

Repository, The (Canton, OH)

Estimated printed pages: 6

December 23, 2001

Section: Main Story

A life unclaimed

TIM BOTOS

Repository staff writer

No one came to say good-bye to Russell Staufken. Four members of a color guard fired three rounds. Taps played on the speakers. A flag was draped on the gold-colored casket.

The service lasted 15 minutes.

The only people at the cemetery for his funeral that Wednesday last year were the funeral directors.

It was no surprise.

After all, he was dead for a week before anyone noticed. A mailman finally realized mail was piling up inside Staufken's box at Sunny Acres trailer park.

The Navy veteran and former Hoover Co. employee died of heart disease. He was found lying on his left side, on his couch. Metal springs poked through the fabric. Drapes were rotting. The place was dirty.

He was 73 years old.

He was alone.

His body went straight into a freezer at the Stark County morgue. Staufken had no relatives and few friends. No one claimed his body.

He's not the only one. Every year, a handful of people in the county die alone. Usually, they have relatives who can't or don't want to be found. But once in a while, there's someone like Staufken.

“It’s horrible,” said Harry Campbell, chief investigator for the coroner’s office. “No one should die like that.”

He was a loner

Staufken already was living in the Perry Township trailer park when Grover Hensley bought the place a few years ago. Hensley never was inside Staufken’s white trailer with green trim, a 1962 Champion, tucked beneath a maple tree.

The old man’s \$170 lot rental was on time every month. It was funny, landlord and tenant always seemed to cross paths in the same place, a couple hundred feet from the trailer, near a trash bin.

Staufken would hold a bag of trash in one hand. And he’d always be dressed in brown pants, a brown shirt and a brown derby hat. It was the same outfit he wore every day. He walked with his head down. They would usually exchange a “hello,” but that’s about it.

“He was a recluse,” said Sandy Cramblett, who lived next door.

From the time he moved into the trailer park in 1984, Staufken was a regular at the bar at Embassy Lanes, a block away. Often, he’d sit in the same chair at the horseshoe-shaped counter.

He drank a lot.

Usually, Miller Lite.

Joan Giordano, who tended bar, used to exchange Christmas cards with Staufken. Sometimes, he’d give her husband, Vince, a 50-cent piece. She wasn’t sure why. But, he was likable enough.

“He just was this little old guy who was lonely,” she said.

Perhaps no one knew Staufken as well as Jim Cowl. He works the graveyard shift at the bowling alley, cleaning, after the place closes. The two met in 1988 and they hit it off right away.

Most nights, Staufken would leave the bar, go home, then come back around midnight. He'd spend the next eight hours talking to Crowl and helping him empty ashtrays and throw away beer bottles. Usually, Staufken had a Camel cigarette in his mouth.

"He'd go through three or four packs a night," Crowl said.

They talked about the Navy. They chatted about Crowl's family or Staufken's parents, who were dead. They argued about whether there was such a tree as a red maple or if it actually was a Japanese red maple. One thing for sure, Crowl rarely could beat him in an argument.

"He was smart," Crowl said.

They kept each other company.

"I miss him sometimes," Crowl said.

Staufken kept pictures of his friend's family in his trailer. Four years ago, he bought a portable stove as a wedding gift for Crowl's daughter, Lori. He didn't have a car, so, to get it home, he balanced the stove on the handlebars of his black bicycle that looked like it was from the 1950s.

"There wasn't anything the guy wouldn't do for you," Crowl said. "A lot of people didn't know that about him."

Staufken tried to give him money to help pay a veterinarian's bill. But Crowl wouldn't accept it.

Sometimes, they talked religion. Staufken read about Christianity and other beliefs, including Mormonism. He wanted to be buried next to his mother, Lillian, and father, William, in Forest Hill Cemetery.

"He worried about being cremated," Crowl said. "He read something where your spirit stays in your body for three days ... he was worried about that."

His earlier days

Staufken spent much of his childhood in a house on Clyde Place SW in Canton. He went to Lincoln High School but enlisted in the U.S. Navy after

his junior year, in 1945. He was seaman second class when discharged July 17, 1946.

He apparently was forgettable. Lloyd Wilson went to Lincoln with Staufken. They were in the same homeroom in their junior year.

“Nope, don’t remember him,” he said.

Staufken married once.

He wed Marie Carrick, a hairstylist, on April 15, 1966. But five months later, the marriage was over.

