

Joe Moore

He gracefully combined businessman and comfortor as he guided people through moments of loss.

Chapter 1 – 1:07

Introduction

Announcer: Joe Moore was born in Claremore, Oklahoma on July 31st, 1919, the youngest of nine children. His father was J. Herbert Moore and his mother was Cora Musgrove Moore, who was a second cousin of Will Rogers. Joe's father Herbert and his brother, J. Foreman Moore established Moore Undertakers in Claremore. In 1932 they moved their family to Tulsa to open their first chapel located at 1403 South Peoria. Joe was 12 years old when he began to assist in the family business. In this interview he talks about the history of the funeral business during the 1921 Race Riot, the Depression, the Dust Bowl Days, funeral home ambulances and the changing burial and memorial service traditions. Under his direction, Moore funeral homes became the largest family-owned group of funeral homes in Oklahoma. In 1999, Joe was named Oklahoma Funeral Director of the Year. He died December 12, 2011. We want to thank our sponsors for their generous donations, which allow us to preserve this voice and story on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 3:23

Family Background

John Erling: Today's date is March 9, 2011. Joe, would you state your full name, date of birth and your present age please?

Joe Moore: Joseph Merle Moore. I was born July 31, 1919. My age is 91.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

JM: We are recording this interview at the Moore's Rosewood Chapel on South Harvard in Tulsa.

JE: Joining us today is Elaine Moore Jones. Elaine, please tell us why you are joining us in this conversation.

Elaine Moore Jones: Yes, thank you John. My name is Elaine Moore Jones and I am part of the Moore family. I am the great-niece to Joe Moore. I am here today to help bring back some of these memories.

JE: Well it's good to have you here. Joe, where were you born?

JM: Claremore, Oklahoma.

JE: Do you have brothers or sisters?

JM: I had a twin brother that died at an early age. He was about 7 years old when he passed away. I have two sisters and five brothers.

JE: What was your twin brother's name?

JM: Sam.

JE: What did he die of?

JM: They didn't know back in those days. He got a fever of some kind and he died.

JE: So it would have been in the mid 1920s when that happened. Tell us your mother's name, and maiden name, and where she was born and grew up.

JM: Her maiden name was Cora Musgrove. She was born and raised up around Claremore there.

JE: Tell us about your father.

JM: His name was James Herbert Moore was born in Shrewsbury, New Jersey.

JE: What did your dad do in New Jersey before he came here, do you recall?

JM: He got into the funeral business early in life there in New Jersey and then came out to Oklahoma and established a funeral home in Claremore.

JE: Why did he come to Oklahoma?

JM: He wanted to get away and come west and he decided he liked Claremore. Will Rogers was from that area up there and was related to my mother. My mother was also the reason that he wanted to come out here.

JE: Your father met your mother in Claremore?

EMJ: The story I heard John was that when he arrived in Claremore with his brother on the train, he spotted Cora when he stepped off the train and fell in love at that moment.

JM: That's a story I've never heard before!

EMJ: (Laughter) That's the story I was told. I think it's in this book. (Motioning)

JE: That's cute.

JM: It was love at first sight.

JE: Moore Undertakers was founded in the early 1900s in Claremore.

EMJ: That's right.

JE: Then they became associated with Musgrove Funeral Home?

- JM:** When my dad came to Claremore, he hired Mr. Musgrove to help him. When they came to Tulsa, they started the Musgrove Funeral Home, which is still there.
- JE:** You said your mother was related to Will Rogers?
- JM:** She was his second cousin.
- JE:** Did they have interaction?
- JM:** He used to come to the house when he was passing through there.
- JE:** Do you recall him?
- JM:** I don't really remember him too well, but I remember him being there.
- JE:** He died in 1935, so it would have been in the early 1930s?
- JM:** Early 1930s, or 1929—the Depression days.
- JE:** You would have been about 10, 11 or 12 years old then?
- JM:** Yes.
- JE:** But he would come to the house?
- JM:** He would drop by and see her. He wouldn't stay very long but he would come in and see her and then leave.

Chapter 3 – 3:25

Race Riot – Dust Bowl

- John Erling:** So being in the funeral business, in 1921 in Tulsa we had a Race Riot. Tell us about your father during that time.
- Joe Moore:** All I remember was hearing the stories about how he would try to go out and pick up a black man and they would tell him to leave him alone and not to pick him up and so forth. They wanted to look for the white people that were hurt and killed and so forth.
- JE:** Would they threaten him?
- JM:** If he picked up a black person they would threaten him.
- JE:** Do you know what your father did? Did he pick up the black people anyway?
- JM:** Not after they told him not to—he didn't have that much nerve I don't think.
- JE:** So I suppose a lot of those blacks weren't picked up?
- JM:** They were picked up later on, but not at that time when the fighting was going on.
- JE:** In 1929 in the nation was in the Great Depression. You were 10 years old. The Dust Bowl Days started about that same time on into the 1930s. Do you have recollections of the Depression?
- JM:** Yes. They were very bad times for a lot of people. I had a sister living out in west Texas.

