



Lifetimes of Care

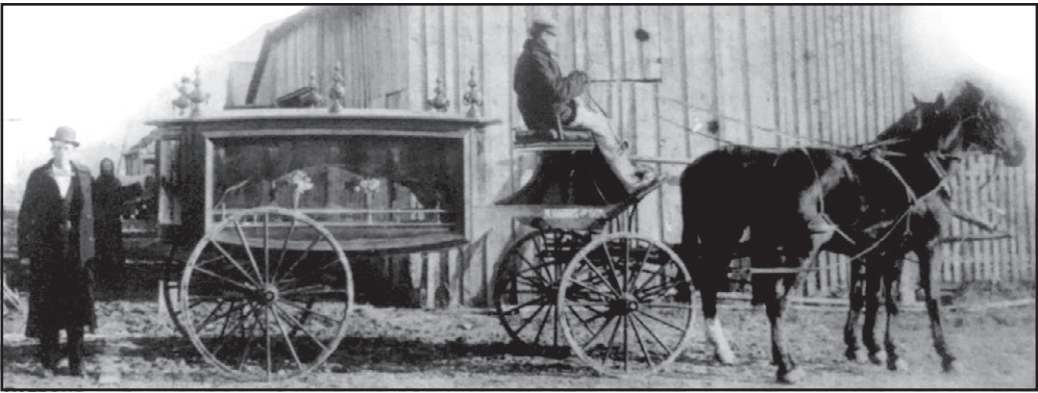
In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant leads a nation still healing from the Civil War, a nation that has not yet witnessed the invention of the electric light or telephone. It was time before the historic events of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday gunfighting at the O.K. Corral and General Custer making his last stand at Little Big Horn.

Although we feel far removed from a time so long ago, 1870 held one milestone which provides continuity for us today here in Pike County. As was the custom of the day, a young cabinet maker named Nick Harris responded to a growing need in the Otwell community by building coffins and offering the service of a new profession emerging in America: the undertaker, one who undertakes care of the dead to relieve the burden of grieving families.



Nick Harris

Declining health would eventually bring Nick to close the business and retire in 1912, but he took assurance knowing his son Orace would continue providing services for the people of Otwell. Nick Harris died in 1927, and is buried at Otwell Cemetery with his wife Martha, son Ovid, daughters Grace and Essie Harris, Flora Bell Scraper, and Fay Ayers. Although Harris funeral home presently resides in Petersburg, we proudly remember and share our Otwell origins.



Above: Nick Harris with his horse-drawn funeral coach.

Below: An advertisement for N. Harris & Son from approximately 1899.

N. Harris & Son
DEALERS IN
FURNITURE
Funeral Supplies of all kinds
Hearse Free to all Funerals.
We keep a full line of white and black caskets, robes, slippers, and all funeral supplies. Embalming and taking care of the dead a specialty. We save you from 15 to 20 percent on all undertaking goods.
Call and see us for anything in our line of business. Cumberland Telephone in office.
OTWELL, INDIANA.



Above: Three generations of Harris undertakers are pictured in front of the newly-purchased home of O.D. & Sons in 1922. Left to right: Orace, Nick, Lee and Owen.

Right: An ad from 1901 when Orace Harris and George Scraper established Scraper & Harris Undertakers and Furniture.

Scraper & Harris...
Undertakers
and Dealers in
Furniture.
Everything new and of the latest styles. We keep a full line of all grades of furniture.
We make a specialty of embalming the dead and we have in stock a full line of funeral supplies.
Call and see us at the old
Jackson & Patterson stand,
Lower Main-st.,
PETERSBURG, - - IND.

In 1900, Orace D. Harris moved his family to Petersburg. Well-trained and experienced under the watchful eye of his father, Orace purposed to build upon Nick's care of the Otwell community by extending the family trade to include the North section of Pike County.

After arriving in Petersburg, the 25 year old Orace first sought to fulfill a strong sense of civic duty instilled in him while working alongside his father, and responded by seeking the Democratic nomination for Pike County Coroner. Following the party nomination, he went on to win the election in November of 1900.



