

From a Few Determined People...

A Seventy Year History of People's Memorial Association

People who today say "I just want simple cremation" or "bury me in a plain casket," owe a great deal of gratitude to the visionary founders of People's Memorial Association (PMA). It was in Seattle at the end of the great depression that small group of citizens, outraged by the high prices and high pressure sales tactics of the funeral industry, banded together to form PMA. That was the beginning of the funeral consumer movement and sparked significant changes in the succeeding years as to how Americans handle their final arrangements.

An outspoken spiritual leader, named Rev. Fred Shorter from the Church of the People in Seattle's University District rallied other like-minded citizens together to create an alternative. This was at the height of the cooperative movement and several of the early members of PMA were also involved in the formation of Group Health Cooperative.

Prevailing funeral customs stressed embalming, display of the body and burial in a costly casket. The founders of PMA felt these practices ostentatious and emphasizing the material rather than spiritual aspects of death. They advocated for the choice of cremation and memorial services without the body present as a far more economical option. Their aim was to present a meaningful and beautiful service at a fraction of the cost.

On January 12, 1939, the People's Memorial Association was formally organized. The founders adopted by-laws and elected a board of trustees to oversee Association affairs. The non-profit organization would provide cremations and would promote the holding of memorial services without the body. A one-time membership fee would be required.

Finding a Funeral Home

The biggest problem facing the newborn cooperative was finding a mortuary willing to do business with it. Fortunately, James C. Bleitz, president of a funeral home at the foot of Queen Anne Hill, had an open mind and a strong sense of business integrity. As he later wrote of his arrangement with PMA:

"The proposal was unusual. It meant working out a new type of service. A considerable amount of adverse criticism on the part of other morticians had been aroused. But ours is an old firm, dating back to 1904, and we believe that we are here to provide people with what they want. It was in the spirit of never turning anyone away that we decided to go with PMA."

Memorial Societies such as PMA remained controversial for many years. At one point, People's Memorial was even accused of being part of the communist movement! Even Bleitz was wary of having his name publicly associated with a reformist organization. Not until 1957 was there a written contract between his funeral home and the PMA.

But interest in PMA's ideals increased in the religious community after several Seattle-area ministers preached sermons decrying the mounting commercialization of the funeral industry. The Association got a big boost among the general public from a laudatory column in the *Seattle Times* in 1958. Recognizing the value of publicity, the PMA board started advertising in Seattle papers. The membership grew rapidly, increasing from 650 in 1952 to over 7,000 in 1960.

Membership soars in the 1960s

In the 1960s, PMA membership soared to 30,000 as the group benefited from a national reform movement. The federal government launched investigations into funeral industry practices, CBS-TV broadcast an hour-long special report and popular publications ran a series of hard-hitting exposes. Especially influential was the best-selling book *The American Way of Death* by Jessica Mitford. The author found her relatives in England had no such elaborate funeral practices and she was angered by seeing a family in her neighborhood nearly ruined financially by a funeral.

Ms. Mitford found that the average cost of a conventional service and casket, plus cemetery and vault amounted to ten times what memorial societies typically charged for their services. Mitford and others explained that what Americans regarded as the "traditional" funeral was in fact a relatively recent development. Generally since the Civil War, a whole funeral industry arose and marketed its practices as an essential feature of "the American Way."

Alternatives, however, began to emerge and have now gained widespread acceptance. Now over 100 memorial associations exist in the United States, following in the footsteps of PMA. In 1962, PMA and its affiliates were successful in forming a national organization to be a unifying force and a voice on the federal level. That organization is now called the Funeral Consumer's Alliance (FCA). In the early 1980's FCA was instrumental getting the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to adopt a set of standards for funeral home pricing called The Funeral Rule. These standards were revolutionary in enabling consumers to get accurate price information from funeral homes.

Cremation has continued to become increasingly common, used for 30 percent of all deaths in the U.S. The practice is even more prevalent in the West. Washington state has the third highest rate of cremation in the country now at 67%.

