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## magazine

# BIG DEATH

Meet the corporate force behind  
Halifax's funeral-home industry

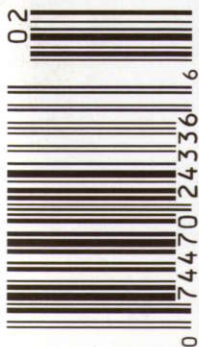
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## Some of Halifax's oldest funeral homes aren't the family-run operations that they appear to be

BY ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE

**I**t had already been a rough day. We had almost finished packing up my mother's room at the nursing home when my phone rang. The call was from the JA Snow Funeral Home on Windsor Street and the voice on the other end was the funeral director we had met with the day before. "Uhhh... I don't quite know how to tell you this," he started.

"I'm very sorry but... it appears that we forgot to have your mother's rings removed before she was cremated today."

It seemed beyond impossible. My mother had died the day before, wearing the six rings that were her most precious possessions. They were her legacy—irreplaceable.

What I didn't know then, but would soon learn through the unpleasant and protracted lawsuit that ensued, was that I had already made a big mistake of my own.

I had, unknowingly, left my mother in the hands of Big Death.



## HALIFAX PRICING

Funeral pricing is a complex morass of packages, service fees and add-ons. American funeral home operators are required by the Federal Trade Commission to provide a detailed price list upon request and to “unbundle” the prices on their package deals. No similar laws exist in Nova Scotia but funeral homes here are required to have a minimum of six caskets of different grades and prices on display, including their lowest-priced model.

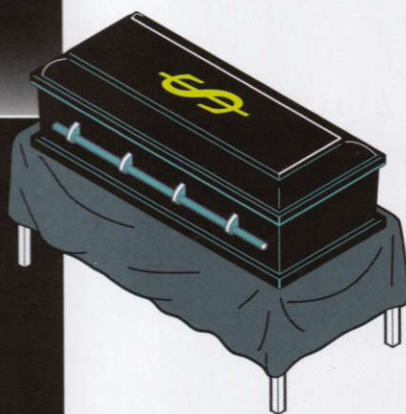
An informal survey of pricing for a basic cremation in Halifax found a range of prices, and varying levels of willingness to disclose pricing information. Many Halifax funeral homes refused to separate out package prices, so choosing an alternative casket or excluding a particular service was often not an option. All insisted that the best way to determine need would be to meet in person.

Keep in mind that the prices we were quoted were for a no-frills cremation with absolutely no extras—no funeral service, visitation, death certificate, or decorative urn. All prices are plus tax.

JA Snow declined to provide any pricing in writing and would only “ballpark” its numbers, with its representative suggesting that a “basic” cremation without a service or an urn would run “around” \$3,000. Interestingly, Cruikshank’s and AL Mattatall, the other Dignity Memorial funeral homes in Halifax, provided detailed price lists (which would be the same ones used by Snow’s). Their basic cremation “no service” option, at \$2,600, did not include a cremation container or casket, which, although not required by law for cremations in Nova Scotia, is “requested” by crematoria. Add on their cheapest pine casket, at \$495 and voila: \$3,095.

Atlantic Funeral Homes, which has three locations in the Halifax area and is owned by Arbor Memorial, provides a basic cremation package, including a cremation casket and basic urn for \$2,820.

Of the independents, Cole Harbour Funeral Home advertises a basic cremation service in its Yellow Pages ad for \$995, while Donald K. Walker offers a very similar package for \$1,150. JA Walker offers a “direct” cremation package that includes a cremation container for \$2,525. Dartmouth Funeral Home’s promised mail-out never arrived and TK Barnard offered to fax some information, but no fax was ever received.



People choose funeral homes for a variety of reasons. I chose Snow’s because we’d held my father’s funeral there 17 years ago and my grandmother’s several years before that. I was under the impression that I was hiring the same locally-owned family business that Halifax businessman John Snow started back in 1883. I chose Snow’s for the same reason most people choose a funeral home: trust.

