Appreciation the from the mailbag

Whenever I spot an email from FCIS, I make time to read it through, knowing that it will be rewarding, informative, memorable and there will be lots to chew on. I wasn’t disappointed in today’s edition [What the Doctor ordered 1/17/2011].

I’m a past president of FCIS, from the 1980s, as I remember. I’m astonished at how far the organization has come since I was involved in it. It is doing much more, taking on more issues, broadening its scope. Congratulations! …

Thanks for all you’ve done and are doing. Please continue with the wonderful newsletter.”  
- Suzanne Antisdel

Attorney-caregiver will speak at FCIS 50th annual meeting

Attorney Elizabeth Hurwitz, of Ann Arbor, will be the featured speaker at the 50th FCIS annual meeting. Ms. Hurwitz provides practical expert legal advice and real life coaching and assistance on all aspects of elder law and elder caregiver legal issues.

Ms. Hurwitz combines her personal experience as a caregiver with her 20-plus years experience as an attorney. Her compassion, coupled with her professionalism, allows her to offer cutting-edge solutions to legal problems faced by people over 50 and to individuals serving as caregivers to older family members or to their friends.

She is a member of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys and the International Coach Federation, the State Bar of Michigan, and the New York State Bar Association.

In addition, Ms. Hurwitz completed the Michigan Institute for Legal Education’s certification program in Elder Law and is recertified yearly by this Institute in Elder Law.
Most of us have experienced a time when something we hope will happen seems to get stuck in a process. Permits for a new home, proceeding with a home sale or purchase, a grant proposal, even a passport application bogged down in the works can leave us feeling impatient, if not frustrated or anxious. That’s kind of how it is with some of the issues that are high on the FCIS agenda—sort of on hold.

Last year, Wendy wrote about then Representative Rebekah Warren’s proposed changes to Michigan’s restrictive funeral laws. Representative Warren was term limited in the state House. Last fall, she ran for Senate, and she won! That was excellent news for FCIS and funeral consumers. Now we have to be patient. Senator Warren has brought her bills with her, but contrary to OUR priorities, the state has other time-consuming issues on its plate (like the budget!). We are in close communication with her office and will let you know when the bills start to move.

Also, last year, we anticipated that a few new green burial sites would open. But in December 2009, the state legislature doubled the mandatory endowment care trust fund to $50,000. That amount would have to be paid before a single plot could be sold. Since green cemeteries tend to be “cash poor and land rich,” it is likely that most efforts to establish them in Michigan have stalled. The conservation burial project here in Leelanau County, Sylvan Legacy, is in the process of negotiating with the Unitarian Universalist congregation for ownership and with Elmwood Township for a zoning change. Fortunately, some traditional cemeteries are recognizing the growing demand for green or, at least, vaultless gravesites. Currently, we know of five such cemeteries in Michigan, which you can find on our website, with several more considering this option.

At the top of the list of remarkable achievements here at FCIS is our newly revamped website. Wendy Lyons spent countless hours working on it over the Chanukah, Christmas and New Year’s holidays, so it’s her gift to us. The new site is attractive, user friendly and packed with valuable information. I am proud to recommend it to friends and acquaintances. There you will find results from our funeral home price survey for areas across Michigan. The survey is a work in progress, with a lot of data to collect and enter. Thanks to the generous bequest FCIS received from Gerald Robert Pearsall in 2009, we have been able to pay for a little help with the general price list collection and with data entry, and we’re making good progress. Be sure to visit www.funeralinformationsociety.org, and let us know what you think.

As I look towards the coming months, I look forward to welcoming our new board members. I am excited about the skills and experiences that they will bring to FCIS. Tim Little and longtime board members Ray Bazmore and Carter Stevenson have served out their terms. A big “thank you” to all three for their years of service.

To all of our members, I offer this challenge: Invite at least one person to join FCIS. Tell them what we do to educate people about their rights as funeral consumers. Encourage them to preplan and to take advantage of the wealth of resources available from our website. New members will receive an attractive, comprehensive free preplanning kit, “Before I Go, You Should Know,” published by the Funeral Consumers Alliance.

Keep on keepin’ on,
Rules for lawful forensic exams clarified

M.E. duties toward next of kin clarified by legislature

Medical examiners must now return an organ or limb after forensic investigation only if the family or personal representative has made a written request for return.