Orace D. Harris

Immediately after assuming office, Orace partnered with George Scraper of Petersburg to establish Scraper & Harris Undertakers and Furniture on Main Street on January 11, 1901. Over the next few years, he shared the partnership with several other people.

In 1915, Fred Brenton and Orace separated the business, with Fred assuming the furniture trade. Because of a trend in the United States around the turn of the century, funerals and wakes had moved out of the home and into formal funeral parlors. Leaving behind his strong furniture-making roots, Orace focused his attention solely on funeral directing, as undertaking was now being called.

With sons Owen and Lee, Orace established his business with the name it still carries today, O.D. Harris & Sons. In 1922, Orace purchased a large home at the corner of 7th and Walnut, knowing it would provide greater accommodations and dignity for the families under his care, more so than the antiquated Main Street establishments of the past.

Following years of service and dedication to the community as both the Undertaker and county Coroner, Orace died in 1941, and was the first of the Harris family to be buried at Walnut Hills Cemetery in Petersburg.



Harris
FUNERAL HOMES
SINCE 1870

A History of Caring



Stiffy Harris with their first motorized funeral coach in 1917

Although unknown by his given name of Owen, many people today that were alive during his lifetime still recall fond memories of the seemingly larger-than-life man affectionately known as Stiffy Harris. If all tales be known, it would take volumes to record the storied experiences of his life, but it was through the life and service of Stiffy Harris that O.D. Harris & Sons truly established the identity of the Harris family and made the funeral home what it is today.

In 1915, local newspapers reported how the then 17-year-old was badly scalded by steam used in bottle sterilization while working at a local dairy, nearly losing the sight of his left eye. Following the accident, Orace decided it was time to bring his son into the family trade to begin his apprenticeship, just as Orace had done years ago alongside his father. In 1920, Stiffy completed his schooling at the Askin College of Embalming in Indianapolis, and was reported to be “a full-fledged and legal-



Stiffy Harris, 1920 and later in life

ly-qualified undertaker and embalmer.” While the year of 1922 would mark the foundation of O.D. Harris & Sons in the present location, it also stood to be the year beginning a storied career of this man’s service.

Like his father before him, young Stiffy Harris sought to fulfill a civic duty to the community, one which extended above and beyond the funeral trade. In 1922, the 23-year-old sought and won nomination on the Democratic ticket for Coroner, reportedly the youngest on the local ballot for any office. He would go on to win the general election, and so began his life of civil service that spanned 7 terms in the office. Although the demands of the office, in addition to the demands and countless hours of the funeral home, would presumably reduce the disposition of a man to something far less than favorable, the exact opposite is true. Memories shared by folks that remembered and knew Stiffy all share similar descriptive words: kind, generous, outgoing and personable. The old adage “a friend in need is a friend indeed” would certainly have applied, as so many stories involve his willingness and desire to help folks he knew had fallen on hard times. It was this sentiment, this love and concern of his community, that he would also pass on to his son and successor, a young man named Robert D. Harris.

Spending 47 years in funeral service and 28 years as Coroner ultimately took its toll on Stiffy, and he died in 1962 at the age of 64. His younger brother, Lee, would assume leadership of the family trade for the next several years, but with no children of his own, this 3rd generation of Harris undertakers would eventually fulfill a tradition of fathers and sons in this family business.



Stiffy enjoyed his pursuits in hunting with his trusty dog.



Widely sought after by antique auto collectors nationwide, the 1959 Cadillac Eureka Hearse that Stiffy bought brand new at a funeral director’s convention is now almost regarded as a family member, hence her nickname of “Aunt Maude.”

GRETCHEN HARRIS, 5TH GENERATION • NICK HARRIS HENSON, 6TH GENERATION



Harris
FUNERAL HOMES
SINCE 1870

Pioneering Spirit

In 1904, newspapers throughout the state, as far away as Muncie, reported of a “pretty young lady” that had recently completed her training at the Myers School of Embalming in Indianapolis. Miss Grace Harris, the daughter of founder Nick Harris and sister to Orace, became the first “lady embalmer” in the southern part of Indiana, practicing the craft alongside her father at his Otwell establishment.

