

Research Notes: Coffin Trolley

Brief description and date

Timber coffin trolley supported by one metal wheel.
C.1930s



Coffin trolley - Ungarie Museum, Ungarie NSW

Fabric, manufacture, condition

The coffin trolley is made from dressed timber. It is supported by one metal wheel, with a metal axle running through the centre of the wheel and a metal leaf spring either side of central wheel. Similar in style to a wooden garden or luggage barrow. Timber sections are worn and split in places, and metal components are covered with a patina of rust. The trolley is intact and in original condition.

Trolley is in fair condition.

Trolley measures: 2480mm (L) X 590mm (W) X 610mm (H)

Criteria

The coffin trolley is a rare, socially and historically significant object, with connections to Herbert Ceely and funeral practices in regional Australia during the early to mid 20th century.

This object also holds research potential and interprets the themes of bush carpentry, multi-skilling in regional businesses, death, grieving and funeral customs from the 1930s to the 1960s.

History and provenance

Made and used by Herbert Ceely who worked as an agent for West Wyalong Funerals, and was employed as a gravedigger at Ungarie from the late 1920s until the late 1960s, when backhoes came into use in the Bland Shire.

Advertisements in the *Wyalong Advocate* of 1927 and 1928 list H. G. Ceely as a builder and contractor and it is also known that he worked as a plumber and tank builder. The advertisements also list Herb Ceely as an "Undertaker: Agent for West Wyalong Motor Funerals". From the Colonial period until the 1940s, multi-skilling amongst tradesmen, particularly in regional areas of Australia, was not an uncommon practice. Builders and carpenters were often listed as undertakers, where their

woodworking skills were used to construct coffins, and in the example of Herb Ceely, a trolley to carry coffins.

Donor's, owner's and community recollections

Herbert George Ceely:

Born at Ganmain in 1894, Herbert married Phyllis Brill at Ganmain in 1918. Moved to Ungarie around 1926 or 1927 and established his business of H G Ceely Builder and Contractor, operating as a carpenter, plumber and tank builder and also operated as an agent for West Wyalong Motor Funerals. Herbert George Ceely left Ungarie in 1970 and died in Adelong in 1972.

Funerals in Ungarie:

West Wyalong Motor Funerals, for whom Herb Ceely acted as agent in Ungarie, advertised in 1928 as:

**West Wyalong Motor Funerals
West End Main Street, West Wyalong
Undertaker and Motor Funeral Director
Dignity, Sympathy And Economy**

They also informed the readers of the *West Wyalong Advocate* of having:

**Porcelain Dome Wreaths And Cape Flower Wreaths Always On Hand
Fresh Cut Flower Wreaths At Shortest Notice.**

A detailed description is given of the funeral of Mr. C. J. Bertram of "Oaklands" Ungarie, who died in Sydney. The Obituary for Mr. C. J. Bertram states that:

The remains were brought from Sydney to Ungarie by trains on Thursday, and were taken to the Presbyterian Church, where a short service was conducted by the Rev. Baird. The coffin was covered with beautiful flowers. After the service, the cortege started for the Ungarie cemetery, the service being one of the largest and most representative yet witnessed in Ungarie.

... The remains were interred in the Presbyterian portion of the Ungarie cemetery, the Rev. Baird officiating at the graveside. The funeral arrangements were conducted by Mr. H. G. Ceely.¹

From his earliest years in Ungarie, Herb Ceely was a community minded man. A member of the Ungarie Chapter of the Royal Australian Order of Buffaloes Lodge, Herb Ceely was present at the 1953 funeral in Ungarie of fellow RAOB member Mr. M. F. Herbert, where:

A large gathering which followed the cortege,, paid silent tribute to a popular and respected resident.

Officers and brothers of the RAOB of which the deceased was a member, were present in regalia, and held a short service which was read by Bro. H. G. Ceely.²

¹ *West Wyalong Advocate* 15 May 1928.

² *West Wyalong Advocate* 6 August 1953.

Comparative Examples

National Railway Museum, Port Adelaide SA.

Context of use

The coffin trolley has important associations to Herb Ceely and to the funeral industry in the early to mid 20th century, particularly in rural and regional areas of Australia. After removal from the hearse, the coffin was carried on the trolley from the cemetery gate to the graveside.

In the 1920s, the lavish funerals of the Victorian and pre-WWI era had largely disappeared. Undertakers in Australia, aiming to maintain the ground gained during the Victorian era, generally advertised their establishments under the heading of "Funeral Parlour". This was seen to preserve the "cosy association with the household"³. Funeral Home, Funeral Director and Motor Funerals were also a popular choice.



Grave covered with floral tributes c1920s

³ (Online extract) Robert Larkins. *Funeral Rights: What the Australian 'death care' industry doesn't want you to know*.

Statement of Significance: Coffin Trolley

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Herbert George Ceely was just one of many such men involved in the Australian funeral industry of the early to mid twentieth century. The significance of the coffin trolley made by Herb Ceely lies in it's provenance and the ability of this unique hand crafted object to activate a range of inter-connected narratives.

The coffin trolley, made and used by Herb Ceely for at least five decades, acts as a link between the maker, the community of Ungarie and funeral traditions and practices of the early to mid twentieth century. It activates the stories of both life and death in Bland Shire of that time period.



Herbert and Phyllis Ceely headstone Adelong Cemetery

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