



Gone to the Grave: Burial Customs of the Arkansas Ozarks, 1850-1950

Abby Burnett

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Before there was a death care industry where professional funeral directors offered embalming and other services, residents of the Arkansas Ozarks--and, for that matter, people throughout the South--buried their own dead. Every part of the complicated, labor-intensive process was handled within the deceased's community. This process included preparation of the body for burial, making a wooden coffin, digging the grave, and overseeing the burial ceremony, as well as observing a wide variety of customs and superstitions.

These traditions, especially in rural communities, remained the norm up through the end of World War II, after which a variety of factors, primarily the loss of manpower and the rise of the funeral industry, brought about the end of most customs.

Gone to the Grave, a meticulous autopsy of this now vanished way of life and death, documents mourning and practical rituals through interviews, diaries and reminiscences, obituaries, and a wide variety of other sources. Abby Burnett covers attempts to stave off death; passings that, for various reasons, could not be mourned according to tradition; factors contributing to high maternal and infant mortality; and the ways in which loss was expressed through obituaries and epitaphs. A concluding chapter examines early undertaking practices and the many angles funeral industry professionals worked to convince the public of the need for their services.

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