The 2010 amendment follows a Michigan Supreme Court decision issued in Waeschle v Oakland County Medical Examiner. According to court records, nursing home resident Katherine Weins was found lying in a pool of blood on the floor of her room in 2008. She was taken to the hospital, diagnosed with a closed head injury and a scalp laceration, and later died from her injuries. An autopsy was ordered to rule out staff neglect and abuse.

From the autopsy report, Karen Waeschle, Weins’ daughter, learned that her mother’s brain had been removed for further examination and had not been returned to the body prior to final disposition.

Waeschle brought a complaint against Oakland County and the medical examiner claiming a violation of her civil rights and emotional distress. The court rejected the arguments, stating that the statute does not give next of kin possessory right to a deceased’s brain following a lawful forensic examination. In response, the Legislature amended the County Medical Examiners Act 181 of 1953, MCL 52.205(6), to specifically address medical examiners’ duties toward next of kin under these circumstances.

Natural burial ground opens in Oakland County

More than 50 acres have been set aside for natural burial at The Preserve at All Saints Cemetery in Waterford. The Preserve abuts Lake Maceday and adjoins protected state-owned land to form a contiguous parcel of natural woodlands. Shroud-only burial is allowed. Catholic affiliation is not required. Plots start at $1,500; opening and closing fees begin at $350. Visit www.michigannaturalburial.com for more info.

MFDA political contributions down 6.6 percent

The Michigan Funeral Directors Association PAC (MFDA PAC) ranked No. 118 on the Michigan Campaign Finance Network’s “Top 150 Michigan PACs–2010 Election Cycle Through 10/20/10.” MFDA PAC contributed $68,885 between January 2009 and October 2010, which is 6.6 percent less than contributions made during the previous cycle.

Minnesota law expands home funeral options

Minnesotans can finally hold a public home funeral for a nonembalmed decedent. The law, effective Aug. 1, 2010, allows the use of dry ice in lieu of embalming for public viewings on private property up to four days after the death. Previously, the state required embalming if anyone other than family and close friends attended. The Minnesota Funeral Directors Association, which initially opposed the bill, helped craft the final language, and the Minnesota Department of Health backed the changes. Source: Duluth News Tribune

Revamped ‘Caring for the Dead’ available soon

An updated and renamed version of Lisa Carlson’s “Caring for the Dead” is expected to be in bookstores in June. “Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death” exposes the excesses of the burial business, brings readers up to date on how the funeral industry parts the grieving from their money, and shows you how to fight back,” said Josh Slocum, co-author and executive director of FCA. This one-of-a-kind book features a section on the funeral and burial laws in every state written in plain English, which, for the first time, will be available for individual purchase and download exclusively through FCA at www.funerals.org.

A sneak peak of the first chapter, “Circling the Hearse,” is available at www.finalrights.org.
Not many people want to write them.

Even journalists—the very creatures who popularized this story genre—consider “the death beat” the bottom rung of the newsroom hierarchy.

On campus, students of writing and their teachers often shun the craft because they consider it morbid.

Personally, I have a love for obituaries. Not death notices—the paid, formulaic announcements and details of one’s demise—but obituaries—the carefully researched and thoughtfully written stories that capture the essence of a life. I have high regard for those writers who craft these delicate epilogues, and it’s a respect I try to instill in my students.

I’ve been teaching obits in newswriting classes at Oakland University for 17 years, and I’ve heard more than my share of collective groans about this assignment. It usually comes around week six or seven in the semester, after we’ve spent countless hours discussing objectivity and accuracy, dissecting leads and analyzing story forms.

“Finally,” I tell them, “we’re ready to put your skills to work on a complete story.” As they begin to squirm, I explain that the obit is a microcosm of everything you need to do well in order to be a successful journalist.

Nigel Starck, an obit enthusiast and distinguished scholar from the University of South Australia, agrees. “The obituary can offer an eminently satisfying experience for the writer, the student, and the teacher of creative nonfiction,” he says.

“At its best, it demands elegance of expression and discipline of purpose, a gift for relating anecdote and a rigorous checking of fact, a sense of history and poetry, and a style of writing which should be at once engaging and authoritative.”

Even if you disagree with the eloquent professor Starck, you have to admit that obits are a pretty important part of the historical record of a person and a place. To a genealogist, finding an obituary is like discovering a treasure trove of family history.

