

# Profile

By Steve Cronin





# Fun with the Famous

## Funeral Director Opens a Museum Filled with Memorabilia

John Herzig didn't set out to create a tourist attraction.

He didn't really intend to start collecting funeral memorabilia either.

But when the trickle of tourists to his business became a small flood, the third-generation owner of Toland-Herzig Funeral Homes and Crematory in Ohio, decided to build a museum to display his impressive collection of more than 2,000 Mass cards, funeral programs, photographs and assorted items.

"It's hard to run a funeral home when you are getting all these calls from these bus tours all the time," Herzig said.

Herzig opened his Famous Endings museum and café in September in the former casket showroom of his 14,000-square-foot funeral home in Dover – one of four locations, including a reception center, his company operates.

The event drew about 200 people to view what the 64-year-old says is the largest privately held collection of its kind in the world.

Herzig's trove includes everything from Joe DiMaggio's list of people who attended Marilyn Monroe's funeral to a lantern from a carriage that carried President Abraham Lincoln's body. There

are worksheets Elvis Presley signed for his mother's funeral, a program from Clark Gable's funeral and cannon shell casings from the 21-gun salute performed at President John F. Kennedy's interment at Arlington National Cemetery. There are items representing stars of every size in the celebrity firmament – from Paul Newman to Tiny Tim to Anna Nicole Smith. It's one of the few places in the world where Buddy Holly, Robert E. Lee and J.C. Penney rub shoulders.

Herzig not only displays the items, he's also willing to give an entertaining talk on any piece he possesses. "It's something I really enjoy," Herzig said. "And if I ever retire, this is something I can do part time."

While it seems natural that a funeral director collects funeral memorabilia, a twist of fate set Herzig onto the path to his museum.

Herzig started out collecting autographs. In 1996 he had the opportunity to get a picture signed by late World Heavyweight champion Joe Louis. Herzig jumped at the offer. When his autograph arrived, Herzig found the package also contained a program from the boxer's 1981 funeral.

"That's where it all started. It kind of went crazy from there," Herzig said.





**Above: John Herzig houses his collection of funeral memorabilia in display cases at his funeral home and museum. Opposite page: Herzig's collection includes items from the funeral of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, top and bottom, and from other celebrities, right, including Humphrey Bogart. (Photos courtesy of Famous Endings museum)**

The Ohio man's interest in autographs was superseded by a desire to collect small reminders of the passing of some of history's biggest names. Herzig found material at auctions and got gifts from colleagues who knew of his developing hobby.

At first, Herzig collected only for his own amusement. That changed as word of his hobby spread.

Herzig enjoys people and enjoys talking about his collection. He found that people enjoyed hearing stories about his memorabilia. He was invited to speak to civic groups, church meetings and service clubs.

The funeral director used his interest in celebrity passings to liven up Toland-Herzig's Facebook page. He posted quizzes, conducted contests and paid tribute to celebrities on the anniversaries of their deaths. He's cut back on his

Internet activities, but the page still routinely tops Funeral Innovations' ranking of industry Facebook pages.

All that attention convinced Herzig to put his collection where people could see it.

"In the beginning, I would throw stuff in a box. But then people started saying 'Why don't you display it?'" Herzig said.

Herzig placed some items in a cabinet near the funeral home's restroom. He watched how visitors reacted. "I would see people visit (the cabinet) and then go get someone else to take a look," Herzig said.

Encouraged, he placed additional cabinets throughout the funeral home. These became a focal point for people attending viewings and services at the business.

The Toland-Herzig funeral home is located in a scenic, Amish area of Ohio. Tourism is big business there,

and visitors are always looking for something interesting to see.

Tour operators began calling to arrange bus visits.

"I had to start turning people away because I couldn't do funerals," he said.

While the museum is part of the funeral home building, and he still has memorabilia throughout the funeral home, the new design allows Herzig to more easily separate the museum from the everyday events at his funeral home.

He asks for a suggested \$5 donation for museum visitors. He also includes access to the museum, which also has a cafe, as an option for families using his funeral home as a \$75 add-on to the funeral arrangements.

The facility features about 500 items from Herzig's collection.

