

King, J.T.Q. (1995+?). *The History of King-Tears
Mortuary, Inc.* [From the personal papers of Marjon
Christopher, V.P., King-Tears.]

THE HISTORY OF KING-TEARS MORTUARY, INC.

In late 1931, Mr. E. J. Crawford, owner of Crawford Funeral Home in Dallas, Texas and a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. King of Memphis, Tennessee, talked with the Kings about coming to Texas and opening a funeral home. He suggested that they take a serious look at Wichita Falls, Texas as the population of the state, including the Black population, was moving westward. They visited Wichita Falls and began to assess the situation, including talking with Black people - ministers, teachers, business people, etc. At that time there were no Black funeral homes in Wichita Falls or in any of the surrounding communities. After two visits to Wichita Falls, they decided to make arrangements for the move. They began to seek a suitable building, one which could be converted to a funeral home. They had visited several funeral homes in several cities and had some idea of what was needed in a building. They proceeded to develop financial arrangements in Memphis.

In 1932 Mr. Crawford contacted the Kings to advise them that Mr. N. W. Rhambo, a funeral home owner in Austin, Texas had been killed. He suggested that they go immediately to Austin and negotiate with Mrs. Rhambo to purchase the business. There were two Black funeral homes in Austin at that time - Tears Funeral Home, organized in 1901 and Rhambo Funeral Home, organized in 1911. Mr. William M. Tears, Sr. had been the person to bury Black Americans for the Thurlow B. Weed Funeral Home, a White business. When he opened Tears Funeral Parlor on East 6th Street, N. W. Rhambo, his brother-in-law (they were married to sisters), was his embalmer. The business building on East 6th Street was not a "full service" funeral home, but was in a "store-like" building. It did not have a chapel nor a selection room.

In 1911, N. W. Rhambo decided to open his own funeral business. He opened his business in a garage on Neches Street, just off of East 6th Street. It, too, was a funeral parlor, not a "full service" funeral home.

Mr. and Mrs. King, in response to Mr. Crawford's suggestion, went to Austin to negotiate with Mrs. Rhambo and made arrangements to purchase the Rhambo business. They gave Mrs. Rhambo some "earnest money" to "seal" the negotiation (deal) and returned to Memphis to make further financial

arrangements.

After converting all of their assets to cash, Mr. and Mrs. King left Memphis for Austin. On their arrival in Dallas at the Crawford Funeral Home, a telegram from Mrs. Rhambo awaited them, which had been forwarded from Memphis. The telegram stated that she had sold the Rhambo business to Mr. W. H. Fuller, a Baptist Lay Man, whose wife, Mrs. A. M. B. Fuller, was an outstanding Baptist Lay Woman and an outstanding leader in the National Baptist Convention. The Kings were shocked as Mrs. Rhambo had defaulted (welched) on the honest business arrangement. This unprofessional action angered Mr. King so much that he decided to go to Austin and open his own business, although he knew only a few people in Austin. During his years as an Insurance Executive, he had visited Austin several times and had met a few people. Mrs. King had not been to Austin prior to the initial visit with Mrs. Rhambo. She had been a teacher in the Memphis public schools for several years. Therefore, they went from Dallas to Austin to begin assessing the situation in Austin. They met with Mrs. Rhambo, who returned to "earnest money" with an apology.

Mr. and Mrs. King were concerned about the reversal of Mrs. Rhambo's decision to sell them the Rhambo business. After making several quiet, discrete inquiries, it was discovered that some Baptist ministers and Lay persons had put pressure on Mrs. Rhambo to sell the business to Mr. Fuller, a Baptist Lay Man, as was Mr. Rhambo during his lifetime. These persons did not want Mrs. Rhambo to sell the business to an "outsider", although Mr. King was also a Baptist Lay Man. Also, it was ascertained that Mr. Tears, a Methodist Lay Man, traditionally buried the Methodist people and Rhambo, a Baptist Lay Man, buried the Baptist people.

While in Austin on this trip, Mr. and Mrs. King found a two story rooming house owned by a Mrs. Hamby. They arranged to purchase the building and returned to Memphis. Mr. King made several trips to Austin after that, each time meeting people and learning the city.

On one early trip to Austin, Mr. King was on the corner of East 6th Street and Congress Avenue looking for a particular office. There was a Black man standing on the corner. Mr. King asked him if he could give him directions to the address for which he was looking. The man stated that he was not working and offered to take Mr. King to that office. Also, the man, who introduced himself as

Celester L. Watkins, offered to spend the day with Mr. King and take him wherever he needed to go. They talked during the day and Mr. King told Watkins that he was going to establish a funeral home and asked him if he would like to work with him, especially since Watkins was not working. They agreed that day that Watkins was employed, although there would be no pay until the business was opened. Mr. King told Watkins about plans to organize a Burial Association and that Watkins could be of great help in contacting people, especially since he was from a very large family and since he knew so many people. Both Tears and Rhambo had burial associations.

