**WHY ERNIE MCCLELLAND GOT FIRED ON CHRISTMAS DAY**

After having been retired from the University of Georgia for six years, I was approached by Mr. Billy Webb about part-time work at the funeral home he owned and operated in Athens, Georgia, Berry’s funeral Home, named after the former owner. He and Ernie McClelland were the only two full-time licensed morticians, who did the embalming and body preparation. My job, which I accepted, was merely to act as an usher to seat funeral attendees in the church or funeral-home chapel, sometimes to roll the casket down the aisle, to be available at the cemetery, to appear somber, and occasionally to pick up or deliver a cadaver from a nearby town or the Atlanta airport.

My ushering job went pretty much as follows: The family was to be seated in a certain section, and they often came in together after the others were seated following a private prayer. After all live bodies were seated, I was to walk to the front, stand solemnly facing the audience, and, when the casket was ready to be rolled down front, I would utter gravely, “Please stand,” uplifting my arms with a stand-up gesture. I would do the same thing with the family guests when they were prepared to stroll in. There could be no smiling. Then I would say in a low voice, “Please be seated,” and my arms would swing down.

I would earn from $50 to $100 per funeral, depending on the cost of the casket. When the family bought a casket, they obtained all other costs of the funeral “free,” except for transportation if the body had to be carried by hearse or airplane. (The hearse was considerably more expensive per mile, even though the airlines charged a freight rate, not a passenger ticket fee.) I had to be on call at all times, as death and funeral times are unpredictable. I actually had more work than I wanted, as I became known as reliable Jim. I didn’t mind driving the hearse, as I did not need a limousine license, and I could feel pretty important going down the highway in that big, long black machine with everyone watching and wondering if I was hauling a body. I certainly got to meet a lot of prominent dead people in my job, most of whom I had just heard about around town when they were alive, but also some of my former colleagues at the University of Georgia. The most money I ever earned as a part-time funeral-home worker for a funeral was $150, when former Athens Mayor Vincent Dudly was buried. The joke, perpetrated by Ernie McClelland, was that the wealthy Mayor Dudly was loaded in more ways than one, as he died falling off his second-floor balcony during a cocktail party one night.

For nearly 30 years before they went into the undertaker business, Billy Webb and Ernie McClelland had been co-owners of a popular men’s clothing store in downtown Athens. In fact, their store opened the same year I moved to Athens in 1971. When a contentious controversy arose back in 1991, Billy Webb sold his share of The Men’s Store to Ernie McClelland, leaving Ernie to do his battles in the newspaper and finally the courts with Baruch Tannenbaum, known as Bernie, a New York transplant who came to Athens with his New York wife and attempted to open the New York Pizzeria next door to the Men’s Store.

Well, talk about incompatible land uses and even more talk about incommensurate and incongruous personalities. Ernie and Bernie put on quite an entertaining local show. Ernie was quoted in the *Athens Daily News* as saying, “The pizza place will bring rats and cockroaches to our store. Our customers don’t want to buy a suit with cockroaches in the pockets or with a rat hole in the seat of the pants.” (That was when Billy Webb sold his share to Ernie.) Ernie called Mr. Tannenbaum “Mr. Christmas Tree,” which is a faulty translation from the German. Bernie called Ernie “a yokel local who has never been out of the county and a parasite on society who inherited his money from an uncle he killed in a fit of red-neck rage.” The newspaper dubbed it “The Bernie and Ernie Show.”

The court settlement allowed Bernie to locate his New York Pizzeria immediately nest to The Men’s Store on East Clayton Street in Athens, Georgia. Meanwhile, Billy Webb went to mortician school in St. Louis and then bought Berry’s Home, leading Ernie to rib his former colleague that “Bury’s Funeral Home” was a fitting name. But the Bernie and Ernie Show was not over. When Bernie was to go to New York to attend a family funeral, Ernie found out which flight number he was on, had a warrant out Bernie for assault from a couple of years before. Ernie alerted the New York Police Department, and Bernie was arrested when he stepped off the plane. Bernie would never have discovered why he was apprehended had not Ernie bragged the fact all over Athens. Shortly after Bernie returned to Athens, one of the thick security plate-glass windows on The Men’s Store was smashed during the night and three large pepperoni pizzas had been tossed inside, one smearing a rack of expensive suits. No one was ever caught. And so on. Finally, Ernie himself gave up The Men’s Store, selling out to Bernie and his highly successful and now enlarging New York Pizzeria. It was rumored that Ernie, stung by the criticism that he had never been out of Clarke County, flew to Las Vegas where he lost over $200,000 in one night. Ernie also went to St. Louis to mortician school and was hired at a weekly wage by his former men’s store partner and haberdasher Billy Webb in his doleful entombment and cremation business.

