

THE NEW AMERICAN WAY OF DEATH

BY 2017, 1 OUT OF 2 AMERICANS WILL

CHOOSE CREMATION OVER BURIAL. OUR CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARD

THIS FINAL RITE OF PASSAGE SAYS EVERYTHING ABOUT THE WAY WE LIVE NOW. BY JOSH SAMPURN

PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA KIMBLE FOR EYE

GEORGE ALAN THOMPSON II, KNOWN AS BIG AL OR THE FISH MAN, SON OF COLUMBUS, OHIO, RESIDENT OF KENNESAW, GA., ONETIME BARTENDER, RESTAURANT MANAGER, REAL ESTATE AGENT, MOTORCYCLIST, OWNER OF AQUARIUM-MAINTENANCE BUSINESS AQUAHOLICS AND NOTED JOKESTER, DIED MAY 28, 2010, AT AGE 50. HE IS NOW A REEF.

Big Al sits at the bottom of the ocean 1½ miles (2.4 km) off Pensacola Beach, Florida. Fish swim through him. Corals will soon grow on him. So will soft sponges—but not yet. After all, Big Al's new life as a reef is still in its infancy. It was three years ago, on Memorial Day weekend, when a drunk driver hit Big Al on his way home while he was riding his favorite bike, a customized Ultra Classic Harley-Davidson. But Big Al wasn't just a biker. More than anything, he was a fish nut.

"At one point, we had 25 aquariums in one room," says his widow Susan. "He was obsessive." So when the Fish Man, as friends often called Big Al, heard about Eternal Reefs, a Decatur, Ga., company that places cremated remains on the ocean floor, he was sold. This was something living, something eco-friendly and nothing like a traditional burial.

In 1998, the year Eternal Reefs began placing ashes in the ocean, only 24% of Americans chose cremation over burial. But the business came along at a perfect time in a changing industry. In 2011, the U.S. cremation rate hit 42.2%, according to the most recent numbers compiled by the Cremation Association of North America (CANA), based on death-certificate information provided by states. The growth is partly driven by the Great Recession and

Americans' newfound desire for low-cost anything—including how we dispose of our bodies. Several states already have cremation rates above 70%, and CANA projects that if current growth rates continue, 1 out of 2 Americans will choose flames over dirt by 2017.

Death in the U.S. is a \$13.4 billion industry. Cremation accounts for about 20% of that number—a percentage that belies the full extent of its popularity, simply because cremation is so much cheaper than burial. Being cremated costs about a third of a typical casket burial. And while price has been a big driver behind cremation's recent growth, our increasing desire to cremate also speaks to our ever-more-mobile society, our gradual shift away from religion, our views about the environment and even our changing notions of our physical bodies. Historically considered to be as stiff and stubborn as its clients, the funeral-home industry is only now beginning to offer what we seem to be longing for in death as in life: meaning, engagement, convenience and personalization.

Reefs are merely the surface when it comes to options for "cremains," the ash left behind from a cremation. The quirky and booming merchandise business includes the following: cremains that can be exploded as fireworks, cremains used



as paint in artwork, cremains stored inside jewelry, cremains unloaded from shotgun shells, cremains pressed into vinyl records—not to mention countless customizable urns. Couch potatoes can reside in an urn that features a remote control. New York Yankees fans can have a baseball-themed one.

If we are gaining options in death, we may be losing something too, in what we leave for the living. "Throughout history, we have not only stopped and celebrated people's lives, but we've tried to create a permanent memorial so that they'll be remembered," says Mark Musgrove, funeral director at Musgrove Family Mortuary in Eugene, Ore. "And I think we may now have a whole generation of people where there's no permanent remembrance of that person."



Rise of the Ashes

WHEN CREMATION HISTORIAN JASON Engler was 12, his grandmother would take him to funeral homes. To hang out. On the weekends. He did his homework there. "I would do visitations and ride with the guy to the cemetery in the flower car, or I would vacuum the floors after the services," Engler says. "I was doing whatever I could to get my foot in the door."

Little Jason Engler wanted to become a funeral director. He loved learning about the lives of people who came before him. Those in the business tried to talk him out of it. But Engler never wavered. Today at 33, he sounds just as fascinated by the business of death as he was in childhood. He has also become a devoted proponent of cremation.

