

## UNDERTAKER'S LIFE RUGGED IN DAYS OF OLD DOBBIN

The late Samuel H. Metcalf would rent out to a lively young swain a well cared for, spirited horse and a spanking clean buggy in which to take his best girl for a ride. By the same token he also would provide this young man with the then most approved type of funeral service if such were required for any of the young man's loved ones.

Such was the custom back in 1894 when "Grandfather" Metcalf launched

riages. After a time, Mr. Metcalf realized he was doing most of the work of the undertakers he was serving. Being an astute Yankee he came to the conclusion that he might better become an undertaker himself, so long as he had the horses and carriages anyway.

Becoming an undertaker at that time was a simple matter for him. No special schooling was required; no license was demanded by city, county or state. All

Sometime later Mr. Metcalf moved his combined business to a location on Fulton St., a short distance west of Jefferson, on the present site of the E. A. Rood Company, home of the famed Doughty birds. (Penclub Mag for December 1962.)

A yellowed newspaper clipping tells the story of Mr. Metcalf's later lease of a barn at 107 Kent St. (Bond Ave.) that formerly had been known as the Shaver Livery and, according to the newspaper, was regarded as "one of the more sanitary stables" of the town. It had "perfectly appointed coaches and broughams and well matched teams." Mr. Metcalf, so the story ran, didn't propose to operate the place for a general livery business but planned to cater to "weddings, receptions and church affairs as well as furnishing carriages for funerals."

The Kent St. address was near Crescent St., but, apparently for business reasons, Mr. Metcalf called his new operation the "Morton House Livery." His son, Charles A. Metcalf, was his partner.

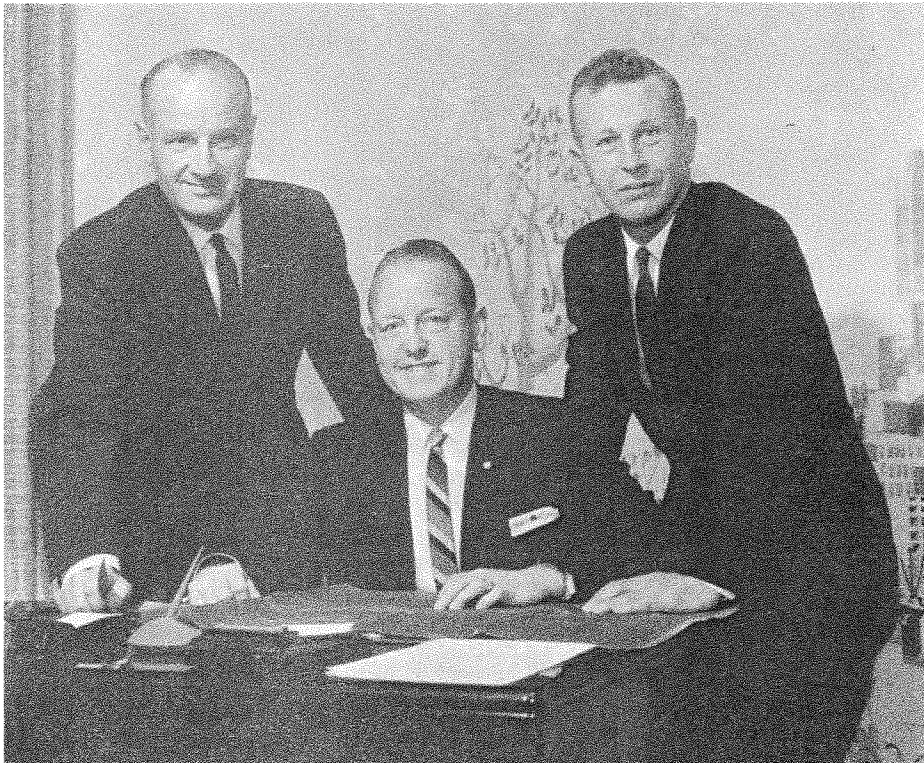
A card-board hand fan, still preserved, bears the drawing of a hack to which were hitched two prancing white horses, with top hatted driver, whip in hand, seated outside the closed carriage. On the reverse side was a charcoal drawing of a Gibson girl with a docile appearing animal resting its head contentedly over her shoulder. Mr. Metcalf at the time owned dozens of horses, but, strangely, it would seem, the animal gracing the fan was a cow!