And often the obituary is the only published record of someone’s name because, as historian Mitchell Stevens says, sometimes “the biggest news in one’s life is often the end of it.”

FCIS is here to help to the end—and beyond. That’s one of the reasons we’ve launched Your Last Writes, an online place for FCIS members to have their obituaries published for free for one month. This is our newest benefit of membership.

We’ll personally monitor the site to insure quality and credibility. Periodically, we’ll even post information, news and resources about everything from writing obituaries and eulogies, planning meaningful memorials and even penning the perfect epitaph.

For more information or to submit an obituary, visit the FCIS website and select Your Last Writes from the menu.

Writing tips for new obituarists

IT’S NOT A EULOGY: An obituary, unlike a eulogy, is not intended to be a tribute. Obits, as published, are concise factual accounts of a person’s life meant to contribute to the historical record. Remember, published obituaries are one of the most-often utilized archival materials for historians, genealogists, scholars and the general public.

NOR IS IT A PAID DEATH NOTICE: Paid death notices are formulaic announcements of a person’s death. Historically, they were published as part of a newspaper’s classified advertising.

INCLUDE THE BASICS: For the record, make sure you include the following information in the obit:

- Name, age, occupation and address of deceased
- Time, place and cause of death
- Birth date, birthplace
- Survivors (typically immediate family)
- Beloved pets
- Funeral and disposition arrangements
- Outstanding or interesting activities and achievements
- Memberships in fraternal, religious or civic organizations
- Service in armed forces
- Anecdotes or recollections from friends or relatives

BE A STORYTELLER: Write a story, not a chronology. Use anecdotal material, and keep it lively.

KEEP IT GENUINE: Avoiding clichés such as “he never met a stranger” will add credibility to the obituary. Also, try to avoid being overly sentimental.

REVISE: Even Ernest Hemingway rewrote his manuscripts several dozen times—and he did his work in longhand! Ask others to proof your copy. Reading it aloud is also a great way to catch awkward phrasings and punctuation issues. Remember, these will probably be the last published words on your subject; you want to get them right.
A brief history of the obit

OBITUARY is from the Latin obit, meaning death. The word obituary has been used to refer to published death notices since the 18th century.

BRITISH INSPIRATION: Although brief announcements of deaths were published in America as early as the 16th century, it took another 300 years and some impetus from the British (who beat us to the punch) for the longer, more-detailed accounts to appear in the press.

ALL ABOUT PROMINENCE: Obits have historically been penned about people like soldiers, public servants, celebrities and adventurers because, according to historian Mitchell Stevens, the audience hangs with such interest on the details of their lives and—unfortunately—their deaths.

MOOD-OMETER: Over time, obituary style has reflected the frame of mind. Accounts of deaths of frontiers men and women emphasized value of life; those of Civil War soldiers were often sentimental and religious.

POETRY ANYONE? For a brief period, during the turn of the 19th century, obits were written in verse. A tribute to Guy Swain, who fell to his death while trying to chase a raccoon from a tree at night, was published in The Delaware Gazette (Ohio) on March 17, 1917. It begins:

A precious one is gone,
A voice we loved is still,
A place is vacant in our home
Which never can be filled.
O Guy, it seemed so bad,
The way you had to go …

GOING GHOUL: Beginning in the 1880s, a trend called death journalism inhabited newspaper obits in England and the United States. During this time, obituaries focused on the graphic and often morbid details of the person’s demise. The New York Times piece on the death of Theodore Roosevelt, for example, leads with an elaborate description of the blood clot that “detached itself from a vein and entered the lungs.”

DEMOCRATIZATION: During the late 20th century, obituary writing was reinvigorated by the rise of the “common man” obit, which recognized ordinary people as well as the aristocracy. Among the pioneers of this genre is Robin Hinch of the Orange County Register whose candid and folksy tributes have been emulated around the country.

LIVES LOST AND FOUND: In 2001, the common man obit was given a new stencil with the “Portraits of Grief” series published by The New York Times. This collection of 200-word obituaries, later published in book form, documented each life lost at Ground Zero.

VIRTUAL VENUE: As the American public discovered the Internet, the drawing power of the obituary was amplified. News organizations began selling obituaries to online sites such as the popular legacy.com. The Web also enabled two other experiments: multimedia tributes and obit blogs.

