

## Funeral Homes of Phelps County

by Patti Simpson

This year, 2009, will mark the 100th anniversary for the Nelson-Bauer Funeral Home here in Holdrege. This occasion made me wonder just how many different Phelps county funeral homes had there been? When I began my search, I thought the list would be short, but it turns out, in fact, there have been several.

When the first white settlers came to Phelps county in the 1870s, there were no funeral homes. Families had to take care of their own. The deceased were placed in homemade caskets and usually displayed in the family parlor until the time of the funeral. In the 1880s that began to change.

Businessmen opened local furniture stores that supplied ready-made caskets to families. It is believed that the first furniture store of this type was probably located in the town of Phelps Center, Phelps county's original county seat. Then the railroad came through and the city of Holdrege was born in 1883. Many businessmen, probably including those in the furniture/casket



Photo of the C.A. Baker Funeral Home hearse at Otto Johnson's Mother's funeral in 1913. Mr. Baker is next to the hearse and Clair Baker is the driver. Pall bearers were Wm. Roos, Gust Gustafson, Leonard Gustafson and Claus Gustafson. Photo courtesy of the Donald O. Lindgren Genealogy Library at the Nebraska Prairie Museum.

business, literally picked up their belongings and moved from Phelps Center to Holdrege.

## Bertrand Funeral Homes

In Bertrand, the firm of Samuelson & Sandstrom Furniture and Undertaking was established in 1892. Andrew John (A. J.) Sandstrom purchased Mr. Samuelson's interest in the business and changed the name to the Sandstrom Funeral Home. A. J. Sandstrom's brother, August Sandstrom joined his brother in the business in 1905. A. J. Sandstrom's son, Carl Sandstrom joined firm in 1927. This business was ran by the Sandstrom family until 1980 when it was purchased by the Nelson-Harris Funeral Home in Holdrege.

## Holdrege Funeral Homes

The first undertaking business in Holdrege is unknown, but from researching old newspaper ads and obituaries there were at least two in Holdrege in 1886.

John C. Rundstrom opened Rundstrom Furniture and Undertaking business in 1886. Mr. Rundstrom's obituary noted that he was involved in the business until he and his family moved to Idaho in 1911. The firm must have merged prior to 1890 because it was called Rundstrom & Johnson Furniture and Undertakers in the 1890 and 1891 Gazetteer.

According to his obituary, James E. Cooper and his brother also opened Cooper Brothers Furniture and Undertaker Supplies in Holdrege in 1886. James Cooper sold the business and moved away for two years to Colorado in about 1896 and then returned to Holdrege in 1898-1899. At that time, he and Mr. Oscar Hopkins purchased the store of A. S. Watson

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This is a photo of the C. A. Baker Funeral Home's hearse. Photo courtesy of the Donald O. Lindgren Genealogy Library at the Nebraska Prairie Museum.

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Furniture and Undertaking. Then, a few months before Mr. Cooper's death in 1900, Mr. Hopkins retired from the business. At that time, Mr. Cooper was assisted in the business by his son, Will Cooper and the business was known as J. E. Cooper & Son Furniture and Undertaking.

In March 1903 the Rundstrom & Johnson business listed above combined with the Cooper business and Rundstrom & Cooper Furniture and Undertaking was established. This new business may have lasted until Mr. Rundstrom moved to Idaho in 1911. It is unknown if he sold his business before moving to Idaho.

Another early funeral home was the Jackson & Son Furniture and Embalmers found in a September 1905 advertisement. There is nothing more known about this firm.

In 1896, a well known Holdrege businessman and entrepreneur, Morten Johnson purchased a furniture store in Holdrege, which he persuaded Rudolph Godfrey Borchert to operate. It was known as the Johnson & Borchert Furniture and Undertaking Co. This firm existed from 1896 to 1907, when it was

then purchased by Clifford A. Baker and became the C. A. Baker Funeral Home.

The C. A. Baker Funeral Home was located at 718 East Avenue which is the current home of Phil and Pam Soreide. From 1908-1910 he also sold furniture at 320-322 East Avenue, the current location of Bruce Furniture. In 1947, Clifford Baker sold the funeral home business to Mr. Wayne Harris of Holdrege. Mr. Harris then re-established the business at the corner of Fourth and Burlington Streets and it became known as the Harris Funeral Home.