We would go out there occasionally. They would have the most awful dust storms where you could barely see to drive. It was just terrible trying to drive and get around.

JE: So you couldn't see beyond your nose as we say?

JM: No, you couldn't. You almost had to stop.

JE: They even say that clouds of dust made it all the way into the New York area. During this time, was there a special funeral plan for families?

JM: They started a burial association for people. It was 50 cents a month. It would cover your whole family. Families had eight or 10 children back in those days. Fifty cents a month would entitle them to a \$100 funeral. Back in those days you could do a funeral for \$100. So we would take an entire family for 50 cents a month. That went over pretty big back in those days. Dad was one of the first ones to start that and he did really well with it for years. I want you to know we still have some of those around.

JE: What do you mean?

JM: Some of those are still in effect.

JE: So some people have still been paying 50 cents a month down through the years?

JM: We raised it to a dollar a month and then we raised to \$2 a month, but the ones who got it for 50 cents a month are still paying on theirs.

JE: They are still paying on it and you still honor that price? Because today what does an average funeral cost?

JM: It costs about \$2,500 to \$3,000—somewhere in there.

JE: Your father instituted that back in the tough times. Sometimes people who didn't have money would give you something in lieu of money?

JM: Sometimes if they would come in and didn't have anything at all, but they had a farm or had some food or something, we would trade out.

JE: I suppose it would be tough for your father to turn people away if they needed your services?

JM: You could not turn them away if they had to be buried, you know.

JE: Right.

JM: The burial association plan went over really well in those days. It included a 100-mile radius of Tulsa. So we would go to other towns and write these policies too. We had a whole lot of them.

JE: At the time, there must have been some competition with other funeral homes in Tulsa?

JM: There was after we started the burial plans. Everybody else got into it too you know.

JE: So they copied your dad's idea?

JM: Yes.

Chapter 4 – 5:40**Ambulances**

John Erling: Where did you go to elementary school?

Joe Moore: I went to Springdale out north in Tulsa. We lived out on the north side so I went to school right there. Then I went to Whittier out at Admiral and Lewis. I went to some high school at Central.

JE: Did you graduate from Central?

JM: No, I graduated from New Mexico Military Academy.

JE: Why did they send you to military school?

JM: Well, I had a sister that lived out there and they had quite a bit of money. Her husband had a good job and he helped pay the bill for me to go to school out there.

Elaine Moore Jones: It was a family tradition in our family that all of the boys went there.

JM: She liked the idea of military school and she had plenty of money, so we all went to school out there.

JE: Where was that?

JM: Roswell, New Mexico.

JE: So you went there for your last two years of high school?

JM: Yes.

JE: Did you enjoy that experience?

JM: No, but I was there. (Laughter)

JE: Was it too rigid?

JM: It was pretty rigid. You had to be in bed every night at a certain time. You were up every day and you didn't get any off time except for Saturday afternoons.

JE: Did you work in the funeral home when you were very young?

JM: Yes, when I was pretty young. In those days we had ambulance service. We were running four or five ambulances all the time.

JE: Let's talk about that ambulance service.

JM: Well, you're talking about going out all hours of the night and day and so forth. It wasn't the hospitals you have now. You had to run quite a ways out of town on accidents and to pick up sick people and all of that. We would operate three or four ambulances all of the time, back in those days. You didn't have the competition that you have now.

JE: But the funeral homes all ran ambulance services?

JM: Almost all of them had ambulance service.

JE: You had ambulances of your own, so when you heard about a fatality...

JM: Well, we tried to go as fast as we could. But it started to get so bad that they started

making us call the police department to get permission to go. If you got the call and you called the police department and somebody else had already called, you couldn't go.

JE: Set the scene here, because there were ambulances coming in from all directions?

JM: Yes. All of the funeral homes had ambulances. There were too many accidents with the ambulances occurring. The ambulances were all trying to beat each other there.

JE: So they could have a wreck on the way to pick up the body?

JM: Yes.

JE: I suppose when they arrived at the scene at the same time, they both might get out and have an argument over who was going to pick up the body?

JM: Sometimes they would steal the other's cot so they couldn't put the body on the cot! (Laughter) That was very uncommon, but it did happen.

JE: This was in the early 1920s. How many ambulances did Moore Funeral Home have at one time?

JM: We had three or four ambulances. We were doing the majority of the ambulance service in town. Back when we first started out, there were about three or four funeral homes here in Tulsa. It was a competitive business.

JE: You were working in the business when you were 11, 12 or 13 years old?

JM: I started when I was 13 or 14. They used to get mad at me because I started making calls and I shouldn't have been making them. (Laughter)

JE: What do you mean by trying to make calls?

JM: I would go on calls with them, but they didn't think I was big enough size-wise to carry the patients.

JE: So that's why they wanted somebody else along?

JM: Yes, they wanted somebody bigger.

