Custom Built Coffins

In most rural communities there are usually some farmers, men of more than ordinary genius and initiative, who develop interesting and profitable avocations. The Miller family, living about sixteen miles southwest of Iowa City, Iowa, possessed these characteristics.

Benedict Miller, imbued with the pioneer spirit of his ancestors in Pennsylvania and Maryland, moved from Ohio to Iowa in 1850. He was born in Maryland on May 20, 1815, and his wife, Barbara Gingerich, was born in Waldeck, Germany, in 1816. They settled near relatives along Deer Creek in Washington Township of Johnson County. There Benedict not only managed a large farm but also tailored the clothes for his Amish neighbors and sawed the lumber for their buildings. His sawmill, driven by the water of Deer Creek, was an important community center for many years.

Benedict Miller's sons owned their farms and, like their father, found avocations that enabled them to serve their neighbors. Daniel became widely known as a sawyer and thresher. A younger son, John, owned a blacksmith and ma-
chine shop which drew patrons from near and far. The grandsons and great grandsons have continued the family tradition of specialization. Among them are sawyers, cabinet makers, a well driller, a miller, two dentists, several physicians, and four doctors of philosophy.

Perhaps none of Benedict's sons occupied a more important place in the community than did Jacob, for it was he who made the coffins in which his neighbors were buried. He first began this service as a side line in his regular wood-working shop. In the early days his coffins were neither expensive nor elaborate. The first ones were usually made of solid walnut and occasionally of cherry wood. Bleached muslin without padding was used for lining. There were no handles on the early models as they were carried with the aid of wooden bars. Later, when the demands for simplicity were no longer so exacting, black handles were added.

The average price of a coffin at first was eleven dollars; later it went up to fifteen. After Jacob's son, Lewis J. Miller, took over the business, he charged thirty dollars for a coffin and ten dollars for a "rough box" or vault made of one-inch lumber. Finally, the price became fixed at forty dollars for the casket and twenty-five for the rough box.
In those early days bodies were not embalmed and so the coffin had to be built with the greatest possible speed. Usually boards of different lengths had been smoothed so that it was possible to complete the casket in a day. By the next morning, the varnish having dried, the casket would be loaded on a spring wagon, covered, and delivered to the home where the dead body lay.

At first the one who came to order a coffin brought with him a measuring stick cut the exact length of the corpse. One time a rider, upon reaching Miller’s residence, was very much perturbed because the mule he rode had just bitten off the end of the stick. In the Miller shop there are at present nearly fifty of these measuring sticks. On many of them information has been written. One stick, for example, is marked “Jerry Kauffman wife July 20, 1880 10 23 7½ 13 plenty high 12 will do.” The stick was five feet six inches long. The coffin evidently was to have a head clearance of ten inches, widening out to twenty-three inches at the elbows and then tapering down to seven and one-half inches at the foot end. Later, strings instead of sticks were brought as measures of the corpses.

When, in 1940, the descendants of Joseph J. Swartzendruber met in reunion, the measuring
stick for their ancestor’s coffin was shown. A half dozen grandsons then compared their height to that of the stick and discovered that all of them varied only slightly from the height of their grandfather.

As the years went by, the coffins lost some of their earlier simplicity. The rough boxes became heavier; one was ordered lined with tin to keep out the groundhogs. This request was prompted, no doubt, by the knowledge that bits of walnut wood had been carried to the surface of the ground from the dens of the groundhogs which were plentiful in the Lower Deer Creek Cemetery. The trustees of the church finally hired a veteran trapper and hunter, Barney Whetstine of Was-sonville, to trap and shoot all the groundhogs in the neighborhood of the cemetery.

Jacob Miller made and sold over three hundred coffins and his son, Lewis, has made 144 to date. But the neighbors now very seldom purchase homemade caskets. Occasionally an old man places his order for his own coffin, but his family generally refuses to use it. Dr. Glen R. Miller, son of Lewis J., and the source of much of the material in this story, related that one such individual recently ordered his coffin and then declared, “And I’ll see to it that they use it!”

In the Amish community between Sharon
Center and Kalona, Iowa, homemade caskets are still used. On funeral days one can see a light wagon carrying a covered coffin proceeding down the road toward the cemetery. Following the wagon will be the many buggies of the relatives and friends who at the cemetery will pay their last respects to the departed one.

Melvin Gingerich