Don't see funeral memorabilia



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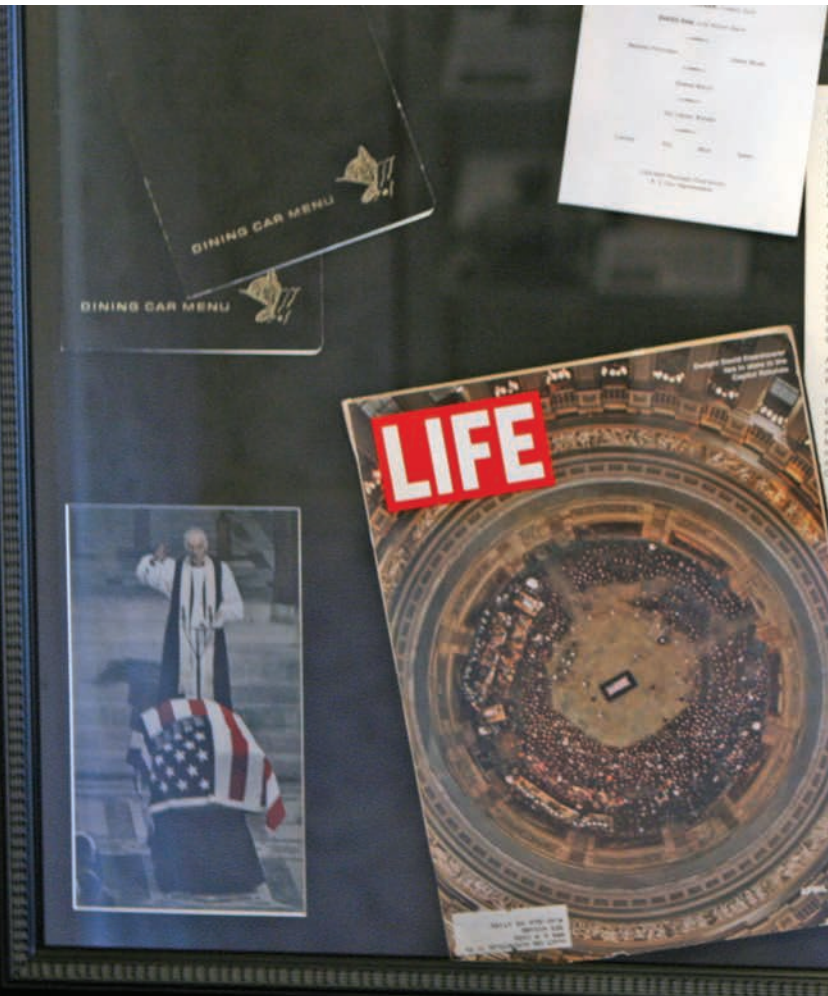
# OPERATIONS PLAN 13-66

## FUNERAL PLAN FOR THE HONORABLE DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

HQ COMMAND, USAF  
20 DECEMBER 1966



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Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower was the most famous general of World War II and the 34th President of the United States.

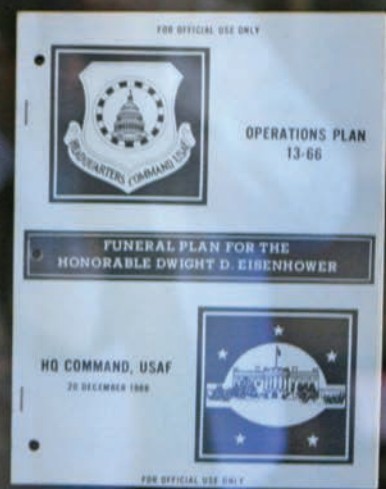
Born October 14, 1889 in Denison, Texas. He was a career Army man which he rose to the level of five-star general and oversee Allied forces in Europe including the famous D-Day invasion of France in 1944. After the war, he served briefly as President of Columbia University. He later would be chosen as the Republican candidate for US President and served as US President from 1953-1961. As a hobby, he enjoyed painting. He was also a religious man having been baptized a Presbyterian.

He married his wife Mamie in 1916 and had two sons. He will be remembered as instrumental in the addition of the words "Under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance and the addition of "In God We Trust" as the motto of the United States.