"It's almost a religion for those of us

who believe in it," says Engler, who is the funeral director at Rollins Funeral Home in northwest Arkansas. "And for the early cremationists, it was a way of life."

Cremation appears to be as old as traditional burial. The ancient Greeks practiced it. The Romans practiced it. The Native Americans practiced it. But it wasn't until the late 19th century that modern cremation took root in the U.S. It began in tiny, quiet Washington, Pa., where an eccentric doctor named Francis LeMoyne built the first modern crematory in the U.S. in 1876 after hearing about its use in Europe. At the time, people believed they were getting sick just from attending funerals. Decomposing bodies were leaking into water systems. Death, it was believed, was contributing to even more death. So LeMoyne constructed a contraption to cre-

Cremation without fire At Bradshaw Funeral in Stillwater, Minn., bodies are broken down with water and chemicals in this stainless-steel chamber

mate bodies in a controlled environment primarily for sanitary reasons. This wasn't a crude funeral pyre. It was a hygienic process meant to destroy any organic matter that might cause illness and give families a more efficient way to preserve ashes. LeMoyne built the crematory for his own use—meaning he was eventually going in—but the idea was popular enough in his community that 42 cremations were performed there before it closed in 1901.

Nationally, however, this new way to dispose of bodies largely stagnated. Crematories were built at a rate of one a year in the late 19th century, and it essentially remained an unorthodox option for those

who didn't want a traditional burial. As embalming became commonplace in the early 20th century, even the sanitary rationale lost its sway. "People started thinking, You can be embalmed and that'll be fine," says Engler. "So cremationists became interested in finding some other way to promote their method of disposition. And that was to make it beautiful."

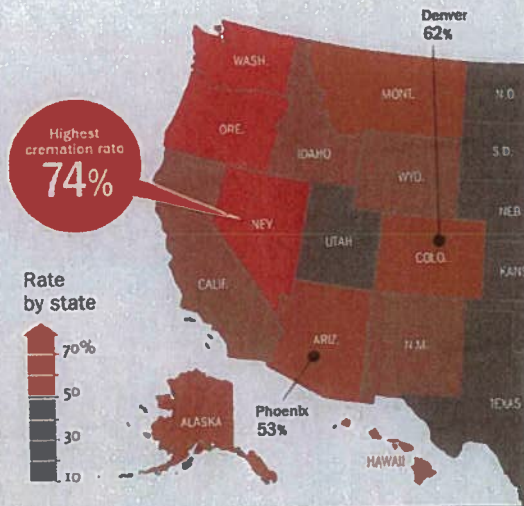
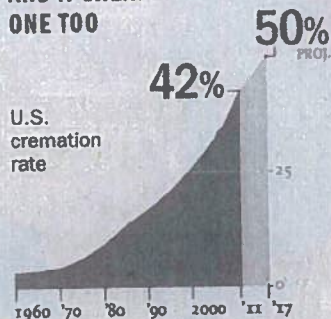
By the turn of the century, cremationists began building elaborate crematories with stained-glass windows, marble floors and frescoed walls. "The cemeterians across the country started this idea that when someone died, there must be a memorial, otherwise what's the point of what we do?" says Engler. "And cremationists, many of which were cemeterians also, adopted that idea as well. That was really where cremation started to gain some sort of popularity." Light-filled columbaria, or vaults designed for urns, were built to permanently hold ashes, and CANA was formed to further the idea of creating memorials for those who pass—and to help cremationists get the most out of their bottom line through sales of urns and niche columbarium spaces.

Still, by the 1960s, the cremation rate was stuck at 3%. Jessica Mitford's muckraking classic *The American Way of Death*, which exposed the funeral-home industry for willfully taking advantage of fragile families and pushing ridiculous funeral-related merchandise, helped cremationists by showing Americans that there were alternatives to burial. But the practice only became widespread decades later, when the cremation rate hit double digits. And the rationale this time was the pocketbook.