Mr. King and Watkins "batched" together living in the two-story building that was being purchased. Mrs. King's older brother, B. F. Woodson, a building contractor in Memphis came to Austin, employed a carpenter's helper, and remodeled the building, converting it to a funeral home on the first floor and living quarters on the second floor. The funeral home had an office, used mostly to receive people and collect burial, a small private office, a selection room to display caskets and burial garments, a small chapel with a piano, a "slumber room", a preparation room (morgue), a large room. living quarters for the men who lived at the funeral home, and rest rooms for women and men. There was a large garage behind the building. The living quarters upstairs was very comfortable and consisted of two large bedrooms, one small bedroom, one full bath, one half bath, a small kitchen, a dining room, and an activity room which served as a library.

The business opened as King and Company on February 3, 1933, with a formal opening. Mrs. King came from Memphis for the opening. The other family members consisting of Mrs. King and her two children, Edwina and John, moved to Austin on September 1, 1933. The name was changed to King Funeral Home in mid 1933.

In 1934, the burial association, which was named the Unity Benevolent Association, gave quarts of milk to expectant mothers during the winter months. This was during the "Great Depression" In 1935 the burial association put four very large oscillating fans in the "Colored Women's Ward" at Brackenridge Hospital. In 1936 the burial association gave free ambulance service to any person, any time of day or night, from any place within the city limits of Austin to any place within the city limits. The burial association grew in membership during 1933-1936.

In 1936, Mrs. King's brother, B. F. Woodson, returned to Austin and remodeled the funeral home and living quarters again. The office was made larger by taking in the small private office; the chapel was enlarged and a drive-through was built on the East side of the chapel, with a screened-in porch built upstairs over the drive-through; the selection room was enlarged; the men's living quarters was enlarged for the building was extended (enlarged) to the South; the new preparation room was built behind the men's quarters; the enlargement of the chapel took in the slumber room. The upstairs bathroom was enlarged by separating the tub and shower from the rest of the bathroom; the screened-in porch, referred to above, was built; a large bedroom was added in the back, over the preparation room; the living room and dining room were decorated; the activity room and the kitchen were enlarged; a porch off the kitchen with steps leading downstairs was added. The living quarters were beautiful and were very comfortable. There were hardwood floors in all rooms except the bathrooms, kitchen, and the new back bedroom. Also, on September 3, 1936, Mrs. Clara M. Cadd Watkins, wife of Celester, joined the King Funeral Home family as secretary/receptionist. She later obtained her funeral director's license in 194 .

In 1936, the Texas State Legislature passed a law "outlawing" burial associations, thus attempting to force existing burial associations to sell to insurance companies. Mr. King refused to sell his burial association! He changed the name from Unity Benevolent Association to Union Welfare Association. He issued new cards which alluded to the fact that the Association was a "charitable association", existing to assist in burying indigent people. Instead of people paying dues each month for a \$75.00, \$100.00, or \$150.00 burial, they made a "pledge" each month to charity. Mr. King was sued each year by the State Attorney General, from 1936-1940, and won each case. In 1940 the Texas State Legislature passed a law creating the "Burial Insurance Act". This act authorized Burial Associations and placed them under the auspices of the State Board of Insurance. Thus was created a reporting system with quarterly reports and an annual report being sent to the State Board of Insurance. All monies received by the Association, which was renamed Union Welfare and Burial Association, was divided into two funds. The General Fund, used to operate the association, and the Mortuary Fund, used to pay the burial claims. This division began on a 60% -40% basis - 60% to the Mortuary fund and 40% to the General Fund. That division was changed later to 75%-25%.

The new Association had a Board of Directors which met periodically, and it was mandated that the Association have an annual meeting at which the Board of Directors was to be elected. At this meeting, which must be announced in advance, a report must be made to the members giving financial data and membership data.

World War II began with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Mr. King had died on July 2, 1941 and Mrs. King appointed Celester L. Watkins manager of the funeral home. He and a few other male employees were not subjected to the draft. However, John Q. Taylor King had graduated from Fisk University in 1941 and enrolled in Mortuary College in the Fall of 1941. He was twenty (20) years old and was subjected to the draft. He graduated from the Mortuary College in May 1942, received his Funeral Director's license, was married on June 28, 1942, and was drafted into the U.S. Army as a private. He was released from the service in 1946, with rank of Captain and returned to the business. His wife, Marcet H. King, took the Funeral Director's Exam in 1946 and received her license. His embalmer's license was issued in 1946.

