

“The Evolution of R.D. Cole Funeral Home Sewickley, PA, Continues”

By: Rick, Brian, and Ronna Cole

A brief history of 328 Beaver Street, Sewickley, PA. What originally started out as a home was converted to the *William E. Gray Funeral Home* in 1931, to the *Gray-Cole Funeral Home* in 1956, and then to the *Richard D. Cole Funeral Home* in 1963, and in 2004, the *Richard D. Cole Funeral Home, Inc.* That evolution continues in 2024 and beyond. The building itself, 328 Beaver Street, has a very interesting history - a late 1800's wooden stick-frame home which was the same design as the *Sewickley Spa* directly across on Beaver Street. At one time four houses stood on the 300 block of Beaver Street: one on the lot, which is now Safran's parking lot, one converted to a funeral home, and two more as neighbors approaching Little Street.

In August of 1935, William (Bill) Gray began the design plan of his new building renovations which is what we see today, a brick veneer with many add-on structures. It took two (2) years to complete the build-out. We have copies of the construction pictures and the December 1937 Sewickley Herald newspaper clippings with the completed picture of the property on the front page and announcements of coming tours and events at the property in January of 1938. Mr. Gray was extremely proud of his accomplishment. The year 2035 would have been the 100th anniversary of this property renovation.

William E. Gray (Mr. Gray to us - to others, he was known as Bill) was quite an entrepreneurial individual and did an amazing job for the local and surrounding communities in their time of need for family members, loved ones, and friends. In the two years it took to complete the new building design, 173 contractors were needed to finish the task and all but seven were local Sewickley residents. The architect came from Leetsdale, PA. Mr. Gray lived in the upstairs apartment of the main building.

A garage was built in the back yard, off Duquesne Way (the alley between Walnut and Little Streets) to house limousines, hearses, and, of course, the ambulance that PA funeral directors provided for their communities (the state of Pennsylvania took away the ambulance businesses from funeral directors in the late 1970s). We learned to park in that garage. With only inches between vehicles, very large vehicles, we became very good at close-quarter parking and parallel parking on curbs. When it came time to “parallel park” for Mr. Razo, the Quaker Valley driving school instructor, we taught him a few things. And all those vehicles always had to be clean!

We remember Mr. Gray and his family well. Mr. Gray, always on the couch in the upstairs living room with his two small dogs (boxers) and a roaring fire in the winter months. Mrs. Gray, however, spent her time in the back courtyard, tending her

gardens (in the non-winter months) and especially her roses, which were everywhere. We have the many photo albums of all this.



William E. Gray Funeral Home, 328 Beaver St., 1931-1935



The Front Page of the December 1937 Sewickley Herald

Mr. Gray was the Great Grandson of the very first funeral director in Sewickley, Mr. Joeseeph Marlatt. The first funeral home in town sat at the corners of Fife and Division Streets, and was established in the early 1800's. Ultimately moving to the corner of Broad and Centennial Streets. Joeseeph Marlatt was a cabinet maker who also learned how to build and construct coffins and turned Sewickley's first school building, 1818, (a log cabin on Division St.) into a funeral home. James Marlatt, Joseph's son was born in 1839. James also became a funeral director and took over the family business in the early 1870's after his father's passing. In 1871, Walter S. Marlatt was born and eventually entered the funeral business as well.

For over 6-decades, J.W. Marlatt and Sons operated at the Broad and Centennial property and in 1923 the business was moved to a new location on the corner of Logan and Beaver Streets, presently R.D. Copeland's Funeral Home (1998), previously the Dallas S. Irvine Funeral Home (1930-1945) after the passing of Walter Marlatt in 1930. The funeral business there continued under the direction of Maria Marlatt, Walter's wife, via a PA State provided "Widow's License" (a process provided by the State within funeral law, for the spouse of a licensed funeral director to continue the business, providing a licensed Director is on staff). Dallas S. Irvine became the staff funeral director and then purchased the business in 1945. Mr. Irvine passed in 1966. In the early 1950's, William (Bill) Neuman became the Supervisor of Irvine Funeral Home. Mr. Neuman then became the business owner in the early 1970's. He passed away in 1992.

Mr. Gray was the son of Albert and Eva Marlatt Gray. He attended Sewickley Public Schools, the Pittsburgh School of Embalming and Eckles College in Philadelphia where he took post-graduate classes in Post-Operative Anatomy. From 1907 to 1931 he was employed by his Uncle, Walter S. Marlatt. Mr. Gray became a licensed funeral director, passing the State Board of Undertakers in 1926. In 1931, after the death of his Uncle, Mr. Gray started his own funeral business and moved to a new location at 328 Beaver Street, Sewickley: the *William E. Gray Funeral Home*.

J. MARLATT, UNDERTAKER,
CORNER OF FIFE & DIVISION STS.,
SEWICKLEY, PA.

The undersigned, Respectfully informs the
Citizens of *Sewickley & Vicinity*,
That he has established the business of an
UNDERTAKER.
IN THIS VILLAGE,
And is prepared to furnish **Coffins** of all qualities
and sizes, and to perform all other functions connected with
the business of an Undertaker, with Delicacy, Precision
and Dispatch.
A HEARSE furnished whenever required.

