



FFT REPORT

Cemeteries and Burial

Culture and Traditions for people from
the Traveller communities.

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Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies are distinct ethnic groups with their own belief structures, languages and customs. They do share some similarities with regard to traditions and superstitions around burying the dead however there are also many differences.

For example, both Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers will hold a wake the night before the funeral however Romany Gypsies will generally bring the deceased home the night before the funeral whereas it is customary for the deceased from the Irish Traveller community to stay in the funeral parlor the night before the funeral.



Family

For both Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies many family members and friends will travel for miles to visit the person who is severely ill and the terminally ill patients will never be left alone. Irish Travellers will call the priest to read the last rites and confession just before death. Irish Travellers will keep a vigil and candles are lit near the bed of the dying person to light the way to the after-life. Candles are kept illuminated until after the funeral. In the Irish community it is believed that 'God now lights the heavens to them'. In both cultures, after death there will continue to be a constant flow of visitors who come to pay their respects to the deceased and their family.

In both traditions close family members will wear black following a death in the family. Typically this will be for a year following the death of close family members. Some traditional Travellers will wear black for the rest of their lives following the death of very close family members.

Death is very difficult to come to terms with for the Traveller communities and the culture and customs can help in some way to try and come to terms with death. Many of the customs refer to the great respect that Travellers have for their deceased loved ones and allowing the spirit of that person to pass onto the afterlife without disruption. 'Let them rest in peace.' Is a common phrase amongst the Traveller communities. Travellers maintain a strong connection with loved ones once they have passed. For Travellers death does not mark the end. The spirit lives on and the graveside is the place in which to grieve and show your respect for the deceased.

Once a loved one has been buried it is customary for the grave to be attended regularly by the family and graves are impeccably kept. Some Travellers will visit the grave on a daily basis, particularly if the death was sudden or the person was young. It is common for Travellers to spend long periods of time at the graveside talking to the deceased. Families will often keep a bench at the graveside, sometimes a marble bench, so they can sit and talk to the deceased and keep that connection with the spirit of their loved one going. Keeping the grave is a sign of respect for the deceased as they are looked after in death as well as life and also important for social status within the community and a sign of how much they were loved.



Ceremony

Many Travellers have specific requirements on where they should be buried. For Romany Gypsies, on the final day the body of the deceased is taken to the cemetery to be buried. On the way they will pass certain landmarks that mean something to that person, stopping at each location to allow the deceased time to connect with those places before finally arriving at their final resting place. For a traditionally nomadic community the grave is the final or only resting place and the ultimate marker of the deceased. The cemetery will traditionally be where there are other relatives and the family have a long standing history which often goes back hundreds of years. Travellers may go hundreds of miles to bury their loved ones. Irish Travellers are often taken 'back home' to Ireland. The bodies of married couples are often buried side by side signifying the commitment that is made in marriage goes on into the afterlife. Within the Irish community the family graves are blessed by the priest on a yearly basis.

Irish Travellers will have the service in a Catholic church. The casket will be open the night before the funeral and holy pictures, rosary beads, and sometimes prayers and their jewelry will be placed in the coffin. Sometimes there is a mass the night before and the family often have a 'wake' the night before the funeral where family and friends come for food and drinks. The following morning the ceremony will take place in the church. The person's life story is told (either by priest or family member), and some Irish songs are played. After church (full mass) the hearse is taken to the deceased's favorite places this can take up to three hours. For example, the funeral party may go to the deceased's favorite pub, stables or home where songs are played. Following this, the deceased is taken to the cemetery for the burial where the priest blesses the grave and leads the funeral party in decades of the rosary.

Possessions

Possessions such as clothes, bedding and the vehicle or trailer, if they passed away in it, are traditionally burnt. This is done as a sign of respect to the person, so the possessions go with them to the afterlife and to aid the spirit to leave this world for the next. Money, holy bracelets, tiny crosses, the wedding ring and photos of the immediate family are often also placed in the coffin for the person to take with them to the afterlife.

Grave

Irish Travellers like to keep candles and lights at the grave side and many now keep eternity candles which they like to keep lit at all times. This light symbolizes the spirit of that person and keeps the internal light of that person alive.

Many of the wreaths that are laid show the theme of Travelling such as a floral lorry however many also show the theme of being rested and seated. The floral chair which is called the 'vacant chair' is made of white or red flowers and allow the deceased to finally rest. Some keep a 'vacant chair' in their homes and this represents the connection that the living have with the deceased. A floral pillow is also made for the deceased to rest their head. Hearts are also common and represent the family giving their hearts to the deceased. Floral decorations of wagons, horses, trailers, horse shoes, dogs, birds and other objects that represent the deceased are also made, allowing family to connect with their loved one. Irish Travellers will often choose religious statues or the statues of their favorite saints as a headstone or to be placed on the grave to guide and protect the deceased.

Traditionally for people from the Romany community photographs of the deceased would be buried with them, however, this has changed over time and photographs are now often placed on the graves for both the Romany and Irish Traveller community's. They enable the family to connect with the spirit of loved ones but also as a community, many of whom are non-literate, it is a way of identifying the graves of family members or people from the community that they knew.



Headstone

The height of headstones and colours used are extremely important for the Traveller community. The size symbolises the love and respect they had for their loved ones. The larger the headstone the greater the respect and love the family feel they can portray. Due to changes in regulations many Travellers are now forced to have smaller headstones. This can cause great distress for the community.

The shape of the headstones are also important. For example, a heart symbolises the family giving their heart to the deceased and may be used for a child or someone who has passed on too early. The bible tells the life story of the deceased and a cross acts as religious protection, angels are used to guide the deceased through to the afterlife and the gates of heaven are there to allow the spirit to enter through into heaven. These symbols are of vital importance to the loved ones and helps them with the grieving process in allowing the spirit to move on peacefully. Travellers can feel great shame if they are unable to have a large headstone with their own specific requirements and will feel that they have not done the best for their loved ones.

It is common for people from the community to have symbols of things that they had a great interest in carved into their headstones. This allows the living to keep a connection with that person and keep the interests of that person going in this world. Death is not accepted as a final end. The grave is a resting place and the person lives on through the symbols and the things they enjoyed.

Memorabilia

Memorabilia and objects that the deceased collected and enjoyed are kept by the grave side this keeps that persons memory alive and connects the deceased with the living. Gates are commonly found at Travellers graves which symbolises and allows the spirit to pass through the gates of heaven. Regulations preventing memorabilia and specific cultural requirements for the grave can cause significant distress and interfere with the grieving process.

Memorabilia is often used to represent the person who is deceased and helps to keep their memory alive. The grave may not feel like the persons resting place, they feel that they do not own it or can connect with the deceased without memorabilia that represents them.

Curbing/Edging

Curbing or edging around the grave is also extremely important for people from the Travelling communities. It marks the sacred space of that person and creates protection against people, animals or machinery from passing over the grave. Children are taught from a young age that it is highly disrespectful to walk over someone’s grave and walking across the grave can be interpreted as disrupting the spirit or disturbing the dead. The phrase, ‘let them rest in peace’ is common amongst the community and walking across the grave can be seen as disrupting this peace.

References:

Information to produce this document has been gathered from individual community members and the following books and websites.

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