Elaine Moore Jones: He was the baby of the family. (Chuckle)

JE: So you got used to seeing dead bodies at an early age but none of that was a shock or anything it was just part of life?

JM: Yes.

JE: So finally the city put a stop to the ambulance services provided by funeral homes?

JM: They did and it was the best thing that ever happened. They were hurting more people getting to the accident than they were picking up after they got there.

JE: How did the new system work?

JM: Well, when you got the call, the first thing you did was call to the police station. You would tell them where the accident was and they would tell you whether you could go or if somebody else was already cleared to go.

JE: Who would call you first?

JM: Somebody that saw or was involved in the accident.

JE: So it was important back then as it is today that your funeral home name was top of mind?

JM: We used to go out for days at a time and put up ambulance signs with our phone number. That's how we would get our calls. We also ran a big ad in the phone book.

JE: So you got the call from somebody that was there in an automobile accident. It wasn't just fatalities, it was anybody that was hurt or injured in an accident, wasn't that true?

JM: That's right.

JE: You were just helping save lives.

JM: That's right.

JE: Were you the largest funeral home in town at that time?

JM: No, we weren't the largest. When we first started out other funeral homes had most of the ambulance service business. When we came into it, we worked hard day and night putting up our signs with our phone number all over town and we had a good response.

JE: Did you ever drive an ambulance?

JM: Oh yes.

JE: How old were you when you got to drive one?

JM: I was about 16 years old. In those days you could drive an ambulance at 16.

Chapter 5 – 6:20

Early Funeral Business

John Erling: Tell us about what used to be known as the doghouse.

Joe Moore: We slept at night on the third floor of the funeral home at 14th and Peoria. We called it the doghouse.

JE: How many people would stay there?

JM: Three people would be there. Two would go on a call and one would stay to answer the phones.

JE: You worked it yourself?

JM: Yes.

JE: Did you get paid for doing that?

JM: Yes, when we had money.

JE: When your father had money?

JM: Yes. Things were pretty tight back then in 1929 in 1930.

JE: Nobody told you that you had to do this, did they?

JM: No, it was just a family tradition and we all were in it.

Elaine Moore Jones: Only one of the brothers left the business, but the rest stayed and helped run it.

JE: You must have enjoyed working?

JM: I grew up in it when I was a little boy. It was the only thing I ever did with my life.

JE: Did you ever have an accident driving an ambulance?

JM: Yes. Nobody was ever seriously hurt, but I had two or three accidents. They weren't really bad, but they tore up the car pretty bad. The bad thing was you would be driving down the street and hit an intersection with your siren on. Somebody wouldn't hear the siren and they would be coming across the other way and you would hit them. I had about two or three of those kinds of accidents.

JE: Were you involved in an accident with an armored truck on time?

JM: Yes I was, I hit one downtown at 4th & Main one time.

JE: What happened? Did the armored truck win?

JM: It got hurt a little bit, but our car got crashed—I'll tell you that. (Chuckle)

JE: But you never were injured or hurt in any way?

JM: Fortunately, no.

JE: Nobody in Tulsa was ever killed going to the scene of an accident?

JM: Not that I remember.

JE: But they could have been injured?

JM: Yes.

JE: Was there a story about a man who was injured and he got off the cot?

JM: We've had several people do that.

JE: Tell us what happened.

JM: I think he was out with another woman. We took him to the hospital and put him down on the floor. He jumped up and took off and that was the last time I saw him. (Laughter)
He took off running.

JE: Again, this was someone who was injured in an accident and you had taken him to the hospital for care. And he got up off the cot and ran away?

JM: Nobody ever paid the bill either! (Laughter)

JE: When you were a child, do remember downtown Tulsa and places that you went?

JM: Oh yes.

JE: Did you go to theaters?

JM: Yes, I went to all of the ones downtown there.

JE: Do you remember some of the movies that you attended or movie stars?

JM: I don't remember too many of them, but I remember Tom Mix really well.

JE: Do you remember some of the stores that were downtown?

JM: I remember Vandever's.

EMJ: Do you remember the Crosstown Grill?

JM: Sure, the Crosstown Grill was at 15th & Peoria. We lived in that place.

EMJ: That was kind of an old-time thing where all of the policeman and all of the firemen would eat there.

JM: You could go in there at 3 o'clock in the morning and they would all be in there eating.

JE: That was really close to your funeral home at 14th and Peoria?

JM: Yes.

EMJ: They were open all night.

JE: When Bob Wills died, the father of Western swing music, didn't you go down to pick up his body?

JM: Yes.

JE: He died in 1975. He was 70 years old. How did your family have a connection to Bob Wills?

JM: Bob and my brother Bill were pretty good friends. They would meet at a bar and have a few drinks and so on. Through that relationship we got to be pretty good friends with the Wills family. When he died of course the first thing they did was pick up the phone and call us. We went down and got him and brought him back.