Prior to leasing the Bond Ave. stable, Mr. Metcalf had moved to what then was 33 Park St. Later this location became the site of the present Y.M.C.A. building. Mr. Metcalf's daughter, Madge, as well as the son, Charles, was associated with him in the business at that location. Mr. Metcalf let the public know, via the newspaper, that he would continue the undertaking branch of his business on Park St. (Now Library St.)

The clipping added that "another feature of the new business" (On Kent St.) was a motorized ambulance. This was the first auto-type ambulance here. It was described as "the latest sanitary Cunningham type."

"With these added facilities the firm should be able to furnish the most satisfactory kind of service," the newspaper observed.

With the business continuing to grow, Mr. Metcalf decided to seek a larger site. He decided upon property at 935 Cherry St., S.E. and purchased it in 1914. Many



**Third Generation in Charge**

*In photo are the trio of partners who now operate the business founded by Samuel H. Metcalf in 1894. Seated is Samuel C. Metcalf. At left, William L. Bennett; right, Oliver J. Ofield.*

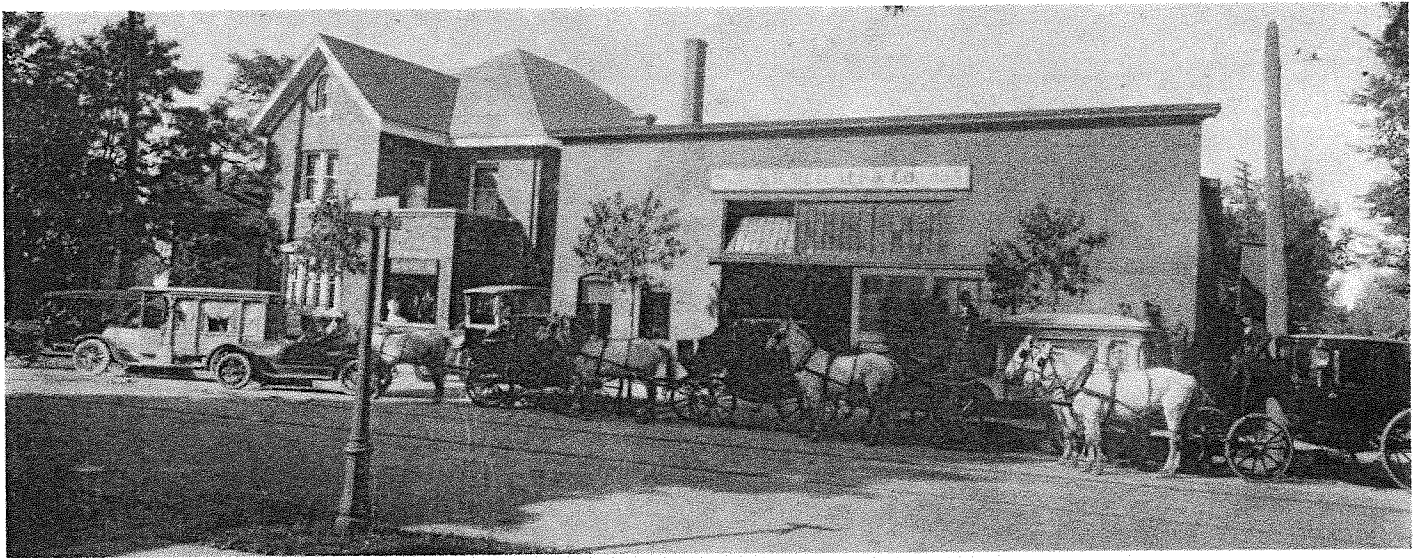
the business that is being continued today under the Metcalf name by members of the third generation of the family. Only the mortuary end of the business is being carried on now, however, the livery business having been dropped years ago.

