Those closest to the deceased—the undertaker, mourners, and pall bearers—originally wore black so they could be “inconspicuous.” Because the dead are envious, no one near the corpse wanted to be recognized and thereby beckoned to follow into death. Black is also thought to prevent contamination, particularly among African Americans.³⁷ Eventually, the fashion industry throughout Europe and America began setting rules regarding mourning wear. Coffin states:

By the nineteenth century there were definite rules setting the length of mourning and the clothing to be worn during each period. Two years of deep mourning was expected of widows. During the first year the bereaved wore solid black wool garments . . . with collars and cuffs of folded, untrimmed crape, no other trim. . . . During the second year of mourning, the widow might wear a silk fabric trimmed with crape and use black lace for her collars and cuffs. . . . After a year and a half, she might vary her wardrobe with garments or trim of gray, violet, or white. . . . Children in mourning, those under twelve, wore white in summer and gray in winter, both trimmed with black buttons, ruffles, belts, or bonnet ribbons only.³⁸

These fashion standards served to adhere to lore surrounding death, but surely commercialism was also a factor.

Many death rituals and customs related to preparing and burying the dead have nothing to do with fashion, worldly possessions, or concerns about the prevention of disease. They are religious in nature. Some remain virtually unchanged from their original, ancient purpose, while others have been altered greatly over centuries of interpretation and adaptation. Eating flesh of the dead has many purposes for cultures all over the world, from tribes that practice cannibalism to acquire virtues of the deceased to Christian rituals of receiving communion out of respect or remembrance.³⁹

The “sin-eater” is a scapegoat figure in many cultures; an individual accepts a small fee and a meal in order to take on the moral trespasses and consequences of the afterlife for someone else.⁴⁰ In Christianity, Christ fulfilled such a role when he offered himself as a sacrifice for all men’s sins. To honor his act and to prepare for his second coming, Christian burials typically place the dead facing east—the direction from which he will come.

Such beliefs are at the core of all our folklore—we do things because we believe strongly in them. A wide array of death lore exists, more so than any other type of lore. There are many reasons that death lore continues when other lore is forgotten or changes beyond recognition. However, the main reason is that we all fear it so much. This introductory chapter offers only an overview of some of the most common superstitions about death and its customs and rituals. The rest of this volume includes over twenty-five articles that illustrate some of the various aspects of death lore as shaped by the beliefs of Texans.

ENDNOTES

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