THIS JUST IN: One of the most famous multimedia pieces was a video-obit posted by The New York Times in 2007 as part of its “The Last Word” series. The opening featured an appearance by the newly deceased subject himself, Art Buchwald. In the first frame, the 81-year-old humorist addressed viewers with a giant grin and said, “Hi, I’m Art Buchwald, and I just died.”

EVERYTHING OBIT: Obituary blogs have waned in popularity but Obit Magazine, a website dedicated to all things death and tribute, has been growing in popularity since its premiere in 2007. Powered by 30-plus journalists, this magazine is considered an authority on the subject.

Sidebar material compiled by Holly Shreve Gilbert who began her study of the obituary while pursuing her master’s degree at Oakland University.

Do you believe it’s important to have a place to turn to where you can get state-specific funeral-related advice and information from people who are not in the business of selling funerals?

If your answer is “Yes!” then please send in your annual dues/donations in the envelope provided.

Remember, FCIS is a 501(c)(3) supported solely through the tax-deductible dues and donations of our members and supporters.

Your contributions make possible the Society’s ongoing educational programs and services to your community.

It’s a team effort. We can’t do it without you.

New!

You can now renew your membership online using a credit card, debit card or your PayPal account. You’ll find the link on the Member page of our website.
eNews:
FCIS launched its first monthly electronic newsletter, or eNews, in January 2010. This short communiqué helps members stay in touch and informed on important issues and events throughout the year. It's delivered to your inbox on the third Monday of every month. If you would like to receive it, send us an e-mail or sign up online on the Newsletter page of our website. (Note: Recipients can unsubscribe at any time.)

Website:
The FCIS website has undergone an extensive—and long overdue—transformation. At www.funeralinformationsociety.org, you'll find a wealth of general and state-specific funeral-related information, including a comprehensive listing of funeral- and cemetery-related laws; funeral-home prices surveys; green cemeteries in Michigan; free and for-sale literature; a home funeral section; online membership and renewals; member obituaries; State of Michigan services; a veterans' burial benefits page with a listing of Michigan’s National Veterans’ Cemeteries; newsletter archives and online eNews subscriptions; and much more.

Our goal is to make it the No. 1 resource for Michigan’s funeral consumers. Please take a look, see what’s available, and refer family, friends and co-workers. Thanks to board member Wendy Lyons, who designed, built and maintains the site.

Membership Benefit:
We’ve launched Your Last Writes, where members and their families can submit the obituary of a recently deceased FCIS member to be posted online for free for one month. See page 4 for more information.

Literature
“Consumer’s Guide to Cemetery Purchases,” published by FCA, includes everything you need to know about buying graves, vaults and monuments. You’ll learn some of the slippery sales tactics to watch out for and how to anticipate surprise charges. Download a free copy from the Literature: Free Info page of our website.

Facebook
Hear about the photographer who wants to “descarify” death? About the man who helps people find their missing dead? Visit Facebook and search for Funeral Consumer Information Society to find our page where you can check out the latest end-of-life news from around the world. We want our members to be our friends.

An informative trio, from the top: The FCIS website is a member-friendly venue with news and information about end-of-life issues; the e-newsletter is delivered to your inbox every month; the FCIS page on Facebook is looking for more friends and encourages your comments.
This year, we are offering two ways to vote: mail or online.

All 2011 dues-paying members are eligible to vote. Ballots must be postmarked by Monday, April 25. Results will be announced online and at the annual meeting.

ONLINE BALLOT: Visit the “Annual Meeting” page of our website to cast your vote.

MAIL-IN BALLOT: Please send in your completed ballot, located on the last page (page 8) of this newsletter, along with your dues/donations, in the enclosed remittance envelope.

Candidate Bios (in alphabetical order)

Al Arens, Alma
I am interested in becoming a board member because of my desire to educate and inform the people about the options available at the time of death. Many people can ill afford to pay the outrageous prices involved with the traditional funeral. Education about the facts will allow people to make better choices. I had a successful career in sales and sales management in the electrical wholesaling industry. Currently, I am the president of Life Enhancing Programs LLC, a training and educational company, and the author of “Integrity – Balancing Body, Mind and Spirit.”

