

At 97, Burlington's famed 'living corpse' losing pep

(Continued from Page 5)

play anything but a passive role. But this wasn't Jim Gernhart's style.

As reported in the News at the time, the onetime Kansas homesteader doubled "as corpse, chief mourner and stage manager." He set up the 700 chairs at the National Guard armory, cooked a 12-course dinner for the other "mourners," listened somberly to the eulogy on his own behalf—and even dabbed at an occasional tear when the poignancy of it all grew to be more than he could bear.

Then he oversaw the carting of his copper casket back to the basement of the house on 12th Street.

NEVER WON ADMIRATION

Gernhart never did win the admiration of everyone in Burlington for carrying off such a stunt—but he never much cared, either. And, as the years went by, his strong flair for blowing his own horn never died down.

As often as he could, he held himself another funeral—and even when he couldn't, he would drop a line to the News once or twice a year to let the paper know he was still alive and kicking.

Gernhart's kick is still being felt in Burlington, even though the weight of 96 years makes it impossible for him to write his own letters. Someone else did the typing this week when he decided to send a brief note about the auction. But he penned his own signature: "Jim Gernhart, Corpse."

With it came a printed notice of the auction, complete with a photo of Jim Gernhart. It said the proceedings will begin at 12:30 p.m. Monday.

Enclosed was a list of the items for sale,

including a "beautiful china cabinet with carved pediment," old rockers and iron beds, a "Type 2 Columbia Grafonola with record cabinet below, excellent condition," tea kettles, razor strops and a set of coal buckets.

HE WOULD SEE CASKET

On the telephone, Gernhart said he would sell the copper casket if somebody offered him enough for it. It's still in his basement.

Asked if he would hold another funeral for himself, the "living corpse" said he didn't know. But he expects a dinner in his honor on his 97th birthday Nov. 20. Gernhart said he "can't walk around much" but eats well.

"I feel pretty good," he said. "I watch very little TV, 'cause the doggone stuff ain't no good no more, and it hurts my eyes."

In past years, Gernhart always credited his abstinence from liquor and his great fondness for vitamins with prolonging his life. Wednesday he said his physician had prevented him from taking his usual 30 vitamin pills while in the hospital, but he vowed he'd resume this diet once he got out.

"My doctor says he don't think they're good for me," he declared. "But I say, they haven't killed me!"

As for booze? He still treasures a quart of whiskey, purchased in 1916 for 90 cents, which he's long promised would go with him to the grave. He said it again Wednesday.

But it fits well with the Jim Gernhart legend for him to talk as if he's not all that sure he's ever going to breathe his last gasp.

"I'm gonna make 120 if I don't die," he said with a laugh. "I'm the only living corpse in the world, I guess."