
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 40 MARCH 2002 NUMBER 1

VICTORIAN MOURNING CUSTOMS

By Sharon Atkins



WOMEN & CHILDREN IN MOURNING

Source: Unknown

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Victorian mourning customs were very different from today's practices and were much more formalized. Like many aspects of Victorian life, proper etiquette was essential. Sharon Atkins shares her knowledge and interest in funeral and mourning customs with us. Those of you who attended the mock funeral of at Tinker Cottage last fall saw Sharon playing the part of the grieving widow. She also played the part of the widow Mrs. Sadewater at the Greenwood Cemetery walk last September.

The author, Sharon Atkins, a native of Rockford, has made her home in Roscoe for the past twenty years. She and her husband, Robert have been married for 26 years. They have two children, Ryan, 24 of Chicago and Heather, 22 of Roscoe. Sharon and Robert are both on the Board of Directors of Rockford Historical Society and are members of the Swedish Historical Society. Sharon has been doing genealogical research for over 20 years and has taught classes on the subject.

WE NEED YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 968-5055.

Thomas Powers, Editor

TRIP TO DELAFIELD, WISCONSIN BE SURE TO PUT IT ON YOUR CALENDAR

Our annual summer tour will be to Delafield, Wisconsin on June 28th. We will tour historic Delafield including the Military Academy and Hawks Inn. There will be time for shopping and lunch at one of the several restaurants in downtown Delafield. The cost will be \$16 per person, which does not include lunch. We will leave Rockford at Highcrest Center at 8:15 and arrive back in town about 5:15. More information will follow.

Victorian Mourning Customs

By Sharon Atkins



During the Civil War and into the Victorian Era, rituals and customs regarding the honoring of the dead were extensive, detailed and often times extremely hard on the families who were expected to mourn their dear departed loved ones. Much planning and thought went into the details of the funeral ritual. Often funeral arrangements were made early in the person's life to prepare for their own funeral. As an example, people planted trees of a certain variety that they admired, with the plan to grow them to maturity and then harvest the wood for their coffins, with the wood being stored, perhaps for years. Clothing that the person wished to be buried in was designated as such and placed in a special box or trunk and labeled for its purpose for the family to find. In some communities the bell of the local church would toll one time for each year the person had lived. As a sign of respect, local businesses would close, and if the deceased owned a business, a black wreath was hung on the door of their business, as well as their home. Elaborate Funeral invitations were printed and sent to family and friends, and anyone receiving an invitation to a funeral would be expected to attend.

Some communities had designated persons who delivered these invitations. The local photographer took mourning pictures, and in the case of many families, this photograph of the deceased might be the only one the person had ever taken. This practice was especially desirable to families who had lost a baby or small child. A burial was often held off for many days to await the photographer's arrival. Some families, regrettably, went into debt to give their loved one the proper final tribute. It was better to face the pity of being declared a pauper than the shame of a less than proper funeral. Death was not feared, as it was a more common occurrence since people did not live as long. The worst fear of the 19th century wasn't death itself, but the fear of not being properly mourned.



The Victorian Era obtained its name from Queen Victoria of England. Much of that country's customs regarding social behavior and rituals became the standard in America, although English customs were more elaborate and rigid than American customs. The prim and proper Victorians, whether in England or America, were consumed by their need to do things, as society deemed correct. Books on etiquette were numerous, as well as articles in magazines and newspapers of the day, which were widely read. American women read Harper's Bazar (sic) and The Ladies Home Journal to learn the requirements of proper dress and behavior during their daily lives and when there was a death in the family. The family was required to mourn the loss of their loved one by adhering to the proper Victorian mourning customs, and by following the rigid "rules" that society had deemed proper. Women had the most severe regulations placed on them regarding mourning, with some women following Queen Victoria's lead of remaining in mourning for their spouses, for the rest of their lives. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, died in 1861 and she remained in mourning for him until her death in 1902.