Adeline (Addie) Emmons, Kalamazoo
These things have been big in my life: four children, six grandchildren; assisting in a veterinary practice; a children’s bookstore; civil rights activities; peace group organizing; becoming a lawyer after age 50. I’ve been interested in burial practices since the late ’60s/early ’70s. Being a perpetual student, I’d like to take part in decisions around death to make it more meaningful and less costly for my own family and for the public.

Holly Gilbert, Rochester
Holly is a journalist and journalism instructor at Oakland University. She believes that just as people have the right to live well, they should have the right to die well. “I don’t like going to funeral homes while I’m alive, so why on earth would I want to wind up there when I’m dead?” she says. “That’s not my idea of dying well.” Her student Wendy Lyons encouraged her to get involved with FCIS.

“T’m happy to be on board what I think is a very important journey,” she says.

Alison S. Heins, Traverse City
I have been interested in social justice issues and simple burial practices for a very long time. I first joined a memorial society in the mid-1970s. A few years ago when my husband and I met with friends to talk about end-of-life planning, we were all dismayed to discover that Michigan’s funeral laws are unduly strict, making it very difficult for families to care for their own dead. Realizing that, other than the funeral directors, no one in my area seemed to be any better informed than I was, I decided to represent NW Michigan in FCIS. As an ecologist, my primary interest is to support the development of a “green”, or conservation burial ground in Leelanau County.

Cendra Lynn, Ph.D., Ann Arbor
I was a long-time member of MAPS and believe this is a vital endeavor. As a psychotherapist specializing in grief and traumatic loss, I have a great deal of experience in this field and feel perhaps I can put it to good use with FCIS. I am the director of GriefNet, dba of Rivendell Resources, Inc., which runs e-mail grief support groups and provides resources to the bereaved on the Internet.

Wendy Lyons, Midland
My passion for family-led home funerals brought me to FCIS in 2005. Since 2006, I’ve been advocating for the family’s right to care for our own dead in Michigan giving public awareness presentations at libraries in SE Michigan. My goal was to inform the public of the growing home-funeral movement and lay the groundwork for positive change. I’ve been married for 29 years to my high school sweetheart, David, and we have two adult children, Tabitha and Jacob, who actively support this work. I have a journalism degree from Oakland University, and I have worked as an associate editor on three national business-to-business magazines.

Tom Madsen, Detroit
Thomas Madsen has been a member of the society for more than 30 years and has been office coordinator and recording secretary for about half that time. Before his retirement from full-time work, he was a writer and editor at Wayne State University where he also, for a time, taught English literature and composition.

He has also taught at the University of Alaska near Fairbanks.

Pam Ortner, MS, RN, CHPN, COHN-S, Madison Heights
I am committed to educating consumers and working for legislation so everyone may make an informed choice about after-life rituals and arrangements. Through my work as a hospice nurse educator and in my personal life, I have seen family members and caregivers making decisions at one of their most vulnerable times without being given the option of a funeral or burial other than by the process of embalming and with the use of a high-end casket, which can be cost-prohibitive.

In addition, from an ecological perspective, I am interested in the environmental and occupational impacts of a traditional versus a home funeral and greener burial.
MAIL-IN ELECTION BALLOT: All 2011 dues-paying members are eligible to vote via a mail-in ballot or online. Please send in your completed ballot, along with your dues/donations, in the enclosed remittance envelope. Ballots must be postmarked by April 25. Results will be announced online and at the annual meeting. Check ONLY ONE BOX per office. Enter write-in nominees in space provided.

FCIS Officers, 2011-2012 Term:

1. President
   a. Alison Heins □

2. Vice President
   a. Adeline Emmons □

3. Recording Secretary
   a. Cendra Lynn □

4. Treasurer
   a. Wendy Lyons □

Director Positions, 2011-2014 Term:
Vote for four:

Al Arens □ Holly Gilbert □
Tom Madsen □ Pamela Ortner □

What’s Your Opinion?

In the 2010 Egress, we printed funeral director Randy Garner’s assertion that "any funeral director or consumer advocate who subjected families to this type of unrequested disclosure [of the process of embalming] should be brought up on ethics charges."* In other words, it is ethically OK to perform the procedure, but it’s not ethically OK to talk about it publicly. *American Funeral Director, Dec. 2009

We asked members to let us know what you think by taking our online survey. And this is what you said:

Should funeral directors fully disclose the process of embalming so clients can make an informed decision?

Yes 97%
No 3%

Total Votes: 69