

## A VENT WINDOW VIEW – HEARSE-ING AROUND

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Nothing messes up the somber reverence of a graveside funeral faster than seeing the hearse with the star of the show stuck in mud a quarter mile short of the cemetery.

City folk with their paved streets seldom if ever contend with such problems, but rural cemeteries are often located at the end of narrow, graveled lanes that run between unfenced fields that are often farmed right up to the graveled tracks.

These singular routes into out of the way graveyards are usually dead ends (come on guys, too many jokes have already been made about that phrase) serving only the cemetery and, sometimes, a small church where attendance is limited because so many of its members now occupy plots in the adjacent facility.

Often, the gravel surface on these roads has been weathered out of existence by winter snows and spring rains. Also, when flumes meant to carry water from grader ditches across low spots fill up with silt from the farm fields alongside the lane, a night with heavy dew can turn that section of the road into a swamp suitable for alligators.

Such “weather limited” access to a cemetery makes a graveside sendoff a major problem for the mortuaries typically found in small, rural towns. Such firms usually have only one hearse available for a funeral and, in many instances, it will be old enough to qualify as an antique. (Frankly, while in high school, I stared at those black monsters with uneasy curiosity about the preparation and transport of the dead, but I never quite dared a close-up look.)

The underlying reason for the utilization of those aged choices was that the hearses were usually trade-ins from upscale, big city mortuaries where the cut-throat competition forced them to employ the largest, grandest, newest transports they could acquire. These vehicles, when they eventually turned up in rural communities, became street-side curios. While they were usually parked behind the large, very well-kempt house that was the local mortician’s home and workplace, when a funeral was scheduled or a pickup had to be made from some distant location, the hearse would often be visible from the street.

Few American vehicles after the Thirties illustrated pomp and ceremony better than a stately Packard or Cadillac hearse accented with decorative chromed scrolls on the exterior, while purple curtains with golden ropes provided privacy for their cargoes. There were other makes; Lincolns, Buicks, and Pontiacs all appeared from time to time in front of mortuaries doing business in the rural areas where I spent my youth.

Never did those operations seem to realize they needed a machine with more traction through mud and snow than those ungainly two-wheel drive monsters could provide. Four-wheel drive trucks were produced by several firms following WW II, so the technology was there. But, the habit of buying units that had served the big name, big city funeral homes remained; pomp and ceremony was apparently more important than worrying about traction down a muddy path. It seems no one ever realized that a funeral home really should provide the same service warranty as that offered by our postal service which is: *“Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”*

There is something regal about that, but surely someone can come up with something with more zing. How about, “Don’t let your loved one arrive late at his own funeral” or “No need to worry! Dial **URN** a hurry.”