

## *Remember when Jim . . . .*



### *. . . held his 25th anniversary funeral parade.*

Several national television news shows were on hand to witness Jim Gernhart's 25th anniversary parade to commemorate his own funeral, which was held in June of 1951. Jim mugged for cameras that sent tape to "Good Morning America," "The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite" and other shows too numerous to mention. Although Jim is no longer around, the 5¢ Beer Wagon truck can still be seen driving around the community on certain days.

## *Jim Gernhart - Burlington's national claim to fame*

Long-time Burlington residents can certainly remember Jim Gernhart. Not that he did anything really spectacular in his life . . . except plan and make himself guest of honor at his own funeral.

The funeral, held on Sunday, June 3, 1951, was attended by over a thousand people, reported on in Life and Look magazines, covered by UP, The Denver Post and several radio stations. He invited several out-of-town guests including the governors of Kansas and Colorado, although both of them declined to attend on a account of previous engagements.

Gernhart, the 75-year-old retired area farmer, bought his own casket, chose his pall bearers, mourners, and arranged the whole service that was held in the Burlington Armory.

He was the last of a family of 10 children and had seen all the other members of his family pass on. In doing so he "experienced the troubles brought by the Grim Reaper" and resolved

he would eliminate a lot of the problems by having his own funeral in advance of his death.

Throughout the whole affair Gernhart maintained that the whole town was against him, including the school board, churches, and several individuals.

Acting as director, corpse and chief mourner, Gernhart sat by his casket in front of a crowd of over 1,200 people during the service conducted by Rev. Mahaffey, a pastor from Kanorado. The "corpse" wept intermittently throughout the service.

As mourners filed out Gernhart said " . . . real nice, real nice, does a man good to see so many people out to bury him."

He was well pleased with the service, the size and behavior of the crowd. "Only they ought to have arrested those two fellows who sat in the front row and laughed."

In the years following the funeral with all its national coverage, Gernhart was visited on a

regular basis by people traveling through Burlington. They stopped by to see him and his casket which he kept in the basement of his home on 12th Street.

Every year on his birthday Norma Keeler would bake him a cherry pie made with cherries he had picked from a tree in his back yard. There were also weekly notices he would send to the paper giving names of people who had visited him.

On the 25th anniversary of the funeral, Gernhart hosted a funeral parade down main street where he made national news once again for Burlington. Several news services, TV and radio stations were in town for the event.

After spending most of his life in Burlington, he passed away in 1980 at the age of 93 and is buried in Goodland. Still holding a grudge against the town for their cold reception to the service held in 1951, Gernhart was often quoted as saying, "I wouldn't be caught dead in Burlington."