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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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## VICTORIAN FUNERAL CUSTOMS

By Sharon Atkins



WOMEN & CHILDREN IN MOURNING  
Source: Unknown

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In the March issue of "Nuggets", Sharon Atkins discussed Victorian mourning customs. In this issue the story continues with a discussion of Victorian funeral customs. These 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

# Victorian Mourning and Funeral Customs

By Sharon Atkins



In the last issue of *The Nuggets of History*, we discussed mourning customs as they applied to widows. The rules of etiquette for women were much stricter than for men. Now we continue with information about mourning customs for men and children followed by information about actual funeral customs of the day.

Widows were permitted more freedom than unmarried women. Because of this freedom, some women preferred to remain unmarried after their mourning period was over. Widows did not have to answer to a man and were allowed to manage their own affairs.



Men were only expected to mourn the loss of their wives for three months and the only visible sign of mourning was worn on the day of the funeral. Men wore black armbands and added crepe to their top hats, with the height of the trim being in relationship to the deceased. Men were free to remarry within three months, but often required their new wife to don the mourning attire for the first wife, who she may not have even known. If a widow were to remarry, she would undoubtedly wait at least a year (which meant the body of her spouse had surely decayed by then) before she would consider remarriage. Often a widow was required to marry again sooner than society would prefer, because of her need to have her small children and herself cared for. But the mourning attire would still be expected to be worn for the first husband even during her new marriage, until the mourning period had elapsed.



Children were not usually adopted, legally into the new family, but they often “assumed” the name of the new family. The blended families are easy to recognize in census records, as they have sets of children the same age. Genealogists have to use caution when examining the records, to guard against assuming all children in the

household belong to the same parents, since there were so many multiple marriages.

Children in mourning were recognized by the wide black waistband added to their clothing. Even babies had white cloths trimmed in black ribbons to indicate mourning. Children incorporated death and funerals into their play. References to these games can be found in diaries and memoirs. Children wore mourning sashes for a parent for six to nine months. When a child died, the parents mourned the child's death for one year, which meant the woman would often have to purchase or adapt a dress for a pregnancy while in mourning.



The business of mourning attire and accessories was a large and profitable one for retailers, who even perpetrated the myth that woman should not have any mourning attire on hand, or keep any mourning attire from a previous mourning ritual, as this would bring bad luck into their homes. Retailers kept black material such as crepe (crape), Henrietta cloth, Bombazine and wool on hand to make mourning attire. Since dyes of the time were unstable there were many articles advising women how to restore color back to black material which may have faded or started to appear "rusty". Ingredients used included ox gall, egg yolks, vitriol, urine, fuller's earth, gum Arabic and bran water. Since the dyes were "unstable" it was not used for underpinnings to avoid the dye staining the skin, but the lower edge of the slips and crinolines would be trimmed in black, in case it might show as a lady walked. The only other item, which was white, was the hanky that every woman must have. This too, would be white to avoid any staining of the skin, but the hanky would have to have a black border surrounding it, in order to be a mourning hanky.



Many of the practices surrounding mourning customs come from superstitions. The fear of death claiming the living made black the color of choice to make them inconspicuous and thereby Death would not claim them as the next victim. Superstitions were common and Victorian people were very careful not to do anything that might tempt fate.



Death, they believed might be avoided, if a person was careful not to cross under a ladder, or not to let a black cat cross their path or to “look at death” Rituals regarding the funerals and burials of their dead meant they could avoid the same fate.

Clocks were stopped at the hour of death, to prevent bad luck for the living, and they were not restarted until after the funeral. All mirrors were covered with black. The mirrors were covered because of a lingering superstition that the spirit of the deceased could become trapped in the reflective glass.



Funerals took place in the homes and the body was watched over at every moment until burial, as a sign of respect. Funeral services included readings and tributes given by friends of the deceased. These tributes were usually written with great care and concern to express the deep affection of the reader. These tributes were sometimes printed in the local newspaper to further honor the departed. Obituaries of the time were very lengthy and often gave the entire life history of the individual. These obituaries are a wealth of information to genealogists, who can often obtain the deceased place of birth, when he or she arrived in the area, who the parents were, who and when they married, their occupation, their childrens' names, what they died of and where they are to be buried.

Embalming did not become a common practice until after the civil war. This could create a very frightening situation, when a body suddenly “sat up”.