Childhood illnesses were often fatal to our ancestors' children. When looking at census records it is obvious to see that children were usually born within two years of each other, if not sooner. When larger "holes" appear in the order, it probably means that a child died at birth or as an infant or perhaps didn't live until the next census ten years later. They often named another child the same name to honor the baby who had died. Three out of every twenty babies died before their first birthday. Childbirth claimed so many women's lives that it was common for women to make arrangements regarding the care of their infants if they should not survive delivery. Men often had several wives because childbirth claimed so many women. And often if the mother died the baby would soon follow her to the grave since bottles were not sterilized and sanitary conditions were not adhered to. Children died of things that we would feel are common minor childhood illnesses such as flu, diarrhea, pneumonia and infections that could be from a small cut, which once infected, could prove to be fatal since they had no antibiotics.



Diseases that we think of as commonplace could prove to be fatal to our ancestors. Flu claimed thousands of people at a time, sometimes resulting in entire families being buried within days or weeks of each other. Pneumonia, diarrhea, tuberculosis (which was called consumption) and simple infections claimed countless people. Mass epidemics led to panic and isolation of persons assumed to be infected, and still these epidemics claimed entire families as well as large numbers of doctors and nurses and undertakers who cared for the diseased people.

When death occurred the entire family went into Mourning, even the children and servants.



The amount of time spent in mourning depended on the relationship of the deceased. For a spouse, a woman's mourning period was the longest, as it lasted for two years with different levels of mourning. First mourning or deep mourning lasted for one year and one day. Second mourning lasted for another year, with some women extending second mourning to eighteen months. Widows in deep mourning wore black from head to toe.

The material of their dresses could have no shine to the fabric. It had to be made of a dull fabric to perpetuate the lack of joy. The dress must be trimmed in crepe also called crape in Victorian times.

Many women wore black dresses, but it was always easy to recognize a widow's black dress by the addition of crepe or rushing. Rushing was crepe material made into gathered rows, which was added to the lower portion of the dress and sometimes to the collar and cuffs. The amount of rushing could be slowly reduced as the mourning period decreased. The material for the dresses varied from region to region. Obviously women in the North had fabric that would be heavier for the colder climate, than widows in the South. Customs regarding Mourning also varied by social standing within society. A woman who had a higher social standing was more concerned with the rules of etiquette and social decorum than a woman who might be in a rural setting. Women had many details of mourning that they were expected to adhere to.



When a widow went out into public she was expected to have her face covered. Widows were expected to wear bonnets, not hats, covered with veils of varying lengths. The veils were made black by dying the material, or covering the bonnet with purchased crape veils. Crepe (crape) had such an offensive odor, that women were warned by their physicians not to wear the veils over their faces for extended time periods, because of the concern that the extreme chemical odor could cause serious side effects. Women would rather take the health risk than face the scrutiny of society for not wearing the veil over their faces in public. The veils varied in length according to the stage of mourning. From Harper's Bazar (sic) April 17, 1886...referring to the widow's veil..."This fashion is very much objected to by doctors, who think many diseases of the eye come by this means, and advise for common thin nuns' veiling instead of crape, which sheds its pernicious dye into the sensitive nostrils, producing catarrhal disease as well as blindness and cataract of the eye. It is a thousand pities that fashion dictates the crape veil, but so it is. It is the banner of woe, and no one has the courage to go without it. We can only suggest to mourners wearing it that they should pin a small veil a black tulle over the eyes and nose, and throw back the heavy crape as often as possible, for health's sake." Many women carried a tussie mussie, which was a cone shaped metal (usually silver) holder, in which they carried fresh flowers, to distract them from the offensive odor of the crape. The mourning veils were made up of two or three layers or varying lengths. During first mourning, the longest veil could reach to the floor, as the mourning period decreased the length of the veils were shortened.



