

Parade marks birthday, anniversary of funeral

By STEVE LANG
News Staff

An oxygen tank stands guard over the small room, crowded with a 100-year-old goose-feather mattress, an electric vibrating chair and a dozen or so bottles of assorted vitamins.

The room at the end of a long hall in the Burlington Rest Home is occupied by Jim Gernhart, whose funeral was held 25 years ago.

The funeral, which caused an uproar in the small Colorado plains town, was held in 1951 as Gernhart faced a crowd of spectators.

At the time, he said he did it because his sister "was given a dog's funeral." He wanted to make sure that didn't happen to him.

On Sunday, 25 years after the first funeral, Gernhart's eyes were red-rimmed with age. His health is failing, but his smile still is quick.

"I've taken better than 50,000 vitamins," he said, sitting in his room surrounded by bottles of Vitamin C, wheat germ, yeast, iron tablets and fruit laxative.

He spoke with a reporter as he got ready for a parade in his honor through the streets of his town. He wore a suit which he bought in 1922 for \$100.

His tie, a colorful, hand-painted number, was sent to him by a "woman undertaker out in California" for his first funeral.

Midway through the interview, Gernhart stopped, pointed at his throat and complained that something was sticking him. The reporter removed a straight pin from the collar of the freshly bought white dress shirt.

He proudly exhibited a color postcard which shows him standing next to his mausoleum in Goodland, Kan.

The inscription reads, "Jim Gernhart, 1876-19 Held his own funeral June 3, 1951."

Gernhart wants to be buried in Goodland rather than Burlington because the people of the Colorado town were so opposed to his original funeral. He decided then he didn't want to be buried in that kind of town. "They fought me up here. They fought it to beat the band," he said.

Gernhart will be 100 years old Nov. 20. He wanted to hold his birthday party/parade/funeral then, but was afraid it would be snowed out. So he moved it up.

When parade time came, Gernhart was helped up and Mrs. Irene Goertzen buttoned his suit jacket. Mrs. Goertzen, with her husband, Ike, owns the rest home.

~~Gernhart walked slowly~~ to a battered green

truck. (Continued on page 30)



NEWS PHOTO BY DAVID L. CORNWELL

As part of Jim Gernhart's parade in Burlington Sunday, these youngsters

staged a mock funeral. The boy playing the body sports a false moustache.

Jim Gernhart celebrates anniversary of funeral

(Continued from page 5)

pickup truck parked behind his room and climbed into the cab.

The truck was driven through the streets of Burlington until it arrived at the rear of the parade staging area. Photographers surrounded the cab as Gernhart climbed down. He posed for pictures and gave a short interview before he was lifted onto the bed of an antique truck.

The truck carried his copper casket, bought for \$4,000 in 1951. After he was lifted up next to it, a folding chair was set down on the truck's bed.

Gernhart lowered himself into the chair. In the past, he had ridden in the casket itself.

The parade moved out. It included a mock funeral procession complete with a "body" (portrayed by a very-much-alive youngster). Children carried signs reading, "Happy 100 years. Colo's still growin' and Jim's still goin' and blowin'."

A group of "mourners" followed in a green golf cart.

The Burlington High School marching band, in bright red uniforms, followed. An old black Volvo was next, bearing a sign telling onlookers that Gernhart was "gone, but not forgotten."

Gernhart's truck brought up the rear, behind several antique cars and a 1928 model threshing machine.

He waved slowly to the 200 spectators who turned out to watch the event — an annual highlight in this town of 2,828 residents.

Gernhart, who was born in Indiana the year Colorado became a state, said he's lived so long because of his vitamins and because "I tended my own business and I worked hard. I worked hard all the time."