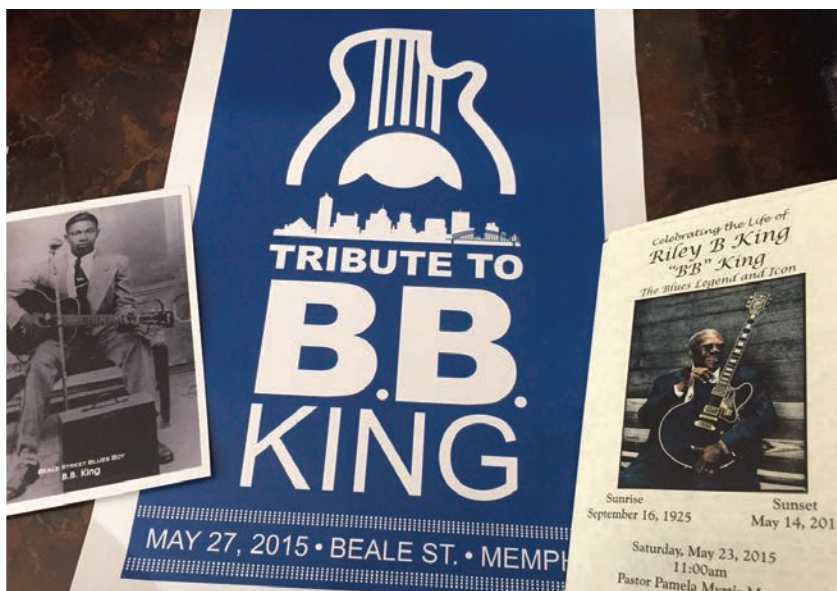
Eisenhower died of Congestive Heart Failure on March 28, 1969 at Walter Reed Hospital and the following day was moved to the Washington National Cathedral where his body lay in repose for 28 hours. On March 30 he was moved by caisson to the US Capitol where he lay in state in the Rotunda. He was then returned to the National Cathedral where he was given an Episcopal Church service. That evening Eisenhower's body was placed on a train en route to Abilene, Texas. His body arrived on April 2 and interred in a small chapel on the grounds of the Eisenhower Public Library.

Among Eisenhower's achievements, he was named one of the Most Widely Admired People of the 20th Century and will be remembered as one of the greatest US Presidents of all time.

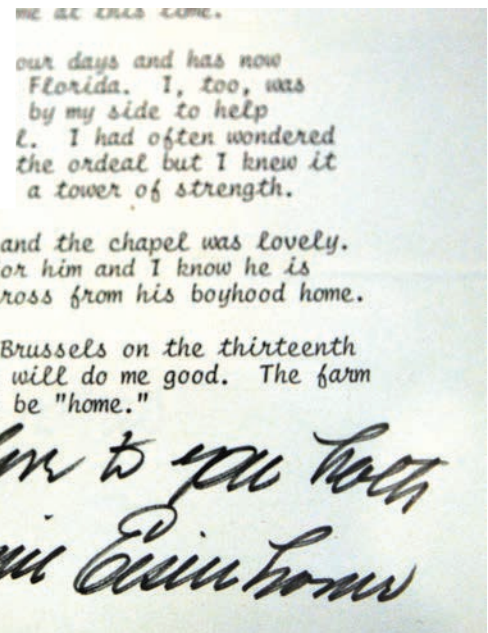
Famous Events has explained the original three train menus (Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner) and photos of his funeral train as well as a copy of the original Funeral Plan, a handwritten letter from Mamie Eisenhower to the General and the original funeral service program and additional letter to the Washington National Cathedral.







**Memorabilia from the celebration of life for B.B. King at the Famous Endings museum. Below: Letter from First Lady Mamie Eisenhower. (Photos courtesy of Famous Endings museum)**



from a favorite celebrity? No problem. Herzig will entertain requests for special access to items not on display.

“If people come in and don’t see something from someone who they are looking for – if they ask me, I will show it to them,” he said.

That friendly attitude, as well as Herzig’s contacts in the funeral service industry, mean his collection is likely to keep growing. Now, when a celebrity dies, Herzig is usually sent a program or some other memorabilia from the service without even having to ask.

One good friend is Bob Boetticher Sr., the CEO of the National Museum of Funeral History in Houston, who has also planned funeral services for a long list of celebrities and politicians. Boetticher has helped with arrangements for former presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford as well as Farrah Fawcett, Merv Griffin and others.

### **Creative Outreach**

Herzig also subscribes to a service that sends out alerts whenever there is a high-profile death. He will visit Legacy.com for ideas about funerals that should be memorialized in his collection.