JE: So your brother became friends with him because Bob Wills of course played here in Tulsa at Cain's Ballroom. He had a radio program on every day at noon on KVOO and he played nightclubs all around here. So then, you did Bob Wills' funeral?

JM: Yes, I think we had it at Cain's Ballroom. It was just packed. There were people from everywhere.

EMJ: There were beautiful floral arrangements shaped like guitars.

JE: Do you remember names of some people that attended his funeral?

JM: Some pretty prominent people attended the service.

EMJ: As a matter of fact we have the last remaining relative Bob Wills now. We have Bob's sister Lorene. We have her funeral coming up tomorrow.

JE: You became friends with Oral Roberts too, didn't you?

JM: Oral has been a good friend for years. He has a nice, wonderful family.

JE: How did that relationship come about?

JM: Just through funerals and weddings. We had his funeral you know.

EMJ: Yes, and his wife Evelyn.

JE: And his son Ronnie, his daughter, there were a number of funerals and it was always the Moore family that took care of them.

EMJ: I just thought of another musician. We had Leon McAuliffe and all of that family and we had Mack Creager the sportsman from Channel 6 who was on TV.

JM: I don't know how we got connected with all of those Western people, but we did and all of the ministers.

- JE:** Let me come back to when you were young. On December 7, 1941, do you remember that day when Pearl Harbor was bombed and how you heard about it? Do you remember what you are doing?
- JM:** I don't remember what I was doing, but I remember the day that it happened because it was everywhere.
- JE:** Did you serve in the military?
- JM:** No, I didn't. I had a heart murmur back in those days. I outgrew it. I went in for three or four examinations and every time I would go in there they would tell me that they could take me because of my heart murmur. I had brothers that served.
- JE:** Do you remember rationing and all of that that went on?
- JM:** Oh yes. We always wind it up with enough rationing to get by.
- JE:** What were they rationing?
- JM:** Gasoline and tires everything else. We had enough because we were in the funeral business and they thought that it was a necessity to have enough. We never did worry too much about rationing.
- JE:** So the government allowed you to have enough because of the business?
- JM:** Yes.

Chapter 6 – 5:18

Embalming / Cremation

- John Erling:** Years ago, embalming practice took place, as I understand it, in the Civil War days. Abraham Lincoln was embalmed and then his body was paraded in various locations. When people realize that embalming was actually working, then that's how it got started, isn't that true?
- Elain Moore Jones:** That's correct.
- JE:** Because, at first, people kept the bodies in their home?
- Joe Moore:** A lot of times they would embalm bodies at the home. Dad used to go out an awful lot and embalm the body and bring the casket to the home and put the body in it and keep the body there at all times in the parlor.
- JE:** And that is why we used to call them funeral parlors.
- JM:** That's right.
- JE:** There were embalming kits, and as we sit here in your office, you have one.
- JM:** Yes, my dad left that in somebody's house one time and they brought it here to me.

- JE:** His initials are on it, W.M.M. on this embalming box. It looks like a small suitcase.
- JM:** His tools are still in there.
- JE:** Do you remember how old you were when you first saw them embalming?
- JM:** I'm not an embalmer.
- JE:** You didn't do any of that?
- JM:** No, I never cared for it. I was around it all the time, but I never did like it. I had some brothers that embalmed, but I never did. My dad used to do it. Nowadays they are so careful about wearing gloves and so forth. Back in those days, you would have blood all over you and your hands and everywhere else.
- JE:** It's pretty sophisticated today, compared to the way it was back then?
- JM:** Oh yes.
- JE:** I don't even know what embalming entails, but back then was it pretty simple?
- JM:** Well, they didn't have then all the instruments that you have now.
- JE:** We have to thank the Egyptians for embalming because they are famous for that, That's where the art of embalming started. Then, private viewings in homes just disappeared and went out of practice. Then, that's when viewings and funerals were held in funeral homes. So your business became more than just picking up bodies and taking them to the hospital, or embalming at the homes, then your business became a destination for them.
- EMJ:** That's correct. We would have the whole family gather here at a certain time to view the remains. It became like a visitation or viewing service that people did traditionally—instead of at the home it would be here at the funeral home.
- JM:** Now, you just come to the funeral home for viewings and you don't even think about going to the house.
- JE:** So today we just think that that's the way that we always did it, but it actually evolved over time. Then I suppose funeral homes and their employees had to learn the whole process of how to treat families when they came in?
- EMJ:** Yes. Throughout the country there are a whole lot of different traditions, but here I think it still applies that very close friends and family members will still go to the home of the loved one. Then for visitation, viewing and greeting other acquaintances they will come to funeral home.
- JM:** Back in those days too, you would go to churches, but now most of the services are held at funeral homes because they have chapels in funeral homes, so more of them are held there now.
- JE:** In 2011, more services are held in funeral home chapels than in churches? Why is that?
- JM:** It's easier to get into a funeral home for older people. Lots of times churches have a lot of steps that older people have a hard time with. Funeral homes are arranged for all people. I think that has to do with it.

