

The Coffin Room

By Diane Sterne

A tale was told of a home located 600 feet above Granite Creek that housed a “coffin room”. Over the years, the owners of the house have been forgotten; however, some detective work may have uncovered its exact location.

The home was reported to have been between the town sites of Granite Creek and Blakeburn. This information together with its elevation above the Creek leads to one possibility – The Holmes’ Homestead.

Walton Holmes was a Granite Creek prospector in 1885. He brought his bride, Lucie, to the area in about 1901. They had previously owned land near Princeton. Walton and Lucie were well-respected in the Granite Creek community and when their first home burned down as winter hit, locals organized a house-raising bee to construct a new one. Walton and Lucie had four children and celebrated their 50th anniversary with almost 200 family members and friends at their homestead.

Walton was a jack-of-all trades. He was a bridge builder, surveyor, sailor, prospector, store keeper, road builder, hunting guide, and farmer. While she wasn’t a doctor, Lucie was often sought out for medical assistance. She was a mid-wife to numerous women of Granite Creek and many ill people arrived on her step for help to recover from their ailments.

Life expectancy in the early 1900’s was much shorter than it is today. Often children died of illnesses and women died in childbirth. Prospectors perished in mining accidents and animal attacks occasionally occurred. Life was hard. During this time there were undertakers, but fancy funeral homes were for the wealthy. When someone died, the undertaker would embalm the body (sometimes), put it in a coffin and take it to the home of a family member. The coffin and body would be placed in a room of the house (usually the sitting room or parlour) where it would remain for a couple of days so that friends and family could view the body. Usually the coffin was left open and family members would take turns sitting beside the body day and night until the burial. While it might seem horrifying to us, it was a common practice a century ago.

In the Princeton Star, undertaker, D.M. “Tink” French advertised his caskets as: “we have buried others, why not you? Caskets cozy and comfortable. Give us a trial,” and “just received, a shipment of caskets, warm and inviting – come in and inspect them.”

Did the sitting room of the Holmes’ Homestead house the fabled coffin room? While we will probably never know for sure, we do know that the practice of using the parlour as a viewing room was a common way to say goodbye to a loved one.

~*~