A Nation Mourns: Remembering President Lincoln

DeMoney-Grimes Funeral Home has a rich history having been a family owned business since 1915. Before a fire destroyed our historic building in March of 1983 we frequently opened the building at the holiday time for tours through the funeral home.

In that spirit of history the DeMoney-Grimes staff embarked on another walk through time by bringing a replica of President Lincoln's coffin to Columbia City for the public to view.

With the Whitley County Historical Society located here in Columbia City we were able to expand upon the viewing of Lincoln's coffin into a whole experience of the Civil War and the history of embalming.

The Historical Society provided us with period clothing and artifacts, such as a tent, rifles, mess kits, and portraits of local citizens that served in the Civil War. They also loaned to us a portable embalming table from the late 1800's and a body removal basket. A large part of the event was the history of embalming since President Lincoln is thought to be the man who actually set the funeral industry into motion.

Men and women dressed in period clothing put on dance demonstrations and the soldiers marched in formation and provided a musket shooting demonstration. A contact through the Lincoln Museum brought President Lincoln to life. This actor dressed as President Lincoln in authentic clothing, stovepipe hat,

and boots. Mr. Lincoln handed out presidential pardons to local students and husbands, and greeted each person attending the two-day event.

Each of the two days Mr. Lincoln held a press conference at which visitors to the exhibit could ask questions of the president. One middle school social studies teacher made the event an extra credit project for her students and many were on hand each day with questions for Mr. Lincoln and DeMoney-Grimes staff.

A feature of our exhibit was a game board consisting of multiple choice questions about the penny, the coin that has Lincoln's profile on the front and image on the back. As each person left the exhibit they were presented with a bookmark containing some facts about President Lincoln, the penny, and attached to the bookmark was a shiny, Lincoln head penny.

Advertising was handled through our local paper and Whitley County Consolidated Schools, our local school district, was contacted through e-mail and personal, letter invitations to each grade level kindergarten through grade 5. Each history and social studies teacher was contacted by personal letter in middle school and high school as well as the principals and superintendent. Other Whitley County school systems not in our service area were contacted about the event. We also made contact with the ABC/NBC affiliate news station in Fort Wayne, Indiana who sent a crew out on the first day of the event and then did a feature story on us during the news at 6 and 11 pm.

The main draw of the exhibit was, of course, the replica coffin of President Lincoln. The coffin was displayed in a black draped room that was separate from the rest of the exhibit. The coffin lay in state much as it might have during the journey from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois and the room invited quiet reflection from the rest of the exhibit. At the time of Lincoln's death embalming was not a common practice. Prior to entering the coffin exhibit a major part of the tour involved the history of embalming. The Whitley County Historical Society provided us with a portable embalming table used for in-home embalming, a mortician's instrument kit, and a removal basket. A small theatre played an 8-minute video of the history of embalming before guests signed the register book and entered the viewing room to view the coffin. Batesville Casket Company of Indiana provided the replica coffin. Also on display was a black saddle from the period, portraits of three Whitley County citizen's who served and died in the Civil War, and a child's 'toe pincher' coffin.

Over 400 men, women, and children attended the two day event not including those participating as re-enactors and exhibitors. This event was free and open to the public giving those with families or on limited incomes access to museum quality material that may not be accessible to them otherwise. DeMoney-Grimes received the benefit of learning a little bit more about the history of our profession enabling us to better share our mission with those we serve. During our year-long preparation for this event we learned how important Lincoln was to the funeral

profession, having been the person whose death gave rise to the need for embalmers, funeral directors and funeral homes. Also, we were surprised by the fascination our country still has with the Civil War and President Lincoln. One knowledgeable Lincoln aficionado told us that except for Jesus Christ no other historical person has had more written them than Lincoln. Our experienced proved this true with the many people who turned out to participate in the event as either a part of the exhibit or as a viewing member of the public.