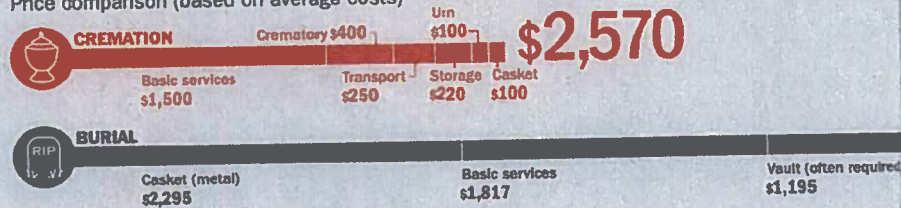
In 2008, before the recession hit, the national cremation rate was 36.2% and had been growing about 1 percentage point a year, according to CANA. But that growth rate doubled in the years that followed—and some states in particular witnessed dramatic increases. Wyoming's cremation rate went from 42.3% in 2006 to 56.1% in 2010, Tennessee's increased from 16% to 27.6%, and Rhode Island's jumped from 27.5% to 37.5%. In 2011, every state in the union performed more cremations than it had the year before.

CANA, the largest organization representing crematories and funeral homes in the U.S. and Canada, says the price for an average cremation is \$2,570. A traditional burial averages \$7,755 when a vault, often required by cemeteries, is included, according to the National Funeral Directors

CREMATION NATION IT'S AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR OPTION— AND A CHEAPER ONE TOO



Price comparison (based on average costs)



Association. CANA and NFDA are virtually the only organizations that track these costs, and both want to make their industry look as attractive as possible from a cost standpoint. But price alone can't fully explain the recent rush to embrace cremation. Before you make up your mind, however, you may want to know what, exactly, your cremation will entail.

Into the Fire

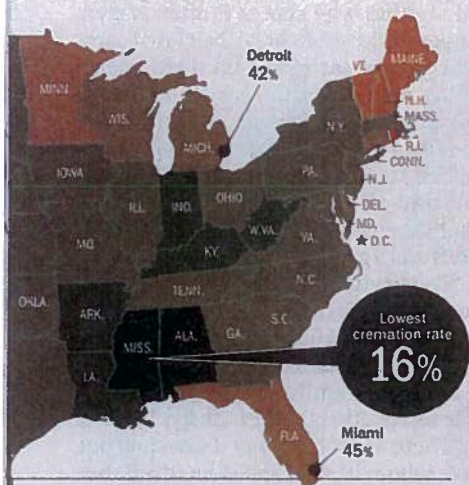
LET'S SAY YOU DIE—SORRY, BUT IT HAPPENS to the best of us—and your family has decided to cremate you. (Hopefully, you approve.) First, you'll likely be placed in a plain coffin or cardboard container. You may have a tag put somewhere on your body or a metal disc placed inside your vessel with a unique number along with matching paperwork so the crematory operators know you're you. But for now, you're no longer you. You're No. 15678.

Once you've been properly ID'd and all the paperwork is in order—which generally includes a permit from the state and authorization by the next of kin—you're placed into the cremation chamber. It's going to get hot, maybe up to 1,800°F (982°C). Let's hope you're not overweight and getting put in at the end of the day, because the whole thing might get too balmy and you could burn

down the crematory, and maybe even the funeral home along with it. That's what happened in Austria in April 2012, when the body fat of a 440-lb. (200 kg) woman caught fire, clogged the crematory's air filters and almost destroyed the entire facility. But don't worry. Thanks to the U.S.'s obesity epidemic, a number of new crematories are being built to hold individuals weighing up to 1,000 lb. (454 kg).

After at least an hour of intense heat and flame, you're reduced to grayish ash that will be raked into a box and left to cool. If you've had surgery, there may be a couple of screws or some wire left behind. That is removed. But there's also the problem of your femurs—they didn't burn completely—along with several other bone fragments. Those are put into what is essentially a giant food processor, which pulverizes them with spinning blades. They're joined with your campfire-like ashes, which are then returned to the family. Now your family has to figure out what to do with you.