Although her career would end in 1912 with Nick’s retirement and her assuming the care of her aging parents, her service is remembered. The presence of females in funeral service as licensed embalmers and funeral directors did not become prevalent until the latter 20th century, moving them from their previously relegated positions of secretaries, housekeepers and greeters. The “lady embalmers” and funeral directors practicing in the State of Indiana owe a great debt of gratitude to Miss Grace, a woman of determination and blessed with the progressive spirit of her father.



**Miss Grace Harris upon
her graduation from
embalming school in 1904.**

Gretchen Harris, 5th generation undertaker, takes great pride in knowing her family didn’t begrudgingly relent to the concept of females entering licensed funeral work as most funeral homes did, because the Harris family helped pioneer it. A tip of the hat to you, Miss Grace.



**The father/daughter team of Bob and Gretchen Harris began in 2003,
just as Nick and Grace had done 99 years prior.**

GRETCHEN HARRIS, 5TH GENERATION UNDERTAKER



Memories & History

History is defined as being events of the past, but people oftentimes feel reluctant to accept their personal memories as being deemed historical, and we are no different. It is with that sentiment our story continues with the 4th generation of undertakers, our beloved Robert Dillon “Bob” Harris.

Like his predecessors, Bob felt a strong sense of duty from an early age; a duty once described by society as the qualities for being a good citizen. Growing up, he was always present



Bob Harris took great pride in his Navy service.

for Sunday worship with his family. Throughout his schooling, his only reported absence in any year was on the day his mother accompanied the 17-year-old to give parental consent for his enlistment in the U.S. Navy. Bob served during the Korean War aboard the USS Taussig until his discharge from service in 1956. Upon returning home, his first order of business was to marry a young lady from Odon named Sondra “Sonnie” Seneff. Following the guidelines set forth by the profession at that time, the newlywed Bob began his year of apprenticeship at the funeral home under the guidance of Stiffy and his Uncle Lee. The following year, he entered mortuary school in Indianapolis,

traveling back and forth (on their occasional times home) with fellow classmates and close friends Prentice Stafford and Jerry Ziemer, also the son of an Evansville funeral home owner.



Newlyweds Bob and Sonnie with Bill Harris in 1956.



The young coroner at work following a death in the White River.

Following graduation, Bob returned to Petersburg as a licensed undertaker. In 1960, as Stiffy was completing his 7th term as Coroner, he decided it was time to pass the torch. Bob won the election that year and so began his many years of civil service. Bob spent 6 decades serving the Pike County community through the funeral home and several terms as Coroner.

In March of 2015, Bob attended the visitation and service of his beloved brother, Rev. William “Bill” Harris. Already in declining health, his brother Bill’s service would mark the last time Bob was at Harris Funeral Home until his death on January 25, 2018.



Bob, Sonnie and Bill in 2012

As folks filed past the casket paying their final respects to Bob at the conclusion of his funeral, fellow funeral director and lifelong friend Prentice Stafford tearfully stated “I just lost the best friend I ever had.” In many ways, that same sentiment could be shared by the community and people of Pike County. Always quick with a smile and handshake on any day that didn’t call for an empathetic touch and words of consolation, Bob was a friend of all. As undertaker, Coroner, community leader, businessman and citizen, it could be said that he was the best friend Pike County ever had. For us, we also remember him as husband, father, grandfather, historian and mentor. As with the previous generations of Harris undertakers and their successors, we are honored to share Bob’s love for his community, exemplified by his dedication and service to Pike County.

At the funeral home, the funeral director scheduled to be notified on nights and weekends of deaths or other after-hours calls to the funeral home is said to “have the phones,” which means being ready to leave home anytime at a moment’s notice. These are the times that account for many lost hours of sleep and countless family events in an undertaker’s life. Standing by Bob’s grave at the cemetery, the moment was truly bittersweet when we said to ourselves, “We’ve got the phones, Bob. It’s time for you to rest.”



Bob and Prentice Stafford atop the old coach.



The Harris tradition is passed down through the generations: Bob with a young Nick Harris Henson.