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Willy von Bracht knows where he's going to be buried, what he will be wearing, and who will dig the grave. About his casket, which stands in a room in his house and holds tools for now, von Bracht quips, "I wouldn't be caught dead without it." Von Bracht is the owner of Sweet Earth Caskets and Cradles in Kalispell and he practices what he preaches.

Tall, lean, and gentle with a big, sheepish smile, von Bracht, 64, insists it's life—not death—that has driven him since 1972 to make plain, affordable caskets and to educate Montanans and customers around the world about funerary choices. "Death is part of life. If you're prepared, it removes a burden. If you're not, it's a nagging little thing. You're leaving decisions for someone else."

It's concern with life, he says, that makes him question how Montanans can spend roughly \$48 million a year burying the dead when 45,000 children in the state go to bed hungry each night. One percent of Montanans die per year, he explains, and the average cost of a funeral in 2006 was \$7,300, not including cemetery costs and extras like flowers. ▶

sweet Swan Song

Flathead Valley man finds calling in simple, wooden casket making



Willy von Bracht, 64, has been crafting caskets since 1972 through his Sweet Earth Casket and Cradle Shop. Shown here in his workshop, von Bracht creates a variety of caskets including one that can be used as a bookshelf in the home until it needs to be used.

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY JESSICA LOWRY

Dr. Mary Stranahan of Arlee bought a Sweet Earth coffin years ago. “People don’t give their families instructions,” she says, “so families make decisions in full grief. They throw their money away. Better to use that money for a college education than for putting metal in the ground.”

The environmental impact of typical funerals also motivates von Bracht, who named his company with “a sweeter option” in mind. Joe Sehee, founder of the New-Mexico-based Green Burial Council, says that annually, along with



their loved ones, Americans bury 30 million board feet of wood (including tropical hardwoods); 90,000 tons of steel (enough for a Golden Gate Bridge); 1.6 million tons of concrete (a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit); and at least one Olympic-sized pool’s worth of embalming fluid. The concrete is for vaults—casket containers that many cemeteries require ostensibly to keep the earth over graves from settling. Embalming fluid contains formaldehyde, a known carcinogen

whose effects on groundwater and earth aren’t well studied.

Von Bracht’s caskets are simple rectangular boxes—angles would cost more to produce, he explains. The least expensive wood model, which sells for \$550, is also the most creative: it’s painted white for further decoration by family and friends. The most expensive model—ironically, the “Old Pine Box”—costs \$1,400. Some models come as kits for half the price; they’re also easier to store in that form until needed, von Bracht points out.

Hand-rubbed finishes, upholstery, and exterior decoration (one casket is painted like a box of Marlboro cigarettes) are extras. So are inserts—shelves, racks for wine or guns—that make a casket useful until needed. Von Bracht plans to introduce a recycled cardboard casket for cremation or burial for \$200. Other Sweet Earth products include containers for ashes and casket-making training.

The son of a Navy pilot, von Bracht grew up around the country and the world. After graduating from the University of Montana in English and journalism, he worked as a smokejumper and

Missoulian reporter. His father’s death when von Bracht was 14 might have influenced his current path, he says, remembering the strangeness of seeing his dad’s face rouged and lipsticked in the coffin. But mainly, the *Missoulian* job got him started, because it included collecting obituaries from funeral homes. Behind the scenes, von Bracht witnessed attitudes ranging from disrespect to simply cold business. It dismayed and angered him—especially considering how much the homes



This page: Willy von Bracht and assistant Steve Tucker work to reattach the cover on his Marlboro casket. The casket was a personal project for von Bracht who has been crafting caskets since 1972. Facing page: Tucker looks on as von Bracht oils the wood of a deluxe model casket.

charged. He told one mortician that when he died, all he wanted was a pine box. The man replied, “You’re out of luck”—that in Montana, you have to be embalmed, pine boxes aren’t allowed, and you have to be buried in a cemetery.

Indeed, state health regulations in the 1970s were unclear. They said bodies had to be prepared for transport by licensed embalmers, which meant that most Montana families turned loved ones over to funeral directors after death. Von Bracht and members of Missoula’s University Congregational Church lobbied to change the regulations. Now, though cities, counties, and cemeteries may have their own rules, state regulations don’t require embalming or any specific kind of coffin, or even a coffin at all, and bodies can be buried on private land. “You might have a hard time selling your property later, but you can do it,” von Bracht says.

Von Bracht considers the information he offers with his caskets just as important as the caskets themselves. He collected some of it into a booklet called *Critical Choices* to help individuals and families navigate end-of-life decisions. Von Bracht is also a font of information about alternative care for bodies after death and home funerals.

He is encouraging about the latter—do-it-yourself affairs

where family and friends prepare the dead and conduct the ceremony or burial—and not just because of the economic savings. “It’s high church,” von Bracht says. “It’s unbelievable magic, what happens at home funerals. People say, ‘This was the only funeral I’ve been to that was real.’ It’s empowering. People do something they never thought they could do. Funeral directors aren’t doing anyone any favors by doing it for them. I hear over and over again that being involved was actually what helped.”

To “round the whole thing out,” explains von Bracht, smiling, Sweet Earth also offers handmade hardwood cradles. “They’re so much fun to make.” Old-fashioned in design, they have stained-glass inserts at either end that bathe sleeping infants in light and give them something to marvel at on waking. Ever the punster, von Bracht had a motto on his van, “From the Womb to the Tomb,” but the letters are faded now. That may be just as well. A depressed economy has sent Sweet Earth’s casket business soaring. Von Bracht may phase the cradles out and is transforming his company into a statewide casket-making collaborative. Sweet Earth’s name will probably change to the Montana Casketmakers’ Cooperative. But its mission? That’s not changing. Not while Willy von Bracht’s casket still stands. ■