

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The First Motor Hearse

Henry Collins, former curator of the Stevenson House and a member of Monterey Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West during his residence here has sent us an interesting commentary on one of Monterey County's businesses in the early 1900s, which we will pass on to the readers of the Diary today. Mr. Collins is now an assistant curator at Sutter's Fort in Sacramento.

"Have my father, Henry W. Collins here with me at present," writes Mr. Collins, "and noting your stories on Peninsula history I thought you might be interested in some day running this story about my father which has a odd twist."

It seems the senior Mr. Collins owned the Salinas Undertaking Parlors in Salinas – a business which he purchased in 1913 from a man named Pickering. Collins was always very progressive so he acquired the first automobile hearse in Monterey County and the first automobile funeral in Monterey was accomplished by him.

Henry Collins related that when Charles White, the manager of the Del Monte stables for the Hotel Del Monte, died, Freeman, the leading undertaker here, asked the senior Mr. Collins for the use of his automobile hearse. Collins drove it over for the White funeral in 1916. The road was very bad then and the Laguna Seco was flooded, so Collins relates how he had to drive through a field about where Miss Maria Antonia Field's home is now. One coupe with three men in it declared Collins would never make it and they turned around and headed back for Salinas. Collins pushed through and arrived in Monterey for the services.

The funeral was held from the White home in Oak Grove. Many horse drawn rigs were present but only one automobile besides the hearse.

The history of the motorized special equipment as told by Mr. Collins to his son follows: "It had an Oakland chassis, the engine was a Continental Red Seal four cylinder. The chassis was bought from Ed Dates (a brother-in-law) who had an agency at that time on Van Ness avenue, across from the Cathedral. I paid \$750 for the chassis and converted my horse-drawn hearse to fit over it. This old hearse had some hand-carved columns added at a cost of \$80 by an old German wood carver. It

was then painted in the old Don Lee Shop in San Francisco, the total cost of conversion being about \$1,000.

"The engine was overhauled by John Iverson and the hearse again painted grey by George Lacey, both of Salinas. It had acetylene headlights and tail light. This old curiosity was used until 1929, when it was sold and converted into a lettuce truck."

Mr. Collins has always been amused by the fact that Charles White, all his life a horseman, should take his last ride to the Monterey cemetery in an automobile.

Another incident which Collins recalled was a case where it was specified in a will that horses should be used for the deceased's funeral – so he was forced to rent two horses for the occasion and leave the auto at home. The funeral was that of J.K. Alexander, an ex-senator from Monterey County, who lived on John street in Salinas.