They sued each other for divorce. He claimed she was cold and indifferent. She argued that he was guilty of gross neglect of duty and extreme cruelty.

He worked at the Hoover Co. from 1947 to 1974. Company records shed some light on his time there.

His cousins, Harold and Donald Winkler, who worked at Hoover, apparently helped get him the job. He was a jack of all trades — materials handler, dusting tool packer, janitor, trucker.

He resigned because of family difficulties. Company officials left a door open for him to be rehired.

But he never returned.

Most of his time at Hoover, he lived with his parents on Clyde Place. Crowl said he left the company to care for his ill mother, who died in 1980.

Bonnie Ball lived a few doors away and across the street from the Staufkens on Clyde Place.

A nod of his head when he left the house to go to the store was about as neighborly as Staufken got.

“I always felt sorry for him,” she said.

Staufken played the piano well. He had lessons when he was a kid. In the summer, with windows open, it was a free concert of classics.

“I could hear him from over here,” Ball said. “You didn’t need a TV or radio ... just sit back and listen.”

Pat Brand’s parents used to be friends with Staufken’s parents. Her aunt and uncle lived next door to them.

Campbell, of the coroner’s office, found her name on a card in Staufken’s trailer. He phoned Brand on Nov. 1, 2000, the day the body was found. She was getting ready to leave for Florida and couldn’t claim the body.

“His parents worshipped him,” she said.

Staufken was an only child. He once helped his father put together a Christmas display in their basement. The set included a model train, and Brand said it was a neighborhood attraction for years.

Brand’s mother, Stella Wise, and Staufken exchanged Christmas cards until she died three years ago. Brand then carried on the tradition.

She said that, in his younger years, Staufken was slender, about 160 pounds, with dark hair and dark eyes. She said he didn’t date much.

“But he was very good looking.”

The funeral

Heitger Funeral Service in Massillon took care of Staufken’s funeral, though it wasn’t by choice.

Cathi Heitger was president of District 16 of the Ohio Funeral Directors Association at the time. The coroner’s office phones her when a body is unclaimed, and it’s up to her to find a funeral home to take the body, or take it herself.

She wound up with it.

Coroner's investigators gave her sketchy information on Staufken. She knew he was a Navy veteran.

"Vets can't be buried in a potter's field," she said, referring to areas of cemeteries for people who have no money.

But Staufken had some money, mostly a \$6,300 checking account at Key Bank. So Heitger arranged to have him buried at Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery, near Rittman.

On Nov. 8, she and her father-in-law, Robert Heitger Sr., took Staufken's body there for a service and burial. She doesn't remember who drove.

It was a clear fall day.

The temperature was in the 50s.

His 18-gauge, gold-colored casket was average. It was modest and unassuming, like Staufken. The casket and vault cost a combined \$3,750.

The service, like all at the cemetery, was at a committal shelter, not the gravesite. The Heitgers and four members of the Amherst area honor guard were the only ones attending.

"They were all perfectly pressed and perfectly dressed," she said.

Two weeks after the burial, Staufken's landlord, Hensley, filed an application with probate court to be executor of Staufken's estate.

There wasn't much.

Aside from the checking account, he had \$425.78 inside a green metal box and four uncashed Maytag pension checks, worth \$127.69 each. An appraiser said the mobile home was worthless. Hensley paid \$975 to have it hauled away.

After all the bills were paid, all that was left of Russell Staufken was \$752.04. The money was put in a government unclaimed fund account.

His final resting place

Heitger didn't know Staufken's religion, so she marked a Christian box on his burial papers. His stone is granite, just like those of the more than 1,300 other veterans buried in the cemetery.

"I've been meaning to get up there to see where he's at," Hensley said.

To Staufken's left, in Section 16 of the cemetery, lies Roger Curtis, Army veteran and "Loving husband, father & son." To his right is Frank Mohoric, a Navy veteran and "Loving husband, Dad, Grandpa."

A cross is engraved on Staufken's stone. The bare essentials of his life are etched on the front. His name. His birth date. The day he died. The fact he was a Navy veteran of World War II.

That's all.

Dying alone is a fear for many, said Dr. Marjorie Woodruff, a clinical psychologist, who teaches a class on death and dying at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

She said most people want to die in their own bed, asleep, surrounded by friends and family.

"The ideal death is something few people realize," she said.

Copyright 2001, The Repository, All Rights Reserved.