

First one held in 1951

Jim Gernhart dies at 103; His 'real' funeral is Wednesday

James Nelson (Jim) Gernhart, one of the oldest residents of the Tri-State Area, died Sunday night at the Kit Carson County Memorial Hospital in Burlington, Colo. He was 103 years of age.

A colorful character over the years, Mr. Gernhart drew national and international acclaim when, in 1951, he staged his own funeral, complete with service, mourners and all. In 1976, he re-enacted the funeral, on its 25th anniversary. Although this didn't merit the coverage the first did, it nevertheless received regional attention.

The son of Morton and Katherine Gernhart, James Nelson Gernhart was born on Nov. 20, 1876 at Little York, Ind. He moved to Hiawatha, Kan., at the age of 8, in 1884. He received his schooling in Hiawatha.

His father died in 1890. Two years later, Jim and his mother moved to Sherman County at which time his mother took out a homestead in Grant Township. Jim lived with his mother and farmed her land until 1897 at which time he took a homestead north of Ruleton. In 1908, he traded for a hardware store. After selling the store, he acted as assistant postmaster and managed his brother's general store. His mother kept house for him until she died in 1919.

In 1929, Jim bought a farm four miles north of Ruleton, selling it in 1943. He then moved to Burlington, Colo., to live with his sister, Mrs. Anna Helton; she died in 1947.

All of his brothers and sisters preceded him in death; survivors include several nieces and nephews.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. (MST), Wednesday, Jan. 23, at the Sage and Smith Chapel in Goodland. Rev. Ben F. Farmer, radio evangelist of Burlington, will officiate. Burial will be in the Goodland Cemetery.

Mr. Gernhart's first widely-publicized funeral was held Sunday, June 3, 1951 in the state armory in Burlington. A crowd estimated at 1,200 attended.

Gernhart's plans had been splashed across the front pages of metropolitan dailies all over the country for days before the services were to be held. By the time the rites were held, the resulting publicity brought about one of the biggest funerals ever staged in the territory.

Before his funeral, Mr. Gernhart entertained 16 guests at his home for dinner.

Wearied by the proceeding, Jim said "it takes a lot of doing to get yourself buried right."

The casket, borne by eight pallbearers, was at the head of the procession. Gernhart followed and next came four ladies bearing flowers. Thirty honorary pallbearers brought up the tail end of the procession.

As the cortege entered the armory, the Rev. S. H. Mahaffey, pastor of the Kanorado Full Gospel Church, awaited them, surrounded by flowers. The brilliance of flash bulbs and flood lights cast an eerie hue over the spacious armory auditorium, as news photographers and news reel men started to crank their cameras.

Gernhart acted as director, corpse and chief mourner during the rites, facing the audience as the preacher read the eulogy, obituary and sermon. He wept intermittently throughout the service.

Rev. Mahaffey based his sermon on John 11-25. He spoke on "Resurrection and Life After Death," emphasizing that our life belongs not to us but to God.

As the mourners filed out of the armory, Jim said, "... real nice, real nice ... does a man good to see so many people out to bury him." Later at his home he said that he was well pleased with the service, the size and behavior of the crowd. "Only they ought to arrest those two fellows who sat in the front row and laughed.

"Would be too bad if I had been dead, and missed all of this," he said. "Now I don't care what they do with me when I die. I've got myself fixed up good. It will be a long time before this town forgets today. Jim Gernhart had himself a funeral."