

# Jim Gernhart's Last Funeral

1980

Jim Gernhart, 103, "the corpse of Burlington" who held his next-to-last funeral on June 3, 1951, was not around for the real thing when services were held Wednesday, Jan. 23, 1980, at the Sage and Smith Chapel in Goodland.

Jim died here Monday night, in spite of the fact that he stated that "I wouldn't be caught dead in Burlington."

Jim retired in 1947 and moved to Burlington from Northwest Kansas, where he had been a farmer all of his life. He received world-wide publicity when he held his "funeral" in 1951, and down through the years received basketsful of letters from people all over the world. Many of the letter writers thought Gernhart was loaded with money, and a large portion of them were seeking a soft touch.

Gernhart was probably the biggest tourist attraction the community has ever had. Especially during the summer months, tourists going through town would inquire about where he lived. Many of these people made frequent stops here, some of them becoming good friends, but most of the letter writers were ignored.

Gernhart had the reputation of being a curmudgeon, but he also had a much better side. For example, without the knowledge of many persons, he devoted a considerable amount of time to helping elderly widows around town. He would run errands for them, mow their lawns, make minor house repairs, and perform many other deeds which the elderly could not do for themselves.

He craved publicity and therefore he was brusque, arrogant and even vulgar when exposed to the many photographers and newsmen who came in from out-of-town.

However, his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Keeler, stated that Jim had mellowed in his later years, and it was acknowledged that he had a sense of humor. The Keelers "looked after" Jim as he grew older, and every year they prepared his birthday dinner and cake.

right, he decided to have a test run. He would be on hand to see how things went.

He bought a casket, a \$456 headstone and cemetery lot in Goodland. Jim experienced some difficulty as the community recoiled when they heard about his plans. The first preacher backed out, his hymn singers quit, as did the pallbearers.

But when it was discovered that Gernhart's plans could not be stopped, the community adopted a philosophical attitude. He lined up eight new pallbearers and there were 18 honorary pallbearers. It was estimated that 1,200 people from the area attended the services held at the state armory.

All of the news services sent photographers and reporters to Burlington to cover the story. Instantly there was nationwide and worldwide coverage. People ate it up, some of them agreeing with Gernhart, while others thought he was off his rocker.

The Rev. S. H. Mahaffey preached the funeral sermon, extolling Jim as a man who had done many kindnesses for people without general knowledge.

It was estimated that Gernhart paid \$4,000 for the funeral, but he thought it was worth it. "Man who drinks spends \$1 for it and a man who smokes pays 25 cents a day for it. If they would save their money, they could buy a nice casket like mine," Gernhart stated.

For several years after Jim's funeral, he celebrated an anniversary of the event every June, inviting the governors, senators, congressmen and others from a wide area. He was always ready to participate in the parades that were held, complete with mourners, the casket and other paraphernalia.

The funeral publicity was not a spur-of-the-moment thing with Gernhart. The death of his sister set Gernhart to thinking. He was not pleased with the manner in which his sister's funeral had been handled, and it started him to thinking about his own funeral. To be certain that his own funeral was handled

## OBITUARY OF JAMES GERNHART

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 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.

Mr. Gernhart died Sunday night at the Kit Carson County Memorial Hospital. He had been a resident of Burlington Rest Home for several years.

Services were held at 11 a.m. (MST), Wednesday, Jan. 23, at the Sage and Smith Chapel in Goodland. Rev. Ben F. Parmer, evangelist of Burlington, officiated. Burial was in the Goodland Cemetery.

Casket bearers were all from Burlington:

Cal Zimbelman, Bill Pangborn, Clarence Winslow, Shorty Monroe, John Wahl, Gene Pralle.

Honorary pall bearers were: Bill Pralle, Art Lange, Dr. C. R. Ross, Jim Knox, John Bryner, Rol Hudler, Harold Boland, Carol Fundingsland, Pete Schlichenmayer, Eldon Snowbarger.