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Denver Post Text, Photos

By DAVID CUPP

It was a different kind of funeral. The coffin was borne through town on the bed of a 1920 Model T truck; a mini-band belted out "Out Behind the Barn, Boys," and the occupant of the casket waved to the mourners.

Every year Jim Gernhart, 94, has his funeral in Burlington, Colo., and every year many people come to witness the event.

"It isn't really a funeral," Gernhart is quick to point out, "it's a funeral anniversary. A man has one funeral and I had my first and last one 20 years ago. Even when I die there won't be another."

\$15,000 FUNERAL

Townpeople of Burlington remember the "one and only." It was a \$15,000 funeral with 4,000 mourners. Jim was the "chief mourner, director and everything."

Jim Gernhart remembers, too. "I didn't want to be buried like a dog so I just went and had my own funeral. I know who was there, what the preacher said and what I got and, by gosh, I've got no substitute."

Unfortunately, on Jim Gernhart's funerals a little sorrow must fall.

"I wrote and invited President Nixon, but the whelp, he never answered me. I wrote him two letters and sent them

registered so no one else could open them. Cost me a dollar and a quarter.

'A DOG FIRST'

"They put in the paper," Gernhart continued, "that Jim wouldn't vote for Nixon now . . . Well, he wouldn't . . . I'd vote for a dog first!"

Without Nixon the funeral procession went on. A Burlington police officer guessed the crowd at more than a thousand. A deputy sheriff said 500, while newsmen put the number around several hundred.

The Model T, leading a cortege of 30 vehicles, drove down Main Street, then went around the block and came down again.

The ceremony ended in the middle of the main intersection of town with well-wishers coming up and congratulating the non-corpse.

BIGGEST THING

"The funeral is the biggest thing that happens in Burlington," explained Mayor Rol Hudler. "Next year we're anticipating making a week-long ceremony."

When Jim Gernhart does finally die — he feels he'll live to 120 — he won't be buried in the town where he had his funeral.

"My mausoleum is in Goodland, Kan. . . . That's where I'll be buried. Why, I wouldn't be caught dead in Burlington."

Gernhart rides on back of 1920 Model T truck during funeral procession through town. Belting out "Out Behind the Barn, Boys" are the Wood on banjo and the Iridzinski on the bass.