

'Living corpse' will have final graveside rites

By FRANCES MELROSE

News Staff

"The living corpse of Burlington," old Jim Gernhart, will have one last graveside funeral Wednesday in Goodland, Kan.

It will be a simple ceremony, unlike the mock funeral the retired storekeeper-farmer first staged for himself in Burlington in 1951. But the casket will be the same handsome copper box Gernhart bought for himself 29 years ago at a cost of \$4,000. The only change will be a new lining in the casket — since Gernhart wore out the original climbing in and out it.

Gernhart, 103, long-regarded as one of the county's crustiest characters, died Sunday in Kit Carson Memorial Hospital, following a stroke. For several years, he had been a resident of the Burlington Retirement Home.

Long ago he elected to be buried in Goodland because, as he was fond of remarking, "I wouldn't be caught dead in Burlington."

His own annual funeral was an interest the retired farmer acquired at age 75. He launched the project in 1951 after disappointment over the services given his late sister, a ceremony he described as "a dog's funeral."

Gernhart gave himself just the kind of send-off he's always wanted. On that beautiful June 3, 1951, he doubled as corpse, chief mourner, stage manager and, finally, maitre 'd for the feast that followed the funeral.

Services were held in the state armory at Burlington, and a crowd of 1,200 from five states attended. The Rev. S. H. Mahafey from Kanorado, Kan., exhorted the audience not to mourn too deeply, and they took him at his word. During the eulogy, however, Gernhart, in a seat of honor

facing the audience, dabbed delicately at a few tears.

Gernhart later referred to it "as the biggest show anyone in Burlington ever put on."

Dick Davis, Rocky Mountain News photographer who covered the event, recalls that Life Magazine, present with a reporter and photographer, paid Gernhart \$200 to get in the casket and lie down, for pictures.

"Would have been too bad if I had to be dead and miss all this," Gernhart said. "Now I don't care what they do with me when I die. It will be a long time before this town forgets the day Jim Gernhart gave himself a funeral."

The funeral, including the casket, a \$2,500 granite tombstone and the dinner afterwards, was said to have cost \$15,000 of Gernhart's estimated \$75,000 fortune. He didn't begrudge a penny of it.

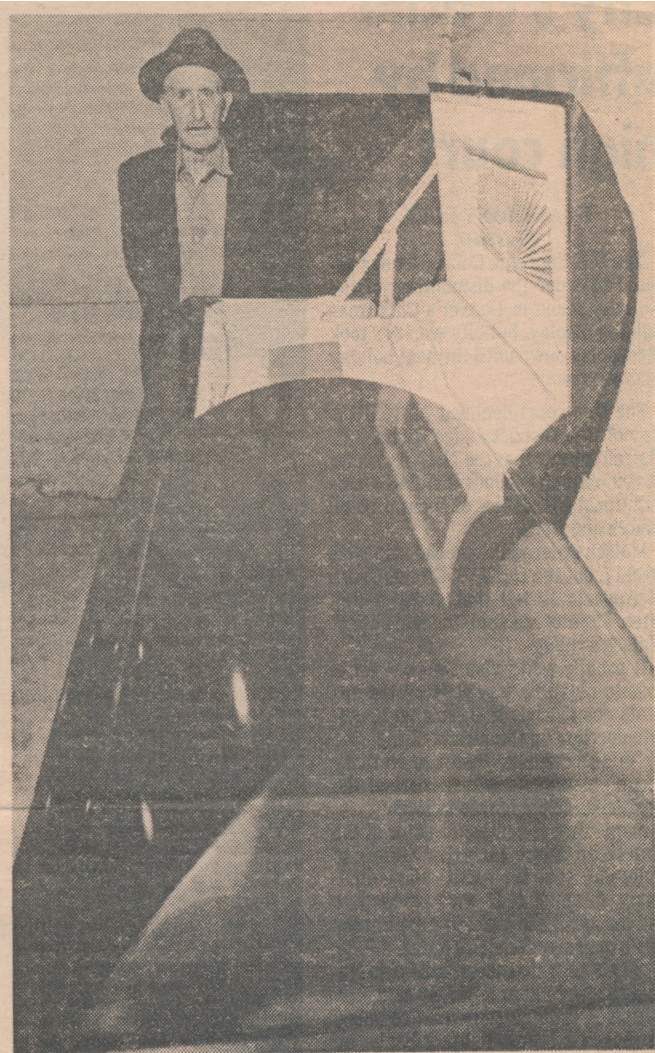
Gernhart made it plain at the time that one of his motives in staging the elaborate funeral was to cut down the inheritance he might leave to relatives, for whom he felt no love.

"Not a penny of it for Burlington, either," he said. "They can't fight me and get away with it."

Gernhart was referring to the fact that the town had opposed his mock funeral, refused him the use of a school auditorium for it and even saw to it that the minister he first requested, turned down the chance to perform the service.

That first funeral bore unexpected repercussions. For one thing, he got letters by the bushel from all over the world, mainly from widows offering to ease his loneliness.

"I'd never trade my electric blanket for one of those widows," he commented. "The blanket keeps me warm, and I can turn it off."



NEWS FILE PHOTO

Standing near a casket is "living corpse" Jim Gernhart, who once said he "wouldn't be caught dead in Burlington."

Following the first funeral, Gernhart staged several others, along with a few anniversary parades, but none ever came up to the first event. Gernhart always notified the press well in advance, and he grew to love seeing his name in the paper. He once castigated the News for not having mentioned him for some time.

He moved to the Burlington Retirement Home in 1973. Irene Goertzen, co-owner with her husband, said Monday that Gernhart was alert and his mind was lively until the end.

"He never complained," she said. "He didn't keep wondering why he had lived so long, like so many old folks do. His ambition had been to live to be 100, and he didn't seem to mind living on after that."

Gernhart attributed his long life to the alfalfa and wheat germ vitamins he consumed in large quantities daily. His money, he said, was saved because he neither drank nor smoked.

Gernhart is survived by a niece, Pearl Parish of Goodland, Kan.