REMOVALS.
The undersigned is also prepared to take contracts for removing
bodies from other Cemeteries or the old Grave Yards in the vicinity,
to the
SEWICKLEY CEMETERY;
Thus saving the friends of deceased persons all trouble or pain in the
matter. He will prepare new Coffins or outside cases, as may be nec-
essary, and conduct the whole proceedings with care and dispatch and
at reasonable rates.
Note. Persons ordering removals, must notify the Superintendant
of the Cemetery, that graves may be duly opened.
Orders solicited.
J. MARLATT.
Sewickley, Oct. 12, 1861.

Marlatt Undertaker Advertisement, 1861, Sewickley, PA



Bill Gay's 1920's Packard Hearse, Sewickley Cemetery

Enter Richard D. (Dick) and Jeri Cole. Our father, Dick Cole, came to the Pittsburgh area with his family after attending Uniontown High School in 1942. He graduated from Allegheny Vocational School in Pittsburgh and became interested in the funeral business in 1943. Before pursuing his career, he served a tour in Europe during World War II in the Army Air Corps (the precursor to the United States Air Force). He became a “tail-gunner” in a B17 bomber (*Akk-Akk-Annie* was her name). He told us it was not the best place to sit in an aircraft while being shot at by enemy fighter planes. The missions were long, and many did not return.



Dick Cole’s B17 “*Akk-Akk Annie*”, England, 1945



Sargent Richard D. Cole, U.S Army Air Corps, 91st Bombardier Group

Returning from the service Dad again entertained the prospect of the funeral business. He entered and graduated from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS) in Oakland and served his apprenticeship in McKeesport and on Pittsburgh's Northside at Pinkerton's Funeral Home. In June of 1951, he married Geraldine (Jeri) Coomes, also from the Northside, and moved to Sewickley a month later to work at the *William E. Gray Funeral Home*.

In 1953 Dick and Jeri Cole established themselves and their own funeral business and added a limousine service (livery) operating out of their house on Blackburn Avenue. Their son, Rick, was born in 1955; *I can still remember Dad jumping over the stone wall in the backyard to get to Locust Street where his limos were garaged*. That house still stands, right across from the YMCA. *I see it in my mind every time I walk up to the Y*. Our Dad leased the space from John Herbst (of the Herbst service station on Walnut and Thorn Streets). The property on Locust is presently under construction and being converted into condominiums.

In 1956, after nearly fifty years of service to the Sewickley Valley and surrounding communities, William Gray announced his new partnership with Dick Cole and the *Gray-Cole Funeral Home* was established. Both men became pillars of the community, not only providing needed funeral and ambulance services but also highly active with the local Kiwanis Club, Masonic Lodge, Shriners, and the Sewickley Valley Board of Trade. Both men were members of the Sewickley Methodist Church. *Richard D. Cole Funeral Home* was established in January of 1963 after Mr. Gray's retirement. He continued to live upstairs in the main building until he passed away in the late 1960's.

Dick Cole did not sleep much between funerals and all the work that they require (sometimes 2-3 a week that lasted 3-4 days each), the ambulance business (he had two (2) and they were rarely in the garage) and, becoming a two-term Mayor of Sewickley (he won the election in 1969 and again in 1973) plus all the extra-curricular activities that he and our Mom, Jeri, were involved in within the community. The business station wagon was constantly used as transport for seniors to and from doctor's offices, grocery stores, and nursing homes, free of charge of course. That was the Dick Cole way of doing things. We cannot count all the folding chairs that we delivered over the years to local events, parties, weddings, etc. - a community service that Mr. Gray started many years prior.

It was all quite inspiring and set a positive course in life for us, their three children. Unfortunately Dad passed very early in his life at the young age of fifty-one (51) when a fatal stroke took him on August 1, 1977, forty-seven (47) years ago. It was a very tragic life event for the Cole family and extended family members. Growing up in the funeral business, surrounded by death and the emotions that accompany it, does little to prepare you for the loss of a parent. But it did bring our family closer together and we did and still do visit cousins regularly, which has been a blessing for all of us.