EMJ: It's neutral ground—neutral territory.

JE: You established funeral home next to Memorial Park?

EMJ: Yes, right next door. Joe was very instrumental in working with the cemetery to allow us to have the road, but we don't have any ownership rights to that. It's separate.

JE: But it's there and it makes it convenient.

JM: What you are going to see in the future and for years to come is more cemeteries having funeral homes on the property.

JE: That's a competition thing as well isn't it? I mean, there are only so many cemeteries, but there are more funeral homes than cemeteries.

JM: You'll find most of your larger cemeteries have funeral homes—most of them have them now.

EMJ: We are seeing the advent of cremation coming up too.

JM: That's coming on strong.

JE: Let's talk about that a little bit. Cremation has become more accepted in the last century?

JM: I think it's the younger generation coming on. They don't put the same emphasis on funerals that older people did back years ago. They don't have visitation as often or have a ceremony with pallbearers and that sort of thing.

JE: There's a cost factor here too isn't there? I mean it's expensive to have a regular funeral.

JM: It is. Cremation is cheaper.

JE: Is that driving the issue you think? So that will be more and more the future is cremations?

JM: For younger people, yes it is.

JE: Are funeral homes constructing their own cremation facilities?

JM: Yes.

JE: You are putting in one now? Where is that?

EMJ: It's right here at 27th and Harvard.

JE: Some funeral homes will contract with existing crematoriums?

JM: Yes, but we do it for the convenience of our customers.

Chapter 7 – 2:48

Ashes

John Erling: What happens to the history of marking where this person is, or their ashes in this case. We see them placed in a wall?

Elaine Moore Jones: Yes, niches.

JE: Talk about that.

Joe Moore: They have crypt that they put them in or a niche that they put them in. They put their name on the outside, so that people coming in will know where they are and can go there and find them.

EMJ: They have several locations where you can inter ashes at the cemeteries. Also, a lot of churches are doing columbariums. Sometimes for people the church is their family and they can have their ashes stored in a columbarium there at the church. Several churches offer that now. But on the other hand, we have closets full of ashes, which kind of answers to your question about what happens to all of this history. It's very sad to me that people will say that they want cremation, but they really don't know what to do with these ashes. So we try to talk to people about where they would like to remember their loved one. We encourage them that there needs to be a place to go. We try to tell people about that, but it's a very interesting change in the traditions.

JE: So you are saying you have closets full of ashes here and people have not chosen what to do with them?

JM: The longer it goes the longer you are going to have them.

EMJ: I will tell you a funny story about that. I was here one night kind of late and I got a phone call. This gentleman said, "My mom's ashes are there, can I come and pick them up after dark?" I said, "Sure. I guess so." So I waited for him and he came. I said, "May I ask why you wanted to pick them up after dark?" He said, "Well, I promised mom I would sprinkle her under the magnolia tree, but we don't live there anymore." (Laughter) They are totally organic. They are not going to hurt anything.

JE: I am thinking in terms of generations from now when people are listening to this. The idea of being able to walk to a spot where that person is buried, which you can do with ashes, you can buy a plot and you can put a stone marker on it. But for history's sake, it's nice to come back and know that's where that person is buried.

EMJ: That's right. Exactly. I think that's our human nature.

JE: Now we are losing that?

JM: It's a different generation coming on that's not as interested in that as the older folks were back years ago.

JE: They don't seem to care about that. You kind of wonder if people are going to be looking back one day and realize that it's important and that they are missing that and they should be doing it again.

EMJ: Yes, I see that. That's my number one cause out there right now is education and talking to people about how important that is for later.

Chapter 8 – 2:38**Burial Traditions**

John Erling: Here's something that we might want to talk about—the various ethnic groups, because you have Vietnamese and you have Latinos and Eastern European groups, Native Americans, African-Americans and they all come with their own burial traditions.

Joe Moore: Yes they do.

JE: Can you talk about that?

EMJ: We have been honored to serve several different ethnic groups here in Tulsa. I'm just amazed. I love learning about the reasons that they do certain things. One of the groups that we've been serving the most of it is called the Hmong. They are the indigenous people of Laos, Cambodia. There is a large population of Hmong here in Tulsa. They require three days of the body lying in state with eating and drinking and kind of a celebration in a way. Then they go to the cemetery, which is a very quiet, family affair. But for three days they really have quite a big vigil. So we tried doing that at the funeral home and that was a disaster because they would take up funeral space for three full days and we are not used to that. We found a place here in town for them to have this three-day ceremony. So we work with them on taking care of the body. Then they go have their three-day celebration and then we take the body to the cemetery the next day. It's very rewarding to be able to help them. Another group that has come to us are the Muslims in Tulsa. That's been a learning curve for all of us. They do a very separate type of thing. We take the body to the mosque and they have a ritual washing and blessing of the body and prayers. Then we go back to the mosque. We are not allowed inside, but we go back to the mosque to load the body in the hearse and we go to their cemetery, which is in Bixby. They bury the person on the same day that the person dies if possible. Native Americans, I know we used to take several bodies to the reservation where they lived and leave the body there for maybe a day or two and then do the burial.

