

Funeral home marks century of compassion

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Poole family has been at helm of Port mortuary business since its founding

For Patrick Poole, looking back at vintage photographs from the 100 years Poole Funeral Home has been in business is like gazing at a family album.

The mortuary has been strictly a family operation since it was founded in Port Washington in 1913 by William D. Poole.

William Poole, who was known as W.D., graduated from Cedarburg High School in 1901. He went to Milwaukee to study the undertaking business, receiving his license in 1905 — the first year of state licensing.

After working at S.F. Peacock & Son, one of Milwaukee's leading undertakers, and C.H. Jordan & Co. in Chicago, Poole moved to Port Washington and purchased a local funeral home from Nic Grasser.

In October of 1913, the funeral business known as W.D. Poole & Bro. opened, with assistance from Poole's brother Eugene.

The business end of the funeral trade was conducted out of the Neuen's Building, the former post office at 213 N. Franklin St.

Records show that the first Poole funeral was for William Munstock, 73. It was held at Union Cemetery and cost \$35.

In 1915, Poole married Mayme Van Ells, a Port Washington native whose father was an alderman and ran a commercial fishing business.

Together, the couple ran the funeral home as well as the local office for Railway Express Agency, a shipping business.

The funeral home relocated to another storefront on North Franklin Street from 1915 to 1921, and to the Michael Bink Building at 231 N. Franklin St. from 1921 to 1940.

The location was rather perfunctory in the early days, since funerals were typically held in the home of the deceased. Undertakers would bring their embalming supplies to the house and make the preparations for the wake and funeral.

As homes grew smaller, the need for larger facilities for formal gatherings became obvious.

In 1940, construction began on the stately funeral home building at 203 N. Wisconsin St., which was also to become the Poole family's home.

Local accounts note that the construction scene was marred by picketing because non-union laborers were used for the work.

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Since its initial construction, the building has undergone significant remodeling. The 11,000-square-foot building now features fellowship, family and children's lounges.

Keeping up with funeral trends, the business added a crematory in 2008 to handle on-site cremations.

Erin Poole was the second generation of the Poole family to join the business. After attending Marquette University in Milwaukee, he completed studies at the Wisconsin Institute of Mortuary in 1939 and — at the age of 21 — became the youngest licensed funeral director in the state.

Erin Poole helped establish the Milwaukee Area Technical College Mortuary School and served on the Wisconsin Funeral Directors Examining Board.

After Marjorie Betz married Erin Poole in 1945, she too joined the business. Marge Poole was licensed as a funeral director in 1948.

In 1959, the couple took over management of the funeral home.

Their youngest son Patrick received his license and joined the family business in 1984. He earned his bachelor's degree in mortuary science in 1980 from the University of Minnesota.

Patrick Poole married Lisa Wunsch, and like his parents and grandparents, they raised their family while living above the funeral home.

In 1992, Kristen Andrews became the first non-Poole to serve as a funeral director at the business.

“Up to this time, the business has had seven full-time employees, and Kristen is the only one who has not been a family member,” Poole said.

He said his four children are too young to decide whether they want to continue in the family business.

Poole said he has no regrets in following his chosen profession. He is the only one of his siblings who works in the funeral business.

“I guess I am the only one who stayed on the farm,” he said. “There is something about being able to provide caring and service to the people in the community you grew up in.”

As for growing up above a funeral parlor, it never posed a problem for young Poole. The Wisconsin Street building was the only home he knew as a child.

“When I was growing up, there were a lot of shop owners in downtown Port who lived above their business,” he recalled.

“We would come and go on opposite ends of the building, so it was never really an issue.”

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To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Poole Funeral Home, a community celebration is planned from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday, June 29.

The event will feature a free pig roast, and entertainment by Vinyl Groove and Jer-Bear the Clown

Historic items will be on display, including a cast iron casket and memorial jewelry. A ceremony to open a time capsule ceremony is planned to kick off the celebration.