That's where a guy like Mike Nicodemus comes in. The vice president of cremation operations at Hollomon-Brown Funeral Home & Crematory in the tide-water Virginia area has some options for you. Nicodemus likes to compare his "personalization wall" of urns and cremation



Sources: Cremation Association of North America; National Funeral Directors Association

\$7,755

Viewing/ceremony	Embalm	Hearse	Other
\$845	\$628	\$275	\$700

merchandise to New York City during the holidays. “You know what the city is like at Christmastime when you walk down Fifth Avenue?” he asks. “People like that, and they say, ‘Wow.’ That’s what we have.”

Nicodemus sells wind chimes that hold ashes, laser-etched urns, baseball-themed urns, biodegradable urns, artificial reefs, military-themed merchandise and much more. And business is good. “In 1998, we were at 20% cremations,” says Nicodemus, “and I predict by the end of the year we’ll be at 60%. We knew it was coming. It just came a little bit quicker than anticipated. But we embraced it.”

A past president of CANA, Nicodemus says he’s seen a generational shift in the way Americans approach death. Baby boomers, who are just now reaching the age when they have to confront end-of-life issues, didn’t live the way their parents did, and they’re not going to go through death the way their parents did.

They’re redefining death thanks to a more basic reason: they’re the most mobile generation in history. Boomers are more likely to have been college-educated, to have found a job, to have started a family, to have retired and to die all in different places. So where are you supposed to be buried after a life like that? Because fewer of us live and die in the same place, we of

ten lose touch with our birthplace, where most would normally get buried. That’s one reason why cremation rates along the edges of the U.S. are higher than in the middle of the country. More people leave Kansas for Seattle than the other way around—and when those Seattle transplants die, where their bodies go gets complicated quickly. Sending your remains to rest eternally in Kansas becomes much easier inside an urn.

A Greener Ending?

THE U.S.’S HISTORY AS A PREDOMINANTLY Christian nation has arguably been the one true barrier holding cremation back. That helps explain why there are still fewer cremations in the South than any other region in the U.S. (In more-secular Europe, cremation rates in many countries are much higher.) Revelation in the New Testament foretells a time when a trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ shall rise first as Jesus returns. It doesn’t say anything about the dead rising from their reefs.

For almost its entire history, the Roman Catholic Church has been against the practice. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the church officially allowed it and only 1997 when the Holy See gave specific permission for U.S. bishops to allow cremated remains to be part of a funeral mass. For Protestants, burial is more historical practice than theological doctrine. Today many more preachers are agnostic about cremation. Even Billy Graham has said there’s nothing in the Bible that forbids it. That’s helped make the practice more acceptable in the Bible Belt, the one region where cremation has yet to fully take hold.

In both Judaism and Islam, cremation is widely considered strictly forbidden. But while very few Muslims have been cremated, some Jewish funeral directors say they are getting more requests for cremation from progressive Jews.

For those who aren’t devout, there is still the idea that we’re at rest once a body is buried. That notion is peaceful. It’s comforting. And it’s nowhere near the truth.

BY 2017, 1 OUT OF 2 AMERICANS ARE PROJECTED TO CHOOSE CREMATION OVER BURIAL

“When we die,” says Engler, “our body immediately begins to go back to what it is. Natural, organic elements. And putting aside the religious notions, when we die, our body tries to go back and disappear. That horrible process of decomposition begins, and it completely takes over the body. Cremation just speeds up that process.”

In fact, there’s more than one way to do it. When families wanting cremation walk into Bradshaw Funeral & Cremation Services in Stillwater, Minn., they’re presented with two options: fire or water.

Bradshaw is one of a handful of funeral homes in the U.S. offering a new method of cremation called alkaline hydrolysis—what they market as green or water-based cremation. For years, the technology was available only at the nearby Mayo Clinic, where the experimental medical center used it as an environmentally friendly way to dispose of bodies used for research. In 2003, Minnesota became the first state to approve it for the general public. At Bradshaw, which has only offered water-based cremation since last July, it’s been wildly popular. Four out of five families presented with flame- and water-based cremations—both priced the same—choose water.

“We anticipated that the bigger reason was going to be the environmental side of it,” says co-owner Jason Bradshaw, referring to the lack of emissions from water-based cremation. “The larger reason has actually been people who don’t like the fire component. They see this as being a gentler alternative.”