JE: The Jewish community does not embalm do they?

EMJ: No, normally they don't.

JE: So that funeral is held quickly?

JM: Yes.

EMJ: Now, we have what's called low temperature, where we can keep the body in almost like a refrigerated area. This allows us to keep the body, if it's a weekend or a snowstorm or something, we can keep the body longer and then do a burial as soon as we can. There are some regulations too now with the medical examiner, where you have to jump through some hoops and follow those regulations for cremation and for burials. There's a time frame regulation in there.

Chapter 9 – 6:30
Changing Traditions

John Erling: Joe, you would have seen how caskets have become more sophisticated over the years?

Joe Moore: Yes they have. They have kept up with the times. We have a lot of metal caskets and different types of caskets that we didn't have years ago.

JE: What was a casket like back in the 1930s?

JM: Mostly wood, they were mostly pine boxes.

EMJ: It's coming full circle.

JE: What does that mean?

EMJ: We are back to the pine box. Basically a lot of people just want the plain pine box.

JE: Now we are so sophisticated with coffins, like if someone is a big racecar fan or something.

EMJ: Oh my. Yes, they can just do anything now. There is a group in Tulsa, I can't think of the name of it, but it's a group of retired firemen. They are doing these caskets where you can do camouflage for hunters. They have just personalized the heck out of them. You can do different hobbies on different corners, or you can have the whole thing wrapped in vinyl with a scene. There's one called "fairway to heaven" that has a golf course scene on it. So it's really fun to see what they've done with them. But I started working here in the early 1980s and really some of the caskets are some of the same ones in the same line as what we had then. So there are some traditional core styles of caskets that I think will always be around.

JE: Also, the day of the funeral has changed, hasn't it? We used to have open casket viewing all of the time. Is that right?

JM: Yes, even at the church. We don't do that anymore—hardly ever.

JE: That's rare now to have an open casket funeral, is that true?

JM: Actually, we don't open the casket as much as we used to at all. Younger people don't like it. They just don't care for it.

JE: So that's a change?

EMJ: Yes. If it's at the funeral home for a viewing we will have all of the flowers that were sent for that person in a room and the casket is open for people to view the body. When we go to a church service the casket is closed. Some religions will not allow an open casket service.

JE: You mentioned flowers. Do you remember way back when, were there certain flower shops in town that catered to your funeral home?

JM: There was Aladdin Flowers.

EMJ: There was Christina's, but they are not there anymore. Mrs. DeHaven's was around then

and they are still here. Aladdin's used to do all of our flowers. Then there was a little man who opened Eastland and the name of his flower shop was Argie Lewis. He would bring flowers in the middle of the night—whatever he had to do. He was just great and he would help us out a lot.

JE: Joe, do you remember what you would do with the flowers that would be left behind?

JM: We would take them to the hospital to people that didn't have flowers.

EMJ: We don't do that anymore—the hospitals don't want them anymore. But now we take them to the hospices around town. A lot of the hospices will let us bring them in and so will the nursing homes.

JE: Another change is that fewer and fewer family-owned funeral homes are around because corporations are buying them up. Here in Tulsa, obviously Moore's is family-owned. So Ninde is the only other one in town that is family-owned?

EMJ: Yes.

JE: Are there any others?

EMJ: I don't think so.

JE: So you and Ninde are the only ones left that are family-owned?

EMJ: I would have to say Joe was very wise about that because in the early 1990s they were going around wining and dining people, but he said that he did not want to sell. Boy did he turn out to be right about that.

JM: It's always been in our family ever since my father started it years ago in Claremore. It's the only business my family has ever been in.

JE: But there was a time I suppose where a corporation came in and offered you millions of dollars for your business?

EMJ: Oh yes.

JM: Well, SCI, Service Corporation International and Bobby Waltrip came to me one time years and years ago and wanted me to go into business with him. Now he has about 400 or 500 funeral homes.

JE: So you could have been in on some of that?

JM: I could have, but I didn't. (Chuckle)

EMJ: I am glad that you didn't. A lot of them were given stock, which is absolutely worthless, so they had worked their whole lives and ended up with stock that was worthless. A lot of them had to go back to work in the business. It was just a travesty.

JE: So they were given stock in the corporation in trade for the funeral home?

EMJ: Yes. They would take the funeral home and give them stock and the stock wasn't worth anything. It was just awful. So Joe was right.

JM: We always kept it in the family. It will always be in the family as long as Elaine and her family are around.

JE: Elaine, tell us about your family.

EMJ: Well, Joe has a son too, a doctor of oncology who has just retired from his medical practice. I think he has an interest in taking over. His wife just recently received her license to go into the funeral business. I think all of us just feel really dedicated to it.

JE: Do you have children too?