“I’m a third-generation funeral director and embalmer,” says Chuck Curry, owner of CL Curry Funeral Service in Antigonish, “and I think trust is probably one of the biggest and most significant aspects of our business, because people confide in us.”

Curry is not only the owner of an independent, family-owned funeral home, he’s also the president and a founding member of the Canadian Independent Group of Funeral Homes, a loosely affiliated network of independent funeral home operators that formed in 1989 in response to a nationwide surge in the acquisition of funeral homes by large corporations.

He remembers when the conglomerates came to Halifax in the late 1980s. “Originally, there was the Loewen Group out of B.C., and they bought Snow’s, Cruikshank’s and Mattatall’s and a few others throughout the province,” explains Curry. The Halifax acquisitions were part of funeral-chapel-owner Ray Loewen’s aggressive North American acquisition strategy which eventually turned his company into the second-largest funeral conglomerate in the world.

In 2006, after a dramatic history that involved hostile takeover bids, numerous lawsuits, corporate restructuring, and, finally, bankruptcy, Loewen’s company was taken over by its biggest North American rival: Service Corporation International out of Houston, Texas.

Known to industry insiders as “Big Death,” and self-described as North America’s “largest provider of death-care products and services,” Service Corporation International is a network of 1,250 funeral homes and 364 cemeteries extending into 43 states and eight Canadian provinces, including 10 Nova Scotian properties. Three-quarters of the way through 2009, SCI’s revenues were a little over \$1.5 billion US and gross profits were just over \$300 million US.

Texan Robert Waltrip founded the company in 1962. His core philosophy was a concept called “clustering”—the corporation buys a number of funeral homes in an area, then centralizes and shares resources, including personnel. “It’s simply economies of scale,” explains Robert Bryce, an Austin, Texas-based journalist



***“When your master is a printout from head office that says who had the most sales... it tends to impose a bit of a different culture than a family business.”***

—Tom Crean

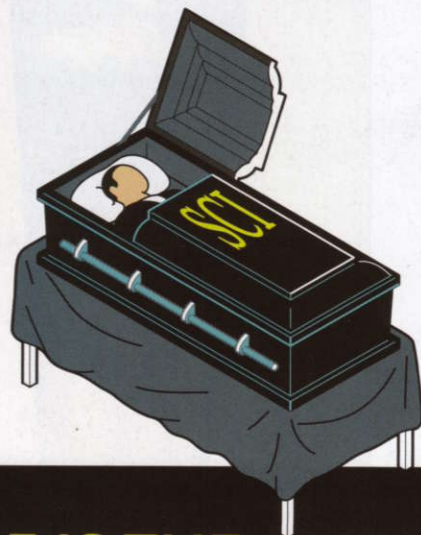
and former reporter for the *Austin Chronicle*, who has written extensively about SCI. “Waltrip’s great insight was that the funeral business was really just a transportation and processing business and fundamentally, that’s true.”

But clustering’s cost-saving efficiencies don’t necessarily lead to greater savings for the consumer. A survey of prices at Halifax’s funeral homes suggests that the conglomerates’ prices are generally higher than those at the independent funeral homes for a basic cremation (see page 24). A 2001 investigation by *Consumer Reports* magazine found that American funeral home chains charge about \$1,300 US more than independent homes for comparable funerals. Recent Canadian data is hard to come by, but a Statistics Canada report on the funeral industry in 2000 showed that the profit margin for small funeral homes was about 1.3 per cent, while the largest firms earn about 10.1 per cent.

In any other business, market forces would simply level the playing field, but most funeral home customers are not particularly inclined to price shop, and those who are have almost no point of reference for what represents good value.

