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Beauty after death

Verla Jean Zielke provides final styling

By JENNIFER COLTON
East Oregonian

The canvas bag is packed and ready to go, tucked away behind a sofa in an immaculate living room dotted with family photos, artwork and memoirs of a life well lived. When the call comes in, Verla Jean Zielke gathers her bag of tools — combs, curling irons, brushes — and heads out the door, ready to provide a service to a family in need.

For most of her life, Verla Jean cut, washed and styled hair for thousands of people in the Hermiston community. Now retired, she only styles hair when she is asked to by her lone employer: Burns Mortuary of Hermiston.

Now 90, Verla Jean continues to pass on her skills to families in grief.

“As long as they call me, I will go,” Verla Jean said. “As long as I can please the people, I’ll keep doing it. That’s all that matters.”

Verla Jean radiates a soft energy. Her smile is infectious, and the skill of her hands is undeniable. Originally from Wallowa, Verla Jean came to Hermiston in 1952 when her husband, Fred, took over the industrial arts program for Hermiston schools. While Fred kept busy in education and around the house, Verla Jean set up shop as a beautician, eventually converting the garage of their home into a beauty shop.

Four years after she moved to Hermiston — and 60 years ago this May — a neighbor asked Verla Jean for a favor. The neighbor’s daughter had cancer, and when the mother asked Verla Jean to help with the girl’s hair, she agreed. When the daughter died, Verla Jean received a phone call that would become the first of many: Joe Burns told her the family had requested that Verla Jean do the hair for the funeral.

“I’ve always felt that if I was needed, I can do it,” Verla Jean said, tearing up. “This is what God has given me, so I feel I should use it.”

Over 60 years, Verla Jean’s work has preceded more than 100 funerals.

Ken Huber, of Burns Mortuary, said having Zielke in the community is a blessing.

“A vital part of helping the family in their grief and recovery is to see that everything is just the way Mom would like it,” he said. “I have had so many families that

were discussing how to do Mom’s hair and then felt at ease once they found out Verla Jean was still doing it. Literally thousands of families have been touched by Verla Jean’s years of expertise.”

Verla Jean understands loss all too well. She provided the last hair styling for her mother, her grandmother, her aunt and many friends over the years. For the beautician, the experience is a service, a final gift to a family lost in grief.

“I do this to help people face a difficult time losing someone special to them,” she said. “If I can please the family, then that’s my goal.”

But Verla Jean does ask for something from the family — a photo of their loved one. She uses her experience and her bag of tools to re-create the hair style and, occasionally, manicure, the family would like. Each sitting takes between 30 and 45 minutes, depending on the length of the hair and the complexity of the style. Zielke pretends the person is sleeping. She works quickly and quietly so as not to disturb them.

Over the years, she has served men, women and even teenagers.

“The difficult ones are the teenagers and the young people,” she said.

Fred passed away in 2013, but Verla Jean continues to live life fully. She makes greeting cards, she paints, she embroiders. She loves to spend time in her garden and with her Dachshund, Scooter. She makes a personalized, hand-made ornament for each of her grandchildren every Christmas — and she has more than 20 grandchildren and almost as many great-grandchildren.

Zielke keeps herself busy, but she always has time when the mortuary calls.

“If they still need me, I’m available,” she said.

She passed on her beautician skills to a daughter and a granddaughter; her other descendants work in different fields from home health to teaching. All have taken on roles of service, much like their mother and grandmother.

“Her heart is in it for the right reasons — to help families,” Huber said. “We don’t even talk about retirement. We have been blessed.”

Jennifer Colton wrote this feature while working for the East Oregonian. She is now the news director for KOHU Hermiston.



Verla Jean Zielke quietly styles the hair of a deceased person in March at Burns Mortuary, Hermiston, in preparation for funeral services.



Verla Jean Zielke is the beautician for Burns Mortuary in Hermiston, where she performs final styling by family request before a funeral.

OUT OF THE VAULT

Gang escapes after robbing card game in downtown Pendleton

Fifteen men gambling in the back room of the Maze Saloon in Pendleton lost their shorts — to a gang of holdup men who crashed the party and shook them down for whatever they had.

A group of men was enjoying an evening of faro and roulette on Sept. 23, 1901, in C.L. McGinnis’ saloon on Pendleton’s Court Street, where Hamley’s Western Store now stands. Dick Lawrence sat in the lookout chair, and Bud Robinson was acting as dealer. Bartender E.D. Murphy had just exited the room to replenish the supply of beverages, but it was more than alcohol he brought back to the gaming room with him. Five masked men holding revolvers followed Murphy through the swinging bar doors

and immediately demanded that everyone reach for the sky.

The lookout was told to get out of his chair and stand aside. Then two of the robbers produced bags and cleaned out the banks of the faro game (\$850) and the roulette wheel (\$400). Another man rifled the pockets of the gamblers, and a fourth demanded that McGinnis open the safe. The bar’s owner couldn’t remember the combination, and the bartender, who was told to try his hand, was able to turn the combination so the safe could not be opened.

A Chinese man, who had lost \$40, saw an opportunity and dashed out the back door of the bar. One of the men guarding the swinging doors fired a shot at him, but missed. The bullet whanged

off the barber shop next door, sounding the alarm. Realizing that the law would soon show up, the robbers made their exit to the street. Bud Robinson, the dealer, grabbed his pistol and gave chase and started shooting as soon as he made it outside. Twelve shots were fired down Court Street, two by Robinson and the rest by the gang, shattering a plate glass store window and lodging another bullet in the door frame of a second storefront.

Three hundred people had gathered outside the bar by the time the shooting was over. Sheriff J.A. Blakely soon arrived with his deputies, all armed with Winchester rifles, and a posse was saddled and pursuing the gang within an hour of the holdup.

Their tracks were followed down Cottonwood Street (present-day Southeast First) to the river levee, where Colt .45 shell casings were found. The trail continued up the Lee Street grade and through a plowed field, but showed the tracks of only three horses, indicating the gang had split up. Sheriff Blakely and his deputies (including Til Taylor) chased the men for miles, across fields and through barbed wire fences that had been cut, but lost the trail near Echo. None of the holdup men was ever caught.

Renee Struthers is the Community Records Editor for the East Oregonian. See the complete collection of Out of the Vault columns at eovault.blogspot.com

ODDS & ENDS

German man recovers treasure lost in floods

BERLIN (AP) — German authorities say an elderly man in Bavaria has recovered his fortune, which he’d hidden at home for safety only to have recent floods make the building uninhabitable.

Police in the town of Simbach am Inn said Thursday the 81-year-old initially told them he’d hidden the money in his house, which is now in danger of collapse. When they didn’t find it there, he told them he had buried the cash in the garden. They brought in heavy machinery to dig through the garden, eventually coming across the treasure in a metal box some 6½ feet below the surface.

They say the “five-digit sum” of cash is being deposited in the man’s bank account.