Industry changes in the 1990's

With the growing popularity of cremation, PMA saw its membership numbers reach 100,000 in 1993, presenting the milestone honorary membership to then Governor Mike Lowry. Corporate consolidation resulted in many independent funeral homes being purchased by large corporations during the nineties. This included the sale of Bleitz Funeral Home to Service Corporation International (SCI) in 1995. Another corporation, Loewen Group (later named Alderwoods), also purchased several funeral homes in the state. In 1999 a record 7,000 new members joined People's Memorial Association. Bleitz Funeral Home in Seattle served PMA members throughout Western Washington.

Competitive Changes in the New Millennium

Up to this time, People's Memorial Association was the primary provider of simple, economical cremation in Western Washington through its contract with Bleitz Funeral Home. However with the growing popularity of cremation, other low-cost cremation providers began to open their doors around the area. Consumers demanded more convenience. At the same time, corporate funeral homes began drastically increasing their price for cremation, so that their profit margin would be the same whether a family chose cremation or burial.

In January of 2004, People's Memorial opened a new office in the Northgate area of Seattle, with expanded space to better serve its members. That same year, PMA absorbed a sister organization, the Memorial Society of Central Washington, extending its service area east of the Cascades. In 2005 People's Memorial Association negotiated a new funeral home contract which resulted in a total of 14 funeral homes in western and central Washington—a far cry from the original one location at Bleitz which had served the organization for most of its history. On March 20, 2006 Service Corporation International, the parent corporation for Bleitz canceled their contract with

PMA, stating that they were unable to make enough money off of our members. That ended a more than 60-year relationship between People's Memorial Association and Bleitz funeral home.

PMA quickly negotiated a new contract with Alderwoods and other providers to offer 5 locations in King County and a total of 14 in Washington state. A year later, Service Corporation International purchased Alderwoods. Despite the fact that the largest funeral home corporation in the world was purchasing the second largest, the FTC under the Bush Administration denied that there would be any monopolistic impact on the industry. SCI then demanded a 65% price increase on cremation which the PMA board refused. SCI promptly canceled their contract with PMA regarding 12 former Alderwoods funeral homes.

Opening a Cooperative Funeral Home

Leary of corporate funeral homes, the members of People's Memorial Association voted at their annual meeting on April 12, 2007 to open a cooperative funeral home in Seattle, which would be owned by the members of People's Memorial Association. In a matter of 7 weeks, the board and staff were able to get the cooperative funeral home incorporated and licensed as a funeral home, office space leased, furniture and equipment purchased, staff hired and trained. People's Memorial Funeral Cooperative opened its doors on June 11, 2007 on Seattle's Capitol Hill, sharing a suite with the membership office of People's Memorial Association. In addition, PMA contracted with 12 other independent, family-owned funeral homes in Western and Central Washington. For the first time, PMA also contracted with a funeral service that specializes in home funerals, A Sacred Moment.

Serving all of Washington State

In the spring of 2009, the Spokane Memorial Association will merge with People's Memorial, expanding the service area of PMA to cover the entire state of Washington. In addition, there are now more than 20 funeral home locations across the state, serving members of People's Memorial.

People's Memorial Today

The People's Memorial Association, a 501(c)(4) non-profit continues to thrive as America's oldest and largest funeral consumer organization, having enrolled over 180,000 members since its inception. No longer exclusively a cremation society, the association offers a full range of services. It has remained a vocal advocate of funeral reform.

The PMA played a key role in changing Washington law to place the funeral industry under the state's Consumer Protection Act and helped pass another law legalizing the scattering of ashes of the deceased. In the 2005 legislative session, PMA succeeded at protecting the rights of families to care for their own dead without the services of a funeral director. In 2007, PMA successfully advocated for the right of religious and cultural minorities to have up to 24 hours to perform religious or cultural rituals with an unembalmed, unrefrigerated body.

The PMA Education Fund, a 501(c)(3) non-profit was formed in 2006 to finance the consumer educational efforts of People's Memorial. This includes educational brochures on a wide variety of end-of-life topics as well as a bi-annual price survey of funeral home prices, to enable consumers to make informed choices regarding final disposition. In addition, the PMA Education Fund sponsors educational seminars for the general public on topics such as home funerals and green burial.

People's Memorial Association still fulfills the aim of the forward thinking people who founded it some 70 years ago: to provide simple yet dignified cremation or burial options and to ensure that one's final journey is not the most expensive ride one takes.