Tom Crean is a third-generation independent funeral director in British Columbia who says it’s important for consumers to be aware that publicly-traded corporations are ultimately more responsible to their shareholders than their customers. Crean is the chair of an advocacy group called the Family Funeralhome Association, a non-profit he founded back in 1989 to “protect bereaved consumers.” It has grown to include members from all across Canada and the U.S. “When your master is a printout from head office that says who had the most sales, and who grew and who didn’t,” he says, “it tends to impose a bit of a different culture than a family business, whose only master is their name and their respect in the community.”

Name and reputation may be a funeral home’s two most valuable commodities, which explains why funeral consolidators go to great lengths to make their takeovers entirely invisible. When the Loewen group took over Snow’s, Cruikshank’s and Mattatall’s, they followed their official practice to the letter, retaining the



## WHERE IS THE VOICE OF SCI?

**Wondering why** no one from Service Corporation International has spoken on the company’s behalf? The Halifax SCI representative we contacted cancelled his interview, citing “company protocol” and explaining that he had been ordered to decline to speak with us on the record. Another representative didn’t return our calls.

## HALIFAX’S OTHER CONGLOMERATE

**Beyond SCI**, there is one other conglomerate in Halifax: Arbor Memorial. Arbor owns three HRM locations of Atlantic Funeral Homes and two cemeteries: Dartmouth Memorial Gardens and Oakridge Memorial Gardens. Arbor is the largest publicly-traded Canadian death-care company, with 41 cemeteries, 26 crematoria, 87 funeral homes and four reception centres.



names of the acquired funeral homes and keeping most of the existing management in place. Those businesses now belong to SCI, whose policies are no different. The Service Corporation website proudly proclaims that “most of the Company’s businesses today feature the Dignity Memorial logotype on their signage, along with the local heritage names under which some have operated for more than 100 years.”

“Dignity Memorial”—the comforting-sounding brand name under which Service Corporation International markets its services—means little to consumers. A web search for Snow’s, Cruikshank’s or Mattatall’s brings searchers to Dignitymemorial.com, where each funeral home’s site still makes proud reference its storied Halifax heritage and no mention of its parent company’s Texas lineage.

But independent funeral home operators see an important distinction between their businesses and the clustered companies. As Chuck Curry puts it, “It’s not a nine-to-five job here in this funeral home. We work long hours.” Or more bluntly: “Employees of a corporate funeral home tend to have a job and employees of an independent funeral home have a career.”

Erin Jennings definitely falls on the career side of that equation. She’s the owner and funeral director of the J. Albert Walker Funeral Home in Spryfield. She happily shows me around her chapel and visitation rooms, explaining the benefits of a smaller operation. “In some of the larger places, because time off is dictated by a schedule, the client may meet someone for the arrangements, they might see someone else during visitation, and they could have two or three completely different people on the day of the service,” she says.

But she says the key to her success goes back to that one simple factor. “If people don’t trust you, you don’t have a business,” she says. “My clients know that when they walk out that door there is dignity, there is respect, there is honesty. They know that I live above the funeral home, and that when they leave, I’m going to look after their mother as if she was my own.”

Perhaps it’s exactly that level of personal commitment that was the missing ingredient in my own family’s unfortunate nightmare. Did the information about my mother’s rings get lost in a shift-change? Would a “career” funeral director have made the same mistake? Jennings offers some perspective. “No matter who you’re dealing with, whether they are a conglomerate or a little tiny guy like me, we are all, at the end of the day, human,” she says. “We’re not infallible. The unfortunate part is that it happened to you.”

She’s right, of course. But, given that it did happen, would I have preferred to sort out the ensuing mess with John Snow, owner and operator of JA Snow Funeral Home, rather than a corporate lawyer working for Service Corporation International down in Houston?

As they’d say in Texas: “You betcha.” ■



## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: FUNERAL PRACTICES IN NOVA SCOTIA

The Consumer and Funeral Practices:

[www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/consumer/funserv.asp](http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/consumer/funserv.asp)

Consumer Rights—Cemetery and Funeral Services Act:

[www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/consumer/cfs.asp](http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/consumer/cfs.asp)

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