

Gaining in Acceptance

Cremation Figures Climbing Steadily

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Cremation. It's a practice that is gaining in acceptance, but is still largely misunderstood.

Nationwide, 10 of every 100 people now choose cremation, a percentage that has doubled in the last decade. In some parts of California, the percentage is as high as 50 percent.

The numbers are climbing steadily, but much of the information that is circulated about the process is still false and misleading.

During a recent visit to Swan Point Cemetery in Providence, the superintendent, James P. Black, discussed cremation, which began in this country in 1876.

Simply put, cremation is the heating process that reduces human beings to recognizable bone fragments.

Black, who is also president of the Cremation Association of North America, stresses that a person is reduced to bone fragments, or calcium. There are no ashes after cremation,

he said.

In fact, a cremationist never uses the word "ashes." What is left are cremated remains, or "cremains."

Walking through the crematory, one of two in Rhode Island and 22 in New England, Black says anyone who is considering cremation can visit Swan Point for information.

"We're completely open in what we show," he says. "We show them precisely what they can expect."

In the next room are two closed coffins, but apparently little else. Then, Black opens a double door and reveals one of three cremation chambers. The heavy metal door to the chamber is shut tight, and for good reason — it is being used.

"We take people through here all the time, and they never know what's happening," Black says.

Turning to the coffins, he explains that most bodies are cremated in a wood casket.

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A casket is not necessary, but some type of rigid, combustible container is required. This allows for easy handling, assures protection to the health and safety of the operator, provides proper covering for the remains, and meets standards for respect and dignity.

Black also said that a body doesn't have to be embalmed before cremation, but most are.

The state of Rhode Island requires a 24-hour wait between death and cremation, he said, so a medical examiner's certificate can be obtained. Because of this regulation, a funeral director has to make the necessary arrangements.

Next, Black walks into the control room, where one of the chambers has just been cleaned. Raymond A. Valentine, the cremationist, shows us a pile of cremains. It is white, with recognizable bone fragments. There are no ashes.

The cremains are later taken to another room and pounded to the consistency of rock salt, Black says. The cremains weigh between four and 10 pounds, depending on the size of the person.

Still in the control room, Black opens one of the cremation chambers while it is working. Looking into the chamber, we see the flames burning peacefully inside. There is no odor, and no noise.

The temperature in the chamber pushes over 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, and the heat actually does most of the work. Most of the body is made of liquids, Black says, so a lot of it simply evaporates.

It takes about two hours to consume a body totally. Since the body will disintegrate in the ground eventually, Black likes to say that a crematory does in two hours what it takes

nature several years to complete.

After cremation, the remains are put in a bronze, marble, wooden or ceramic urn. The cremains can also be put in a box and shipped anywhere in the country, or overseas.

Most urns are then buried, usually in a family lot at Swan Point or elsewhere. The urns can also be buried in an "urn garden," a parcel of land set aside solely for cremains.

Or, an urn can be placed in a columbarium, a collection of wall "niches," or enclosed shelves. The word "columbarium" dates to Roman times and means "House of Doves," according to Black.

The niche is covered by a glass, marble, or bronze plaque bearing the name of the deceased. Larger niches are also available so members of the same family can be placed together.

Some people prefer not to memorialize the remains in any way and just "scatter" them. Many purists scatter cremains over water, or in the mountains, Black said, but this practice is discouraged.

"What they're losing is the lack of a name site ... There is no record for future generations," he says.

In 1979 Swan Point established an arboretum specifically for the scattering of remains. The area, called Memorial Grove, is marked by a 55-ton rock, a megalith.

There are also rocks embedded in the ground, carved with the names of people who have been scattered there. "It means something for somebody to have a specific spot where they can think of a person who is gone," Black said.

There were between 700 and 800 cremations last year at Swan Point, a well landscaped 200-acre cemetery on Providence's East Side. The cemetery, which still has 30 acres of woodland, is located on Blackstone Boulevard, and borders the Seekonk River.

Black said people who prefer cremation can't be stereotyped, but strong religious faith is still the strongest deterrent. Most major religions permit cremation, and the Roman Catholic Church has allowed it since 1964, although many people are still unaware of this fact.

Scholarly or well-educated people tend to favor cremation, Black said. Probably because they recognize that, as Black says, "cremation is only a step in the memorialization process," and not a substitute for it.

People who are cremated are practical people, Black says. "The whole ecology idea has had its effect. People are conscious about using space ... The cleanliness of the cremation process is probably the best way to summarize it."