

## HOME BURIALS OFFER AN INTIMATE ALTERNATIVE

*-- Excerpted from a NY Times article*

When Nathaniel Roe, 92, died at his 18th century farmhouse the morning of June 6, his family did not call a funeral home to handle the arrangements. Instead, Mr. Roe's children, like a growing number of people nationwide, decided to care for their father in death as they had in the last months of his life. They washed Mr. Roe's body, dressed him in his favorite Harrods tweed jacket and red Brooks Brothers tie and laid him on a bed so family members could privately say their last goodbyes.

The next day, Mr. Roe was placed in a pine coffin made by his son, along with a tuft of wool from the sheep he once kept. He was buried on his farm in a grove off a walking path he traversed each day. "It just seemed like the natural, loving way to do things," said Jennifer Roe-Ward, Mr. Roe's granddaughter. "It let him have his dignity."

Advocates say the number of home funerals, where everything from caring for the dead to the visiting hours to the building of the coffin is done at home, has soared in the last five years. The cost savings can be substantial, all the more important in an economic downturn. The average American funeral costs about \$6,000 for the services in a funeral home, in addition to the costs of cremation or burial. A home funeral can be as inexpensive as the cost of a pine coffin (for a backyard burial) or a few hundred dollars for cremation or several hundred dollars for cemetery costs. The Roes spent \$250.

While only a tiny portion of the nation's dead are cared for at home, the number is growing. There are at least 45 organizations or individuals nationwide that help families with the process, compared with only two in 2002. The cost of a death midwife, as some of the coaches call themselves, varies from about \$200 for an initial consultation to \$3,000 if the midwife needs to travel.

In Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska and New York, laws require that a funeral director handle human remains as some point in the process. In the 44 other states and the District of Columbia loved ones can be responsible for the body themselves. Families are typically required to obtain the death certificate and burial transit permit so the body can be moved from a hospital to a cemetery, or, more typically, a crematory. But even in states where a funeral director is required, home funerals are far less expensive. Some families, like the Roes, choose burial on private land, with a town permit. In most states those rules are an issue of local control. "Can Grandma be buried in the backyard? Yes, for the most part, if the backyard is rural or semi-rural."

Many death midwives are like Jerrigrace Lyons, who was asked to participate in the home funeral of a close friend, a 54-year-old woman who died unexpectedly in 1994. Ms. Lyons was initially frightened at the prospect of handling the body, but she participated anyway. The experience was life changing, she said, and inspired her to help others plan home funerals. Ms.

Lyons educates the bereaved about the realities of after-death care: placing dry ice underneath the body to keep it cool, tying the jaw shut so it does not open.

Mr. Lakin, a woodworker, makes coffins specifically for home funerals. Ranging in price from \$480 to \$1,200, they double as bookcases, entertainment centers and coffee tables until they need to be used. He became interested in home funerals after his father died 30 years ago and he felt there was a “disconnect” during the funeral process.

During her battle with cancer, Diane Manahan also requested a home funeral, and the family did not know then how much it would help them with their grief. “There’s something about touching, watching, sitting with a body that lets you know the person is no longer there,” Nancy Manahan said. “We didn’t even realize how emotionally meaningful those rituals are, doing it ourselves, until we did it.”