

## Thoma/Rich, Hewitt and Chaney Funeral Home

Founded: 1853

Location: 116 South Main Street, Bluffton (1853–1964); temporary quarters on Walnut Street (ca. 1890); 308 West Washington Street (1964– )

Henry Thoma immigrated to the United States in 1849 from his birthplace in Ebersdorf, Germany, at age seventeen. He had been a farmer in his native land, but after settling in Findlay, Ohio, he worked as a cabinetmaker's apprentice. Thoma moved to Bluffton, Indiana, in October 1853, forming a partnership with furniture maker Jacob Tribolet two months later. The firm of Tribolet and Company made furniture and provided undertaking services for seven years before the partnership dissolved by mutual consent. Thoma temporarily went to work in Henry Cook's hardware store until he formed his own business at the same location as the Tribolet furniture shop.

In 1861 Thoma opened his store and began making cabinets, custom-ordered furniture, and coffins. He promised low prices and quality service and was known not only as a skilled carpenter but also as a caring undertaker. In 1853 he built the first hearse used in Wells County, which was drawn by a white horse and driven by an agent of the business, who wore a "plug" hat, a swallow tailcoat, and boots. By 1903 he offered an ambulance service, which continued into the mid-twentieth century. When a brick structure was being built on the site of his store, both his business and the frame building were moved to Walnut Street. When construction was complete Thoma moved back to 116 South Main Street, continuing to operate the firm until his death in 1911.

Like most entrepreneurs in the nineteenth century, he was active in his community, serving as the city clerk for five years, sitting one year on the school board,

and serving for three years on the city council. In 1886 he was elected to the post of county coroner on the Democratic ticket, the first in a line of coroners associated with the Thoma business. He was also active in his church and at one time had considered becoming a minister while in Findlay, Ohio.

Herman Thoma, the only child of Henry and Matilda Deaver Thoma, joined his father's firm in 1891, and the company's name changed to Thoma and Son. Herman was one of the first undertakers to meet the requirements for the Indiana law of 1898 that licensed funeral directors. After his father died Herman made a few changes to the business. He replaced the horse-drawn hearse with an automobile, which by 1937 was a new Packard. He brought his son, William H., into the business as a partner in 1922. The business was then remodeled; a facility for holding funerals and a chapel was added, with a separate entrance from the store.

When Herman died in 1946 William became the president of the concern. William was a graduate of DePauw University and the Worsham School of Embalming. In 1964 he discontinued the furniture portion of the business to concentrate on the operation of the funeral home. When the furniture store was sold, Thoma moved the funeral business to a newly constructed edifice located on West Washington Street. While the furniture store was in operation a series of managers, including Morris McCray, Carl Shelley, Harry James, and John Maynard, ran the business and would at times help with the funeral home. Maynard bought the furniture portion of the business, continuing to run the store until 1984.

Howard Rich joined the business in 1956 and rose to a partner in 1961. He was involved in planning the design of the funeral home. He bought the business from the

Thoma estate after the death of William Thoma in 1974. Rich, like his predecessors, became actively involved in the community, serving as the president and campaign chairman for the Wells Community Swimming Pool, sitting on the board of the Wells County United Way, and receiving the Wells County Community Service Award.

Seeking to develop the company, he purchased a local monument business in January 1991. Tim Steffen, the former owner of the monument firm, agreed to stay on as the manager. A year later the funeral home added insurance to its list of services. In October 1993 the name of the funeral home was changed to its present designation. Michael Chaney and Jeff Hewitt had been partners in the firm since December 1990, and the name change simply reflected that fact. Hewitt had joined the funeral home for the second time in February 1989, while Chaney had been employed continuously by the firm since 1986. In 1999 the business remained on West Washington Street, and Howard Rich continued as president of the concern.