The custom of sending flowers to funerals began during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when bodies were sometimes kept waiting for the family or a photographer to arrive. The flowers masked the smell associated with decay. Many times the flowers were placed directly on the body or in the casket. Flowers also became an outward sign of affluence. The larger the floral display, the wealthier the sender. Coffins also evolved over the years. They began as simple wooden boxes, made to fit the deceased, often being made out of beautiful wood, and then, evolved to carved work done to enhance the coffin. Cabinetmakers often supplemented their trade by designing and producing coffins that displayed their artistic skill.

The door of the home of the deceased was covered with crepe and a black wreath and badge was hung over the door knocker or bell to indicate to any one who might come calling that a death had occurred there. It was of course, not proper to disturb the family during this time. Even during the funeral, a guest would not ring the bell or knock; rather they would be met at the door and quietly ushered in. Members of the family would usually not speak to persons calling to pay their respects, and often the women of the family did not appear for the minister's service or for the

kind words uttered by friends, as it was just too much for them to bear. Of course, pregnant women could never attend any funeral or memorial service, for fear of harm or “marking” to her unborn child. This superstition continues with some people believing that a birthmark or birth defect must be the result of some encounter with death.



When the service had concluded and the body was to be taken to the cemetery, there was a superstition regarding how the body should be taken from the home. They removed the wooden casket, from the home of the family, feet first in the belief that if the head of the deceased face backward he might influence another member of the family to follow him in death. The men who carried the casket, were called pallbearers. This term came from the custom of placing a drape or sheet over the entire casket, with the men underneath. This covering was called a pall.

In some areas, guards had to be hired to protect the gravesite from grave robbers, who would desecrate the grave for valuables or sell the body to universities for scientific research.



Cemeteries were also places for the Victorians to publicly demonstrate the dignity which Victorian people expressed for their loved ones. Elaborate grave markers and monuments were placed on their loved ones' graves to show their respect and continuing love for the deceased. The wealthy even had artists design elaborate monuments to express the deceased hobbies or tastes and to reflect their individuality. Then, carvers and craftsmen were hired to carve the monument. Many are still admired for their beauty and the skill required to create these elaborate works of art and entire books have been published relating to the art of grave monuments.



A unique aspect of mourning was the creation of Mourning jewelry or Mourning art. Both were created by using hair from the deceased person, or hair of various family members, if there was not enough of the deceased hair to use. Hair was gathered in beautiful porcelain jars that Victorian people kept on their dressing tables.



This hair was collected and saved and then braided in to elaborate pieces of art. The finely braided sections were twisted and gathered and made into floral arrangements that were mounted around a photograph of the deceased person. Some braids were used for watch "chains" and still others were simply placed in a bible or kept in a jewelry box. In order to create a very large or elaborate piece of mourning art, many different colors of hair were used to create flowers, leaves and patterns to surround the photograph or sketch of the deceased. The hair was so finely braided and the artwork that was created was intricate, it is often not recognized as hair. Some hair was not braided. It was simply a lock of hair, cut from the deceased and placed in a small locket. Many of these types of lockets double sided, with the hair on one side and a photograph of the departed loved one on the other.



The Victorian people honored their dead with elaborate funerals, tributes-both written and oral, by wearing special clothing, to express their grief publicly and by burial grounds of such beauty that they are still admired today. These customs, although long since gone, tell of an era where mourning and tributes to the dead were the highest form of love and respect.

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#### HARLEM PARK – IMAGES OF HISTORY