EMJ: No, my nephews can work part-time maybe this summer. We are going to see if we can get some new family members interested.

JE: It sounds like there will be enough family members to keep this going?

JM: Yes.

EMJ: I have to say we have some great employees. We have people that have been with us for years. The one thing that we all have inherited from Joe is the need and the mission to please people—whatever it takes. This is a one-time deal. We only get one chance to do it right. He has given us great leadership.

JE: So your grandchildren could be interested in the business?

JM: Yes.

EMJ: Oh yes, they are working and helping us now to see if they like it. It's not for everybody. One of the ladies at my church met Joe, Joe's grandson and she just thought he was wonderful.

Chapter 10 – 4:25

Ledger – Genealogy

John Erling: As we talk here, I am thinking about Dr. Warren Hultgren of First Baptist Church.

Joe Moore: He was my closest friend.

JE: Was he?

JM: Yes.

JE: He was very good about visiting people in the hospital, and he preached a lot of funeral services.

JM: I bet we did about half of the funerals he preached. I have a big picture of him at my home.

JE: Joe, isn't it true that the family didn't have any means or if they didn't have any minister or anything, that you would call Dr. Hultgren?

JM: Yes, everybody liked him. He was a wonderful person. He had a wonderful personality. He and I traveled all over the world together.

JE: Did you really?

JM: Yes, we were good friends.

JE: What was your wife's name?

JM: Eunice. She was from west Texas.

JE: She has passed on?

JM: Yes.

JE: How old was she when she died?

JM: She was in her 80s.

Elaine Moore Jones: Do you remember her maiden name?

JM: Thornton. She was from west Texas. We used to go out there every summer and spend time there.

JE: Did she get involved in the family business as well?

JM: No, she was never active in the business. She was too busy playing bridge and having a good time.

JE: Nothing wrong with that is there?

EMJ: Oh no! (Laugh)

JE: Elaine, you are sitting here with several books. This one marked record of funerals, what is that? How far does that date back?

EMJ: This one says 1933.

JM: It is one of our older ones.

EMJ: This is just so interesting. This was a way of keeping history of the funerals. This was way before computers. We still keep these books believe it or not. We talked about the family, and this again pertains to history, which you were asking about. This book would list the names of relatives and what casket they chose. Some of them have a ledger of their payments that they would make. It also has all the information on the service as well. A lot of families come back to us and we serve their family again. They might say to us, "We want the same service that Uncle Bill had." We could go right to our ledger book and find out what service we did for Uncle Bill and reproduce that for them. But it is amazing how these have changed as well. We used to put addresses in the paper. We would list who their relatives were, which minister would do the service and that's all changed. We would never think of putting the address in the paper now. The causes of death are very interesting and how those have changed.

JE: How far back do your records go?

EMJ: I was going to see.

JE: This one goes from 1931 to 1933.

JM: I think it starts in 1929.

JE: So you have ledgers going all the back then and to the present?

EMJ: Yes, all the way to the present.

JE: Every funeral you've ever had?

EMJ: Yes, at each location. We have 25 books at Southlawn, which is our newest location, and we opened that one in 1984. We are one of the few funeral homes that welcomes the genealogy society to come and go through our books. They have given Joe several awards and recognition.

JE: We were talking earlier about having an official marker somewhere. If some of that information is lost, they can come into your funeral home and you can give them an answer. You can tell them where someone is buried.

EMJ: On the website now I handle all of the requests that we get about genealogy. We get requests to look up people. I call around to the different locations and try to find the information. I do a lot of the follow-up on genealogy, which is really interesting.

JE: Did you ever find Joe that people die in groups? That you could go several days without a call from anybody, and then all of a sudden you get a call and then another one and another?

JM: They would come in three at a time you know.

JE: We often say that when famous people die that it happens in threes? I don't know where we get that, but you just said it happens in threes, and that's the way it actually has happened, is in threes?

JM: Yes.

EMJ: Yes, or on a full moon, or anytime the weather changes it seems like it happens.

JE: Oh, so you've noticed full moon deaths?

EMJ: Yes.

JE: So you can actually point on the calendar when there's a full moon and you know you are going to start getting calls?

EMJ: We know we're going to get busy.

Chapter 11 – 6:50

Remembering Joe Moore

John Erling: Does it seem strange for those of you who are in the business, and you've been in the business since the 1920s, to attend a funeral for someone in your own family?

Elaine Moore Jones: It's very difficult.

Joe Moore: In my whole family, I am the only one left.

EMJ: Yes, and that's really hard.

JE: You've attended all of these funerals and you're sitting there in the place of the people that you have served. Let's talk about that.

EMJ: When my mom and dad passed away, I put it in the hands on my staff and I said, "You guys, this is your turn." For me, I felt most at home at the funeral home with my sisters planning what I wanted to happen. So it was a real relief for me to be there. Then to show up at the funeral home and have all of the employees show up just was the biggest honor. So I think we realize how valuable we are at a time like this. For me, I just felt so proud of my staff that they do really care and they are really compassionate. It's hard when it's your own family and you are doing the things that you are used to being in charge of and you are letting somebody else do it.