Another Holdrege funeral home was A. E. Roach Furniture and Undertaking. Originally located at 317 West Avenue, this firm was established sometime prior to 1907. Then in 1908, Carl S. Nelson stopped in Holdrege on his way to Seattle, Washington. He came to town on a Saturday evening and had a lay-over until the next train departed for the west. Mr. Nelson stopped in front of A. S. Roach Furniture and Undertaking and engaged the proprietor in a conversation. He told Mr. Roach that he had learned the undertaking business and obtained a state license while working in Osceola, Nebraska and he that he planned to remain in the same work when he arrived on the West Coast. Mr. Roach offered to sell a part interest in his business, and the firm of Roach & Nelson Furniture and Undertaking was established in early 1909.



In 1910, Mr. F. D. Swanson purchased Mr. Roach's interest in the business and the name changed to Nelson & Swanson Furniture and Undertaking. It was at this time that the business

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moved to the Masonic Temple Building at 413 West Avenue where The Connection is currently operating their business. Then in 1920, Carl S. Nelson became the sole proprietor of the business and the name changed to C. S. Nelson Furniture and Undertaking.

In 1931, the second generation of the Nelson family, Clarence S. Nelson entered the business. It was at this time that the funeral home split from the furniture business. The Nelson Funeral Home then moved to 621 East Avenue where Das Gasthaus (The Guest House) is currently located. It remained there until 1966. In 1943 the furniture part of the Nelson business moved from 413 West Avenue to 322 East Avenue where the Bruce Furniture store is now located.

Keith B. Nelson joined the family business in 1963. In 1966, the Nelson Funeral Home purchased the

Harris Funeral Home located at 401 Burlington Street and moved into the Harris building establishing the Nelson-Harris Funeral Home. This was now the only funeral home in Holdrege.

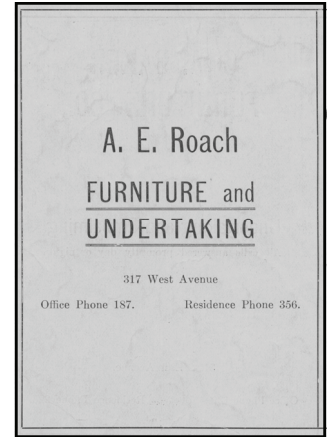
In 1977 the Nelson-Harris Funeral Home purchased the Mitchell Funeral Home from George Mitchell in Oxford, Harlan County, Nebraska and renamed this branch office the Mitchell-Nelson Funeral Home.

In 1980 the Nelson-Harris Funeral Home purchased the Sandstrom Funeral Home in Bertrand and kept the Sandstrom Funeral Home name for this branch office.

In 1981 the Nelson-Harris Funeral Home then purchased the Mitchell Funeral Home in Orleans, Harlan County, Nebraska and also kept the Mitchell Funeral Home name for this branch office.

In 1998, Lexington natives, Ryan L. Bauer and his wife, Jody relocated to Holdrege to began working with the Nelson's and assumed management in January of 1999 at which time the Nelson family sold the business to The Keystone Group. In 2004, the Bauer's acquired ownership of the Nelson-Harris Funeral Home and the associated branches in Bertrand, Oxford and Orleans and have continued to extend the same unsurpassed service that south central Nebraska has grown accustomed to.

Ryan and Jody renamed the funeral home in Holdrege to Nelson-Bauer Funeral Home to reflect the new ownership as well as holding on to the long community tradition of the Bauer's predecessors. Besides the main location in Holdrege, the Nelson-Bauer Fu-



This is a photo of 718 East Avenue where the C.A. Baker Funeral Home was located. Photo courtesy of the Donald O. Lindgren Genealogy Library at the Nebraska Prairie Museum.

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This is an early photo of the residence at 401 Burlington Street, later known as the Harris Funeral Home. Photo courtesy of the Donald O. Lindgren Genealogy Library at the Nebraska Prairie Museum.

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neral Homes, Inc. continue to operate the Sandstrom Funeral Home in Bertrand, the Mitchell-Nelson-Bauer Funeral Home in Oxford, and the Mitchell Funeral Home in Orleans as a vital part of their business.

The Bauer's continue to offer the very best care for families and all the guidance and support needed during the most difficult time of our lives. According to their website, their mission is, "When hearts are

heavy we will assist your family by showing tender care and encouragement in caring out your wishes and planning a personalized and memorable tribute to celebrate your loved one's life."

From horse drawn funeral coaches to reading obituaries on the internet, a lot has changed over the last 100 years. It makes me wonder - what will the next 100 years bring?

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Current photo of the Nelson-Bauer Funeral Home located at 401 Burlington Street in Holdrege.