If I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from inappropriate smiling during my dignified and long-faced stance at the front of the grieving assembly, Ernie had to had to bite his entire mouth on many occasions. Unlike Billy Webb, who had the taciturn personality and calm countenance of a mortician, Ernie was often kept in the background by the no-nonsense Billy Webb. Ernie liked to play practical jokes on Billy and me, as well as the public. Once, when Billy was out of town, Ernie switched the viewing rooms, as there were two concurrent viewings, placing the wrong names on the doors. The grieving friends and family would approach the open casket only to find a stranger in the coffin instead of the beloved one they had come to visit. One man was so startled and heaved so that he nearly fell into burial box himself. (Ernie switched the names around again later in the evening and apologized unsparingly.) He thought the whole thing was hilarious. He told me, “If you can’t laugh a little, life isn’t worth living. You can’t always be serious.” When Billy Webb heard about it, he didn’t laugh.

Well , you can imagine my surprise when, the day before Christmas in 2006, I got a call to drive to Augusta to retrieve the body of Bernie Tannenbaum, who had been killed in an automobile wreck. He had divorced, and one of his New York relatives, using the Internet—the Billy Webb Web page for funeral homes—had selected the Berry Funeral Home to prepare his body for shipment for burial in New York. His ex-wife, knowing of the Bernie and Ernie thing, would never have approved, but she of course was not consulted. It was later determined that Bernie’s blood alcohol level was .07, not enough to be legally drunk. He had driven into the back of an 18-wheeler parked on the side of I-20. It would definitely be a closed casket affair.

I drove over, picked up the Bernie body, and drove to Athens. I recalled that Mr. Tannenbaum had only spoken four words to me in his life. Once, when he and his then-wife were exiting from their large Lincoln automobile as I walked along Broad Street in downtown Athens, I mentioned to him, “Your lights are on.” He replied derisively, “They turn off automatic,” which was the first time I knew of this then-new automotive technology. He of course said nothing to me now.

Ernie and his assistant were on duty when Bernie and I arrived at the Berry Funeral Home. Ernie had to perform his work quickly, as I had to haul Bernie to Atlanta’s Hartsfield Airport and send him freight rate to new York. It was a rush job alla round, as Mr. Tannenbaum, being of the Jewish faith, needed to be buried within 24 hours of death, as is also the custom with Muslims.

Billy Webb was already in Florida on his Christmas vacation, and home-town Ernie was in charge.

I had never spent so much time in the preparation room, as it was called, but since I was awaiting Bernie’s readiness to travel, I finally walked in on Ernie and Bernie. “How does it feel to be handling your cold old friend?” I asked. Ernie replied, “Come over here and take a look,” beckoning me toward the open casket. He had Bernie dressed in a Santa Claus suit, with the Santa cap covering most of Bernie’s smashed-in head. Ernie was hooting.

I said, “You can’t do that. I’m not driving him that way. Someone will open the casket.”

Ernie said, “No, it’ll be our secret. I’ll put proxy glue on the bars that hold the lid shut, and it will take a crowbar to pry it open. Not to worry. I’ll take the credit and you don’t know anything about it. But nobody will open it. This will definitely be a closed-casket funeral in New York. So Mr. Christmas Tree believes in Christmas!”

Well, someone in New York did open the casket, and you can imagine Mr. Billy Webb’s reaction in Florida to the indignant call from a New York relative. There would be no law suit to besmirch Tannenbaum’s name and nothing in the newspapers. This disgraceful, abominable, perfidious, and sacrilegious crime must be kept from the public.

As soon as he had finished the New York phone conversation, Billy webb called his long-time partner on Christmas Day and said, “You’re fired. Clear out your office. I’m going to send Wheeler to mortician school in St. Louis. He’s pretty old but he will do a good job.”

And that is why Ernie McClelland got fired on Christmas Day in the year 2006.