JE: Joe, you have buried many, many family members haven't you?

JM: I'm the only one left in my family and we had a big family too.

JE: Yes, that goes back lots of years. You had nine in your family. I guess you know how you want your own funeral service to be conducted?

JM: I am going to leave it up to Elaine.

EMJ: Yes, I have it planned. (Chuckle)

JM: I know I will be buried by my wife at Memorial Park Cemetery.

JE: Having been around death all of these years, do you fear death? What is your vision?

JM: I don't fear it at all anymore. I did back when I was younger, but I don't anymore because it's something that you know is on the horizon. You might as well get ready for it because it's coming.

JE: Yes. You're 91 and you are in good health.

MJ: I have health, but don't know about good health (chuckle).

JE: You have a nice smile still and you still have a sense of humor. We've laughed here today—how would you like to be remembered Joe?

JM: I would like to be remembered as a person who tried to do right by people. We made sure to treat everybody the same. We do a great amount of funerals each year, so we are doing all right.

JE: Elaine, how do you see Joe being remembered?

JM: Don't talk about that! (Laughter)

EMJ: I think one of the most important things about the legacy that Joe Moore has provided to this community is that this has been his whole life. He doesn't have any hobbies or anything else he does. He just cares about people. I'll remember dinners and meals where the family would be there and they would get a call and they were gone, and all of the boys would go too. This was their life. This is what they did. They would go to the hospitals and meet families and walk them through these transitions. I just have so much

respect for him because your time is not your own. It's not an easy career. You're meeting people at the most difficult time of their lives. They sometimes have a lot of anger and it's sometimes directed at an easy target. But he has just made it what it is today.

JM: Well, we go back a long ways there. Back when I was younger, I didn't mind getting up two or three times a night.

JE: But it had to take a special person, as Elaine has just said, to deal with these families.

JM: They are very upset at times like that. You have to be very careful with how you handle them. I've seen a few of them just fly off the handle, angry because they have lost someone.

JE: And it seemed like they were mad at you?

JM: You made sure they didn't get mad at you.

JE: But even if they did, you knew what was happening.

JM: Oh yes. You understood what the deal was.

EMJ: He has done so much for the community. Just the average person in Tulsa just does not have a clue have what it takes to employ 38 people and to keep this company going and never miss a paycheck—to provide all that he provides for the employees as well as what he's done for the community.

JM: I think that may be overstating it, but we have been very successful. We have enjoyed it very much. It is been a pleasure to help people.

EMJ: He has been successful because of the way he has treated other people, and that's a lesson that all of us can learn from.

JM: I want everyone to feel like they've been treated properly. That's how I feel about people—I really do.

EMJ: He doesn't care if you wreck a car. He doesn't care if you make a mistake. If you do something wrong concerning the family you are helping, you are in deep trouble—that is the one thing. He's got a great demeanor and he doesn't get mad very often, but if you do something and the family calls up here and mentions it, he is upset. That's the one thing that I think we've all learned.

JM: The smartest thing I ever did in my life, and I've done lots of crazy things, and I've done one or two smart things. (Laughter) I went out to California one time and I told Elaine, "You're coming back home with us." And she did. She said it was the best thing that ever happened to her.

EMJ: Well, this was in 1982 or something, and I was out in California having a good time. He asked me, "Are you serious about getting into the funeral business?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, come on home." And I did. We did 575 services last year out at the South Lawn location on 51st Street next to the cemetery.

JE: Okay.

JM: We put that location right next to the cemetery.

EMJ: That was one of the best things you ever did.

JM: We were always afraid that Memorial Park would put in a funeral home out there. They couldn't very well do that, because that's trust land out there that was given to the city.

JE: So you bought the land next to it and that's why that works. Did you ever have a funeral and have only one or two people show up?

JM: We've had funerals where nobody showed up.

JE: Oh really? How sad that had to be.

EMJ: Yes, it's very sad.

JE: Well, I want to thank both of you.

JM: I want to thank you. This has just been a pleasant afternoon. I was kind of dreading it.

EMJ: He really was trying to get out of it (chuckle).

JE: You were dreading it and it turned out to be all right, eh?

JM: I didn't know what it was going to be, or how long it was going to be or anything else, but I am glad I came over to see you this afternoon.

JE: I'm glad you showed up Joe. (Laughter) This interview will be preserved on the website VoicesofOklahoma.com forever and ever—beyond our lives, so that young people can look back and say, so that's the way they handled funerals years and years ago.

JM: You'll make sure of that?

JE: Yes.

Chapter 12 – 0:22

Conclusion

Announcer: The voice of Joe Moore and his story are now preserved forever thanks to the generous support of our sponsors who believe in our mission of preserving Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time. We encourage you to explore our website and listen to all the voices and their stories on VoicesofOklahoma.com.