Inside Bradshaw’s Celebration of Life center are two chapels, one with a grand piano and a dedicated family-respite area, another with a water wall. But the star of the show is the Resomator, a stainless-steel chamber that uses a combination of water, potassium hydroxide and heat to break down bodies into peptides, soaps, salts and sugars. In other words, it dissolves your every tissue and reduces your bones to fragile, gleaming white fragments that are pulverized just like flame-based cremains, except that the final product is more powdered sugar than campsite ash, and the watery substance simply goes into the wastewater-treatment system.

Many Americans are increasingly turned off by the idea of filling a body full of chemicals to slow down decomposition and then putting it into the ground inside a casket that’s inside a burial vault that’s inside a cemetery whose grounds will need to be watered and maintained

in perpetuity. It should be no surprise that the embalming industry has been hard-hit over the past decade. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of embalmers in the U.S. has dropped by almost half since 2005.

Trouble at the Crematory

AS CREMATION HAS BECOME MORE POPULAR, sensational and almost unbelievable stories of errors and misidentifications have cropped up, none more horrific than the Tri-State Crematory incident in Noble, Ga., in 2002.

After hearing reports of scattered corpses and body parts near the crematory, federal agents investigated and found hundreds of bodies—334 total—thrown in holes, stacked in piles, in hearses and in all phases of decomposition. Authorities called it Stephen King—esque. Everywhere you looked there were bodies. The families had been given cement dust instead of remains.

Ray Brent Marsh, who ran the crematory, was charged with 787 felony counts. He pleaded guilty, was sent to prison for 12 years and was forced to write letters to relatives of the deceased. He has never explained why he did what he did, but it rocked the industry and, cremation supporters say, ultimately changed it for the better.

"That was a situation with a businessperson who was offering \$125 cremations, and funeral homes were saying, 'Hey, that's a great deal,' and then not really visiting the crematory, not inspecting it," says CANA's executive director, Barbara Kemmis. In the aftermath of Tri-State, Georgia and other states passed stricter laws to tighten regulations allowing officials to better monitor crematories. Still, only four states require certification from organizations like CANA to operate one.

Nicodemus of Hollomon-Brown is one of a handful of experts who travel across the country certifying crematory operators through a CANA-sponsored course. But in many instances, the only training that operators get is either on the job from other operators or through a crematory manufacturer's representative.

David Charlip, a mortuary-and-funeral-law attorney based in Florida, has represented plaintiffs who sued crematories and funeral homes, most commonly for cremating the wrong body. Not surprisingly, he's highly critical of the industry.

"Generally, crematories are off the beaten track in areas that are more secluded," says Charlip. He also claims that the job

of reducing bodies to ash doesn't necessarily attract the most reliable employees. "Lots of times you've got people who are ex-cons. It's really not the kind of job that a lot of people would want to do. That's not to say that there aren't good, committed people that do it, but the kind of people you're dealing with a lot of times aren't the most reputable. History has borne out the fact that if unscrupulous people are dealing with dead bodies, there's money to be made from dead bodies."

Even so, Charlip said he hasn't been taking on more cremation cases, partially because they're so difficult to win. Plaintiffs often need to show medical evidence of emotional distress, which can be hard to prove, and the threshold for getting those damages can be high. While no organization tallies cremation errors, they don't seem to be increasing along with the cremation rate.

Look at Georgia, where the Tri-State Crematory incident took place, says Kemmis. "The [cremation] rate was 17% in 2002. In 2011, it was 33%. It doubled. But the number of incidents are not doubling. I'm just saying this anecdotally, but there's no way. You'd be writing a lot more on this topic if that were the case." And the allegation that a lot of cremation operators are ex-cons? "I don't see any evidence of that," she says. "The industry standard is to conduct background checks before hiring people. Are they showing up to work in overalls and work boots? Yes, they are. They're not in suits. But that's O.K. They're still doing their job as well as they can."

What We Leave Behind

IN THE 1980S, WHEN FUNERAL DIRECTOR Mark Musgrove got his start, every funeral was pretty much the same: a welcome, a prayer, a song, a passage of Scripture, another song, a message, a benediction and then a trip to the cemetery. But not today, at least not at Musgrove Family Mortuary.

