

Growing Together ? Thompson's Funeral Home



By Brock Weir

The Auroran's Sesquicentennial series on Aurora's oldest businesses continues this week with Thompson's Funeral Home, established "below the shop" in 1921.

Growing up on Victoria Street, the imposing building near Wellington Street was a symbol of tradition for Brent Forrester.

These were the days when, even not so long ago, Thompson's Funeral Home was in the heart of Downtown Aurora. It was a familiar site to him growing up, although he had no intention of joining the funeral business. Nevertheless, fate intervened.

It may seem strange for a business that has served Aurora over for nearly 95 years, but in his last 27 years as funeral director, tradition is more and more becoming a thing of the past.

"It's very hard now to define what tradition means," says Mr. Forrester of today's funeral services. "Now, it is more about personalization than anything. There is more emphasis now on the reception part of the funeral than there ever used to be. They'll have people giving eulogies, favourite foods being served, but there is a definite change in that every day brings a new challenge with something new."

It is a challenge they're more than equipped to deal with in their relatively new location on Industrial Parkway South. Having moved from their Victoria Street home in 2005, it was a move necessitated by a growing community and the growing demands that came with it.

Thompson's is a business that has grown along with Aurora. Founded in 1921 by Preston Thompson, whose family also plied their trade in the local furniture industry, the funeral home has its origins in what was then the basement of their Yonge Street store.

After the original furniture store was replaced after a fire in 1954, the funeral business moved to their family home. That building too was modified to meet community demands, including increased parking and a new chapel.

"The way we conduct our business on a day to day basis is not really that different than it has always been," says Mr. Forrester. "Typically for small communities, the funeral homes and the furniture stores had a connection and there was a synergy between the two. Typically, that is because the furniture store had the horses and buggies to deliver the furniture, so they could transport caskets to churches, cemeteries and whatever the case might be."

?In Thompson's case, the caskets were sold at the furniture store, the embalming and preparation was done at the furniture store, and the funeral home as a building didn't really exist until many decades later.?

Although the way they conduct their business hasn't particularly changed, their company has. In 1998, the Thompson family sold the business to the Dignity Memorial Network, an extensive company of North American funeral homes and cemeteries.

The upside of that, he says, is now they have a larger company, can call on ?sister? funeral homes for extra staff or vehicles when the needs arise, and also present new and different ideas for funerals, including vintage and even Harley Davidson hearses owned by other homes. It was under Dignity that they moved their location seeking not only a more practical building but better visibility.

Wherever their location, and despite they are essentially the only game in town, the main thing that sets Thompson's apart from the crowd, according to Mr. Forrester, is client loyalty and a loyalty that is reciprocated.

?There is a huge sense of responsibility here [in running a 92 year old business]. Aurora has always been my community as well. I have no desire to work anywhere else because this is home. There is a sense of loyalty to the community, to the families we serve, and there is a long history of my predecessors and the number of years they put in here.

?There is a misconception that the scientific part of dealing with the deceased ? the embalming and the preparation ? is much more of a factor than what it really is. That is about 15 per cent of the job. The other 85 per cent is working with the family and looking after the needs of the living. I think that's what keeps everyone coming back. They do it for the love of helping and feeling good that you can go home and be proud when you look yourself in the mirror that you have helped a family out.?