In early December 1946, Gus Bragner, Jr. came from Landig College of Mortuary Science in Houston, to do his apprenticeship. He completed his apprenticeship, enrolled in Huston-Tillotson College and graduated during the interim, and remained with the business until 1950 when he left to go to California. In 1951, Leanthus Jackson came from Landig College of Mortuary Science to do his apprenticeship. Jackson remained with the business after completing his apprenticeship until he was drafted in the U. S. Army. After his Army service, he returned to the business, enrolled in and was graduated from Huston-Tillotson College. He remained with the business until his death in 1986.

The next major change in the business took place in 1953. In September 1953, Celester L. Watkins died and Mrs. King appointed Mrs. Clara M. Watkins (now Mrs. Clara M. Johnson) his widow as manager. John Q. Taylor King had just registered ^{AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN} for twelve graduate hours and signed for the two Ph.D. language examinations prior to the death of Mr. Watkins. Mrs. Watkins arranged for all of the funerals and John Q. Taylor King directed all of the funerals ^{AND DID SOME OF THE EMBALMING.} At the end of that school year, in ^{HIS EMBALMING SKILLS WERE SUPERB} the summer of 1954, Gus Bragner, Jr. returned to Texas and to the business. He remained active

NORMAN T. MILLER JOINED THE STAFF, PART-TIME, AND DID MOST OF THE EMBALMING. HE WAS AN EXCELLENT EMBALMER.

with the business until his health failed in 1992.

In 1955, Milton C. Tears, owner of Tears Funeral Home, contacted John Q. Taylor King, advised him that he desired to retire and sell his business, and asked if there was any interest on the part of the King family to purchase the Tears Funeral Home. The King family had been looking for a new location as the East Thrd Street location was surrounded by industry. After giving serious thought to Mr. Tears' offer, and after serious negotiations, which included having an inventory made of the Tears equipment, building, etc. by knowledgeable persons, it was decided to purchase the Tears business. This included the building, vehicles (except one car), equipment, burial association, and goodwill. The East 6th Street funeral home was sold, the house next to the Tears Funeral Home at 1308 East 12th Street was purchased as a home for Mrs. King, and the Tears Building was remodeled. Architect John S. Chase did the plan and Builder Arthur Parks served as contractor. The building was enlarged substantially. The name was changed to King-Tears Mortuary. During this period, in 196⁵, Mrs. Lillie Mae Newby, longtime King family friend and former neighbor on East 6th Th Street, became a member of the King-Tears Mortuary staff as secretary/receptionist. In 1967, the business was incorporated and became King-Tears Mortuary, Inc., with Mrs. Alice T. King as President, Dr. John Q. Taylor King as Vice President, Mrs. Edwina King Murphy as Secretary, and Mrs. Marcet H. King as Assistant Secretary. Mrs. Alice T. King gave shares of the stock to her son and daughter, and to Mrs. Clara J. Johnson, Gus Bragner, Jr., Leanthus Jackson, and Cordell Arnold. She later gave stock to Mrs. Marcet H. King.

In 1970, Mrs. Alice T. King married Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson and moved to Washington, D.C. She left the total operation of the business to Mrs. Clara M. Johnson and her son, Dr. John Q. Taylor King, although he was then President of Huston-Tillotson College in Austin. Dr. Johnson died in 1976 and Mrs. Alice T. King Johnson returned to Austin.

In 1972, the funeral home was rebuilt completely with Architect John S. Chase doing the plans and Arthur Parks serving as building contractor. The garages in the rear of the funeral home were refurbished and two garages were built behind Mrs. King's home at 1308 East 12th Street.

Mrs. Clara M. Johnson retired in 1981 and Gus Bragner, Jr. was appointed as manager. Mrs. Johnson continued in a part-time relationship.

Mrs. Alice Taylor King Johnson died on December 17, 1984. In her will she left stock to her son, to her daughter in trust with her son as Trustee, to Mrs. Johnson and to two grandchildren, Marjon King Christopher and Stuart H. King.

On January 1, 1991, Gus Bragner announced at the annual stockholder's meeting, that he would retire from active service but would continue to serve the business by answering the telephone after business hours. Upon Gus' retirement, Mr. Barry J. W. Franklin, who started with the business in March 1979, was appointed manager and Funeral Director in Charge. Gus Bragner, Jr. died on June 17, 1994.