Oregon has a cremation rate above 70%,

'TO SURVIVE, WE NEED TO ADAPT,' SAYS ONE FUNERAL DIRECTOR. BUT MANY MORTUARIES ARE PROVING TO BE AS STIFF AS THEIR CLIENTS

and families who choose it often want a unique service to celebrate their loved ones. At Musgrove, instead of "In the Garden," you're more likely to hear "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida." Video tributes are displayed on big-screen TVs in their chapels and family centers. Memorabilia of a person's life are displayed on memory tables. The funeral home's cremation garden has a waterfall, ponds and a gazebo.

"To survive, we need to adapt," says Musgrove. "We need to listen to the families we serve and find those things that are meaningful to them."

Musgrove Family Mortuary has clearly done so, but others in the industry haven't.

"There are some funeral directors out there who will send someone to another funeral home because they don't handle cremations, because the owner doesn't like them," says Nicodemus.

And they're still in business?

"Not for long," he says. "I guarantee you, it won't be for long."

Over the past five years, revenue growth across the industry has declined largely because low-cost cremations have pushed more-expensive burials aside. There's no sign that that will wane, meaning funeral directors will have to find new ways of making up for the loss. Demand may push the cost of cremations higher, but it's likely that funeral directors will seek to make up deficits by selling more merchandise and pushing elaborate services.

For those who choose cremation, according to CANA, roughly a third of the cremains are buried in traditional cemeteries, a third are taken home by relatives and a third are scattered. That last third is what the industry is targeting with its endless array of products.

"Scattering destroys the need for a memorial," says Engler. "It destroys cremationists' purpose. The idea was that they had to create a memorial so that it would be a permanent place to remember the dead, but it also perpetuates their business."

The industry has historically been criticized for taking advantage of families and selling them unnecessary products at a time of grief. A 2007 AARP poll showed that many Americans seemed unaware that embalming and coffin-encasing burial vaults, both of which are often purchased, are either never or rarely required by law. But many cemeteries require vaults, which average about \$1,200. Depending on which funeral homes are analyzed, profit margins across the industry are estimated to be as high as 13%, according to market-



Eternal rest—in a log
The rise of cremation has prompted the funeral industry to produce a vast array of customizable urns, from sports-themed receptacles to political vessels to urns that feature an image of the band KISS



research analyst IBIS World—often due to high markup on merchandise like caskets. Others estimate the industry's profit margins at closer to 5% or 6%, which is the figure supported by NFDA.

Either way, death is a business. Memorials are important for funeral directors because they can't make a living on ashes alone. But it's important for you too, because whether you realize it or not, you may be setting fire to your own history, at least if you decide against having your ashes memorialized somewhere that could be easily visited by your descendants. And what Americans of the future will think of their ancestors' collectively going up in flames won't be known for decades.

Even though he now performs more cremations, Musgrove still owns an old cemetery. When he talks about his cremation business, it's straightforward, by the book. But as he starts to describe his cemetery, Musgrove's voice wavers and gets quiet, and he becomes contemplative.

"Walking through our old cemetery, every time you read a marker, for that moment, their memory lives again," says Musgrove, almost whispering. "That's what's so important about it. Remembering and talking about the important things in life. Not about who won the football game, but about life and death."

Susan Thompson has a place to talk about the big things. She just has to sail to it. This year she plans to scuba dive off Pensacola Beach to see the reef holding Big Al—the Fish Man—inscribed with I'M JUST HERE FOR THE SHRIMP thanks to suggestions from his friends who thought it would amuse the jokester in him. Eventually Susan herself will become a reef and be placed among the corals and sponges and fish rather than inside an airtight box in hopes of warding off the inevitable.

For now, though, back in Kennesaw, Susan is moving on. She recently got out of the shaky real estate market and is now in sales. She has started dating again and says she doesn't dwell on the past. Except.

At the end of our interview, Susan lets me in on a secret. She tells me she kept a little bit of the Fish Man with her.

"To tell you the truth, I didn't put all the ashes in the reef," she says. "I bought a small urn and did keep some of them. I just didn't want to let it all go."

Sometimes tradition is a hard thing to give up. ■

FOR A VIDEO TOUR OF A CREMATORY, GO TO time.com/cremation