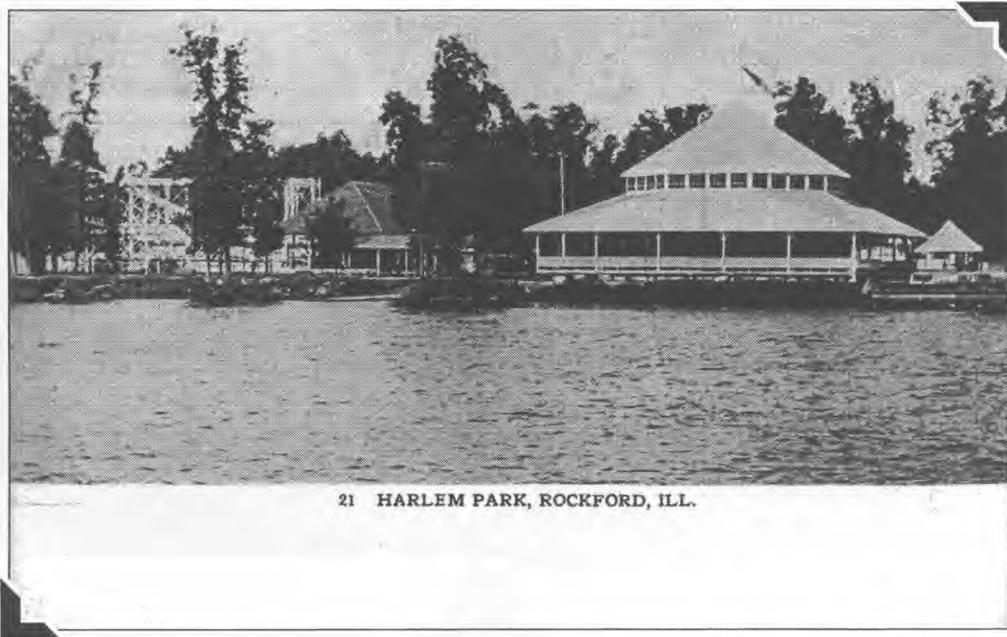
The Harlem Park amusement park was a place where thousands of Rockford area citizens enjoyed summer days during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The following images are from post cards that were probably sold at the park during its heyday.



This postcard, showing some of the buildings at Harlem Park is postmarked 1915.



The Harlem Park Auditorium seated 5,000 people. It was the home of the Rockford Chautauqua and other events beginning in 1902.



This view from the river taken in 1908 shows part of the roller coaster on the left side of the photo.



This view shows the Center Walk leading down from Harlem Blvd. It dates from 1912.

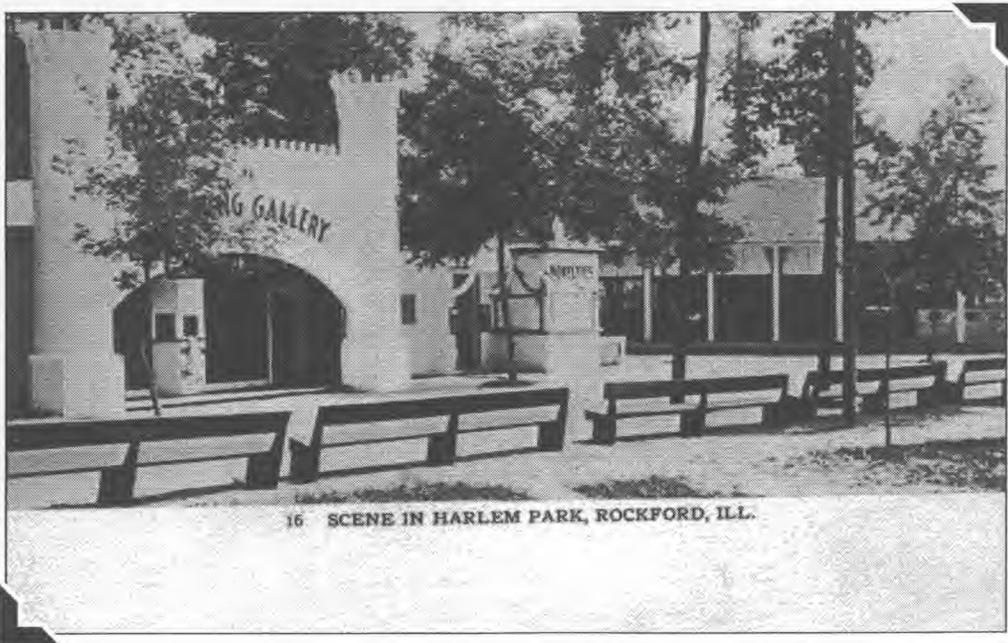


The Figure Eight was a popular ride at Harlem Park. Note the sign in front. Tickets 5 cents. This image dates from 1905.



Rockford, Ill., Old Mill, Harlem Park

The Old Mill was another popular attraction at Harlem Park. This image dates from 1903.



16 SCENE IN HARLEM PARK, ROCKFORD, ILL.

This photo shows the Shooting Gallery, part of the Midway. It is undated.

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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.

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