

Berhalter-Hutchins Funeral Home

Founded: 1860

Location: 227–228 South Main Street, Kendallville (1860–1935); 222 South State Street (1935–)

Six generations of the same family have operated the Berhalter-Hutchins Funeral Home since its founding in the spring of 1860. The Kendallville establishment began as a cabinet and furniture-making firm that also built coffins on the side, operated by Joseph and Fanny Berhalter. Joseph's first partner was F. Oscar Rossbacher, but the relationship did not last long, and Rossbacher soon formed his own firm. The team opened for business in a building on South Main Street, a site still occupied in 1999 by the Berhalter Furniture store. Joseph and Fanny emigrated from Germany in the 1820s, moving to Kendallville from Pennsylvania in early 1860. During the Civil War Joseph fought for the Union army, leaving his wife to run the operation with the help of their eight children.

After the Civil War, Joseph came back to Noble County and ran the business until his death in 1881, at which time his sons, John and George, inherited the concern. The brothers changed the name of the establishment to Berhalter Brothers and five years later bought the building housing their business and turned it into a furniture store and funeral parlor. The undertaking side of the establishment was housed in an addition on the south side of the building. The brothers kept a horse-drawn hearse that they used in funeral processions in an old barn at the back of John's home at 427 South Oak Street.

Sometime around 1900 the firm began an ambulance service, a practice continued into the early 1970s. By 1913 the Berhalters had retired their horses and purchased an automobile to carry the deceased and the injured.

When John died in 1923 the business came into the hands of George. John's sons, Arthur and Louis, became the owners of the Main Street business in 1928 after the death of their uncle. Two years later the brothers ended their partnership. Louis opened his own funeral parlor on 120 East Williams Street, a business that continued in operation until 1977. Arthur remodeled the store in 1930, adding a "modern" storefront. In 1935 Arthur purchased a home from the estate of Chris Beyer on South State Street to serve as a funeral parlor, separate from the furniture company, which continued in operation at the South Main Street address.

The State Street home was built in 1904 by Beyer, a German immigrant. Arthur and Emily Shull Berhalter raised two children in the southern portion of the home, using the northern half of the house for their funeral business. Their son, John, died at the age of fourteen in a hunting accident. Beverly, the couple's daughter and an accomplished musician, married Myron C. Hutchins. Hutchins and Arthur Berhalter formed a partnership in 1937, and when Arthur died in 1945 Beverly and Myron Hutchins became the funeral home's proprietors. Emily Berhalter continued to live in the house until her death in 1956. After her death, the southern wing of the building was converted into use as a funeral parlor and an addition was built on the west side of the home. Both Myron and Beverly served as funeral directors and were active in the business through the 1970s.

Myron and Beverly's son, John Berhalter Hutchins, graduated from Hanover College and the Indiana College of Mortuary Science in 1958, the same year that the company's name was changed to Berhalter-Hutchins Funeral Home. During the 1960s and 1970s the firm went through many changes. During those decades a new brick front

entrance, an additional chapel, and parking facilities were added. Around 1970 the furniture store was sold to Fred Rasp, who retained the store's name. Rasp operated the business until the late 1980s when Corunna Bedding purchased the firm. The ambulance service was discontinued in 1972 due to the introduction of county-financed emergency teams. In 1973 the couple bought the Williams Funeral Home in Wolcottville from Roger Williams, renaming it the Hutchins Funeral Home sometime later.

John and his wife, Sherrell (Sherry) Harter Hutchins, both participated in running the family firm. Sherry developed the community services program for the company. In the late 1990s the program lent books and other media material that deal with the topics of death and dying to the area's denizens, provided a widowed-to-widowed support group, and offered speakers and tours of the funeral home to interested groups. John B. Hutchins worked as a funeral director and has received numerous awards and honors for his service in the funeral field from his peers. He served as the president of the National Funeral Directors Association in 1985–86. Throughout his career he has placed an emphasis on the need for community education.

John S. Hutchins, the great-grandson of Arthur Berhalter and son of John B. and Sherrell Hutchins, entered the funeral business in the mid-1980s after graduating from the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. In the 1980s and 1990s the firm began prearranged funeral planning, community education, and follow-up services. In line with John Hutchins's belief in community outreach and quality service to customers after the burial, the firm began offering an Aftercare Program in 1990. The program provides death certificates, laminated obituaries, and other information pertinent to the family within two weeks of a death of a loved one, including help with filling out insurance

forms or a chance to ask questions. In 1999 John B. Hutchins retained the post of president of the funeral home business.