Magazine articles of the day informed women of not only the acceptable types of materials that their dresses and veils were to be made of, but they went as far as to publish a list of the "widow's outfit" which gave them the model for what to have in their widow's wardrobe. They even listed the acceptable fabrics and requirements that must be adhered to.

Colliers' Cyclopedia of 1901 printed the following recommended wardrobe for a widow. (Note: what we refer to today as crepe, was then called crape)

- One best dress of Henrietta (cloth) trimmed entirely with crape.
- One dress, either a costume of Cyprus crape, or an old black dress trimmed with rainproof crape.
- One Henrietta mantle lined with silk and deeply trimmed with crape.
- One warmer jacket of cloth lined, trimmed with crape.



- One bonnet of best silk crape, with long veil.
- One bonnet of rainproof crape, with crape veil.
- Twelve collars and cuffs of muslin or lawn, with deep Hems. Several sets must be provided, say six of each kind.
- One black stiff petticoat.
- Four pair of black hose, either silk, cashmere, or spun silk.



- Twelve handkerchiefs with black borders for ordinary use, cambric.
- Twelve of finer cambric for better occasions.
- Caps, either of lisse, tulle or tarlatan, shape depending very much on the age.



Young widows wear chiefly the Marie Stuart shape, but all widows' caps have long streamers. They vary of course, in price. Tarlatans are easiest to make at home, but we do not fancy homemade widows' caps are an economy, they soil so much more quickly than bought caps. It is a good plan to buy extra streamers and bows for them; these can be made at home for the caps, very fine thread and needles being used for the work, which should be very fine, neat and even.



If, in summer a parasol should be required, it should be of silk deeply trimmed in crape, almost covered with it, but no lace or trim for the first year. Afterward mourning fringe may be put on. A muff, if required, would be made of dark fur or of Persian lamb. No ornaments are worn in such deep mourning, except jet, (jewelry made of compressed coal, that had a dull black finish), for the first year. Jet is, of course, allowable.

Rich silk is, of course, admissible in widows' mourning, especially for evening wear, but it must always be deeply trimmed with crape for the first year, and the quantity afterwards gradually lessened. A silk costume (dress) is a very expensive item in a widows' mourning; (wardrobe) therefore we only allude to it—do not set it down as a necessity. The best silks for the purpose are rich, heavy silks, such as drap du nord, (and) Satin merveilleux.

Furs are not admissible in widows' first mourning, though very dark sealskin and astrakhan can be worn when the dress is changed. In other mournings, furs are now very generally worn—that is, after the first few months, but only dark furs.

Widows' lingerie, to be always nice, entails a considerable amount of expense. If collars, cuffs and caps are made at home, as we before said, they get soiled directly. As, however, it is not always possible to buy them when they require renewing, the following directions may prove of use: Widow's cuffs. Made of lawn, should be about nine inches long, according to the size of the wrist. They are not intended to overlap, but just to meet, fastened with two buttons placed near the upper and lower edges. The ordinary hem at the top and bottom of depth is five inches, with a wide an inch and a half deep.



The material being merely a straight piece, they are easy to make. For the collar, the straight all-around shape, turning down over the collar of the dress, is the most usual. If any other shape is required, cut it in paper, and make it accordingly with a wide hem of one and one half inch. If the collar is straight, it will be merely necessary to turn it down; if rounded at all, it must be cut to the shape, run to the collar at the edge, and then turned down. Fine cotton and needles and neat work are required.

It may be well to sum up what we have said. Duration of mourning: Widow's first mourning lasts for a year and a day. Second mourning, cap left off, less crape and silk for nine months (some curtail it to six), remaining three months of the second year plain without crape, and jet ornaments. At the end of the second year the mourning can be put off entirely; but it is better taste to wear half mourning for at least six months longer; and, as we have before mentioned, many widows never wear colors any more, unless for some solitary event, such as the wedding of a child, when they would probably put it off for the day."