For older items, Herzig usually has to pay – and he’s willing to part with cash to obtain an interesting piece. The Joe DiMaggio list cost him about \$3,500 – the most expensive item in his collection, he said.

While his big-name items certainly draw attention to Herzig and his hobby, they are not necessarily his most treasured, or most sought-after acquisitions.

“I collect famous names, but I get the biggest kick out of people who used their God-given gifts to change our world for the better,” he said.

Represented in his collection are Wilson Greatbatch, who invented the cardiac pacemaker and Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity. There are also items associated with Eugene Pulley, the inventor of the television remote control, as well as the men responsible for the Frisbee, the Pillsbury Doughboy and the plastic pink lawn flamingo.

“His place is just marvelous. You can’t even fathom what he’s got,” said Frank Dawson, a friend and fellow funeral home operator from Liverpool, Ohio. “How he gets this stuff, I don’t know.”

Dawson lives about 90 minutes

away from the Toland-Herzig funeral home, but he says a visit is always worth the trip. The Liverpool man has an interest in presidential history and enjoys perusing Herzig’s collection of memorabilia.

That famous picture of Navy Chief Petty Officer Graham Jackson crying as he plays the accordion as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s funeral train leaves Warm Springs, Georgia? Herzig not only has a copy of the picture, he’s got the actual accordion.

“I’m surprised he doesn’t have pictures or memorabilia from Joseph of Arimathea,” Dawson said.

Herzig is uniquely suited for the dual challenges of running a successful funeral home and entertaining visitors to a museum, his friend said.

“He’s a very compassionate, very open gentleman,” Dawson said. “He doesn’t bore people. He’s got a nice ability to say, ‘Here’s the program from Rodney Dangerfield’s funeral, and here’s the line that says, ‘I get no

respect.’ And then he moves on quickly from there. Some of these places, you get a guide that just goes on and on. (Herzig)’s very enjoyable, and his enthusiasm just permeates the visitors.”

While Dawson, who collects memorabilia connected to football great Lou Holtz and famous people from the Ohio valley, is envious of Herzig’s ability to acquire collectible items, he also admires his friend’s dedication to his life’s work.

“He’s 100 percent funeral. He maybe takes a weekend off once a year,” Dawson said. “He’s just a fine, fine gentleman.”

Herzig sees his hobby and

museum as a way to complement his funeral business.

In 2005 “Ripley’s Believe It Or Not” told the world about his collection. He gets plenty of newspaper, television and radio coverage for his museum – and funeral home. He can also use his talks to get audiences thinking about their own needs when making funeral arrangements.

“I can use examples from celebrities and the personalizing of their funerals and use it to discuss how to personalize a service,” he said. “It’s a nonthreatening way to start the discussion. You are not giving a sales pitch on preneed or

cremation, you are actually telling human interest stories.”

When “Star Trek” actor James Doohan died, attendees at his memorial service received flashlights inscribed with the phrase “Beam me up, Scotty.” Herzig has one of the flashlights. He also has a great example to use when discussing personalizing a funeral service.

Herzig hopes publicity about his museum will help him fill some gaps in his collection.

He’d love to add items from TV host Ed Sullivan’s funeral or something related to arrangements for “Saturday Night Live” comedian Gilda Radner.

But he would really like to add Dorothy Fuldheim to his museum. A television pioneer, Fuldheim began doing news and analysis on the air in Cleveland in 1947 and continued until she had a stroke in the mid-1980s.

“Barbara Walters would tell you that she’s the one who set the stage for Oprah Winfrey and Walters. She was a pioneer in women’s journalism,” he said.

Herzig’s museum and his funeral business are family affairs. His daughter Tricia McKinnon represents the fourth generation working at Toland-Herzig. Many of the stories he tells visitors to the museum are “Joyce stories,” named for his wife.

One drawback of having his collection on site is that sometimes, people get too interested in what is on display.

“Now, when we dismiss at the funeral, we have to check the museum, because people will leave the chapel, but they won’t go to their cars because they are enjoying the museum,” he said. “When you get people walking in and enjoying your place – that doesn’t happen too often at a funeral home.” •



**John Herzig and his wife Joyce Herzig.**  
*(Photo courtesy of Famous Ending museum)*