Gray-Cole Funeral Home, Circa 1950s

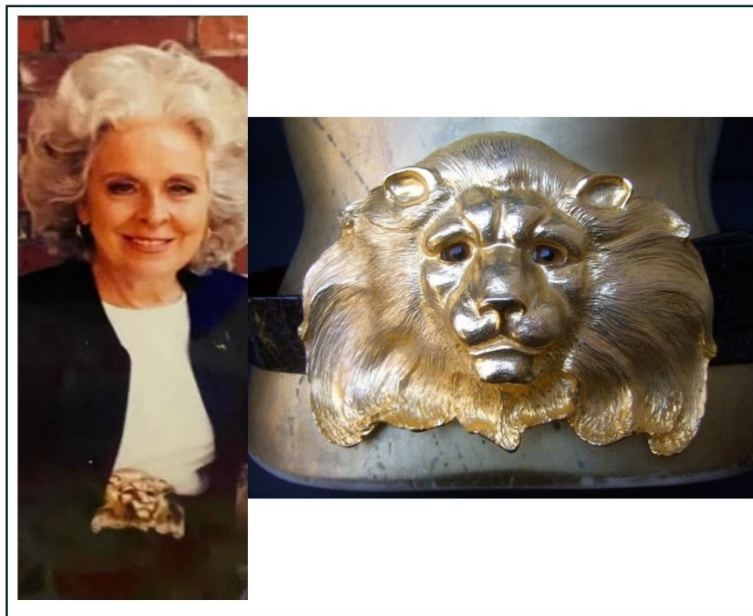
After losing Dad, the question became: *What does Mom do with the business and the property?* In 1977 Rick was fresh out of the United States Navy and preparing for college. Brian and Ronna were still at Quaker Valley High School. After much contemplation and many consultations with others, Mom jumped straight into the fire and followed the same path as Maria Marlatt, forty-seven (47) years earlier. Jeri Cole contacted the Pennsylvania State Board of Funeral Directors in pursuit of her own “Widow’s License”. There were phone calls and offers from other regional funeral directors, but once Jeri Cole made up her mind to do something, she did it, and usually, quite successfully.

Frank Urso, one of Dad's closest friends (Frank was in the funeral home daily and lived locally) and a licensed funeral director himself, took on the task as staff funeral director and did so for the next near decade. Mom and Frank created an exceptional team to continue the "*Distinctive Service*" for which *Cole Funeral Home* was known. Frank passed in the mid-1980s, and Pat Boylan (of Boylan Funeral Home, Evans City) came on board as Mom's staff funeral director for a short period of time, but it was James (Jim) Hughes who carried the torch for the remaining decades at Cole's. Jim worked for Dad in the 1970s while studying at PIMS and became the staff funeral director and supervisor soon after Frank Urso passed.



Dick and Jeri Cole, 1973

It was Jeri Cole, Jim Hughes, Bud Musgrave, and Chuck Hoffmaster who set the tone for Cole's moving forward. They were all outstanding individuals and knew the "Dick Cole Way" of supporting families. Mom managed the business for twenty-six (26) years, five more years than her husband did. In 2003 Mom succumbed to a relatively short battle with cancer. She was diagnosed on October 1st, 2003, and passed on November 20th, 2003, the day before Rick's forty-eighth birthday. *It is emotional to even write that sentence.* In remembering Mom we must include her trademark, that amazing Lion Belt Buckle, purchased at the Portico, a shop on Beaver Street in Sewickley. *That buckle was the first thing you saw as you walked in the front door at Cole's, as she greeted you on the steps with that smile and . . . that lion staring right at you as it is below.*



Jeri Cole and Her Lion Belt Buckle

With Dick and Jeri Cole now gone and Jim Hughes at the helm of Cole's, the "*Distinctive Service*" continued. We, Rick, Brian, and Ronna, helped with various things from time to time, greeting families at the front door and helping to maintain and to support the property. But it was the Hughes family who carried it all forward from 2003 on. Jim Hughes was Dick Cole-trained after all! Jim, his wife, Dee, their son, Kris, and his wife, Kellie (three (3) licensed funeral directors within the Hughes family) did an amazing job with the Cole standards and traditions, enhancing them with their own traditions over the years. Jim retired on January 1, 2024. Kris, a tradesman (embalming) locally and Kellie, a freelance funeral director in the Pittsburgh area.

Our parents were amazing individuals. They taught us how to work "eight (8) day weeks and twenty-five (25) hour days". Probably not a good thing, but it did help us to build and to enjoy very successful lives for ourselves and our families. As did the Sewickley community at large. The way we were all raised - to open and hold doors for the person behind you, to say thank you when you should, to help others in need when you can, to be polite and respectful. And how fortunate were we to go through the Quaker Valley Public School system, with amazing teachers and coaches who really cared for all of us. All of this contributed greatly to how we live our lives today.



R.D. Cole Funeral Home today, not much has changed with exception to the front and backyard landscaping and sign. Nearly 70-Years of: ***“Distinctive Service”***

We believe that Dick and Jeri Cole would be very proud of how far their legacies have carried on. It is not possible to mention all who were involved over the years but a few deserve honorable mentions for sure: All of our family members, our Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, and Cousins who would come on a whim if Dad needed them; all of the various employees over the years, the limo, ambulance, and hearse drivers, and of course; the car washers; the Sgro family, Isabel Martin and family, Don Detwiler and family; the many want-to-be-funeral directors who apprenticed under Dick Cole (and became very good funeral directors themselves), the Hughes family, and Colleen Kelly Whalen and Bud Musgrave for their amazing attitudes, energy and support of *Cole Funeral Home* and Sewickley community. Just to name a few. We gratefully thank all of them from the bottom of our hearts and we thank our parents immensely for the blessed lives that they gave us.