It is difficult for us, in the year 2001, to imagine society dictating what we should wear. However, Victorian women were told not only what they should wear during mourning, and for how long, but also, that they could not attend social functions or receive any guests. A widow was not expected to leave the house for the first month, except to attend church, and some widows did not even attend the funeral or burial of their loved one. There were also strict rules of etiquette regarding how they could "re-enter society after the proper amount of time had elapsed.

From Harper's Bazar 1886,

When persons who have been in mourning wish to enter society, they should leave cards (special white calling cards trimmed in black) on all their friends and acquaintances, as an invitation that they are equal to the paying and receiving of calls. Until this intimation is given, society will not venture to intrude upon the mourner's privacy. In cases where cards of inquiry have been left, with the words "To inquire" written on the top of the card, these cards should be replied to by cards with "Thanks for kind inquires" written upon them; but if cards for inquiry had not been left, this form can be omitted.



After the proper amount of time, they were allowed a few privileges, yet they would still be under societies watchful eye. The article goes on to say:

But no one wearing a heavy crape veil should go to a gay reception, a wedding, or a theatre; the thing is incongruous. Still less should mourning prevent one from taking proper recreation: the more the heart aches, the more should one try to gain cheerfulness and composure, to hear music, to see faces which one loves: this is a duty, not merely a wise and sensible rule. Yet it is well to have some established customs as to the visiting and dress in order that the gay and the heartless may in observing them avoid that which shocks every one—an appearance of respect to the memory of the dead—that all society may move on in decency and order, which is the object and the end of the study of etiquette. A heartless wife who, instead of being grieved at the death of her husband, is rejoiced at it, should be taught that society will not respect her unless she pays

to the memory of the man whose name she bears that "homage which vice pays to virtue," a commendable respect to the usage's of society in the matter of mourning and retirement from the world. Mourning garments have this use, that they are a shield to the real mourner, and that they are often a curtain of respectability to the person who should be a mourner but is not.

EDITORS NOTE: A continuation of this article covering funeral and burial customs as well as mourning customs as they pertain to men will appear in a future issue of Nuggets.

Bibliography

Widows, Weepers, and Wakes by Janet S. Hasson, 1995

Godey's Lady's Book Louis Godey, Publisher 1850-1870

Harper's Bazar, Mourning and Funeral Usage's April, 1886

Women in Mourning Patricia Loughridge and D.C. Campbell Jr. 1984

Mourning Dress by Lou Taylor 1983

Funeral Customs by Bertram Puckle 1926

Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms 1884

Death in the Dining Room and other tales of Victorian Culture by Kenneth Ames

Styles for Mourning of the Era of the Hoop by Heidi Marsh 1996

Life in the Midst of Death: A Victorian Manual for Mourning by Holly Majka 1996

The Language of Mourning by Karen McHaffey 1997

Private Diaries and Journals

NUGGETS OF HISTORY, is published quarterly by the Rockford Historical Society, 6526 Spring Brook Rd., Rockford, Illinois 61114. Society members receive NUGGETS upon payment of annual dues. New rates, effective January 1, 1998: Family @ \$15, Individual @ \$10, Contributing member @ \$25, Life member @ \$150. Mail check to: Membership Chairman, Rockford Historical Society, 6799 Guilford Rd., Rockford, IL 61107.

Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

2001-2002 Officers

President	Sue Crandall
Vice-President	John Johnson
Editor Emeritus	Robert Borden
Editor/Publisher	Thomas Powers
Contributing Editor	Hazel M. Hyde
Treasurer	Jack Crandall

We welcome manuscripts and photos to area historical events and personalities, for publication consideration. We reserve the right to edit and to condense. For return, please include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Send to NUGGETS EDITOR, ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 6799 GUILFORD RD, ROCKFORD, IL 61107

ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY
6799 Guilford Rd.
Rockford, IL 61107

Non-Profit Org. U.S. POSTAGE PAID ROCKFORD, IL PERMIT NO. 320