A lot of changes have been made in the undertaking business since Grandfather Metcalf first hung out his shingle, but more of that later. The elder Metcalf, a transplanted New Englander, had settled at Grandville, had done some farming and then got into the livery business. A considerable part of that business consisted of supplying undertakers of the area with horses and car-

riages. he had to do was to announce that from then on he was an undertaker, hang out his sign and wait for calls.

That's just what Mr. Metcalf did, and he was in business — both the undertaking and the livery business. He didn't think it prudent to drop the latter line. Two years later he came to Grand Rapids and continued both lines.

One of his early business cards read: "S. H. Metcalf, Undertaker and Funeral Furnisher — Calls attended to night and day . . . also in connection, Fine Boarding and Feed Stable." The business was located at "29 and 31 N. Waterloo St." Name of that street long since has been changed to Market Ave.



### Autos Nose Way To Front

*Autos — including motorized hearse — lead procession and famed Metcalf white and grey horses were on way to oblivion.*

of his friends and associates who recalled Eastern Ave. as the former city limits, shook their heads. They thought "Sam was making a poor move by locating away out there in the country." Mr. Metcalf went ahead with his plans, started construction in 1915 and moved into the Cherry St. building in 1916 where the business is still operated. Son Jay returned from World War I and joined the family business in 1919.

Over the years the property has been enlarged and the plant modernized. It has a separate modern chapel with seating accommodations for 350 persons, and provides complete service. Caskets from which to make a selection, are available on the premises; complete burial wardrobes for persons of both sexes are to be had. Licensed embalmers do their work in a hospital-type operating room. A lady attendant is always a part of their staff. Beautician services also are provided for women.

\* \* \*

Samuel H. Metcalf, who died in 1919, used to recall the rugged experiences of his early days as an undertaker. Night calls in the dead of Winter were dreaded, especially when they came from rural areas. Drivers would heat foot-stones before leaving, to help ward off the cold. Blizzardy storms with poor roads to be traversed by the horse-drawn hearse in an era when snow plows were non-existent were nightmares.

To avoid drifts it would be necessary frequently to leave the highway and drive over fields and farm lands. Drivers equipped themselves with wire cutters to open fences of that type. The fences then must be repaired on the return trip. Sometimes horses would sink to their bellies in the snow and would have to be helped out. Occasionally the hearse would tip over, entailing a call for more

help. Members of families of the deceased sometimes would guide the drivers with lanterns.

To avoid long very difficult trips, Metcalf's for a time had branches in Wayland and Hopkins. The advent of motorized equipment lead to discontinuance of these branches.

\* \* \*

During all the pre-automobile days the Metcalf establishment was famed for its white horses and its grey horses and its spic and span equipment. The firm rented out the horses and equipment to other undertakers in the area as it did at the time of the Stanley Ketchel funeral. Ketchel, at the peak of his career as world's middleweight boxing champion, was slain by a jealous farm hand on a Missouri ranch in 1910. His funeral was held at a West Side church here. The church was jammed to the doors while thousands of curious persons milled about outside, admiring the white and grey Metcalf horses which drew the hearse and carriages.

While the Metcalf firm has conducted services for many prominent and even

famous personages, including many Penclubbers (and continues to do so) the services for one of Grand Rapids most revered persons, the late Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, probably attracted the most attention and was given the most publicity.

A large barn was maintained at the Cherry St. address. It housed not only the horses but also the drivers and stablemen who were employed by the establishment.

The horses "went out" in the early 1920's and the carriages were taken by the State of Michigan, which put them into service conveying sightseers and

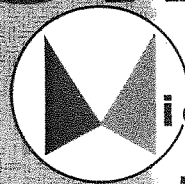
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## Metcalf

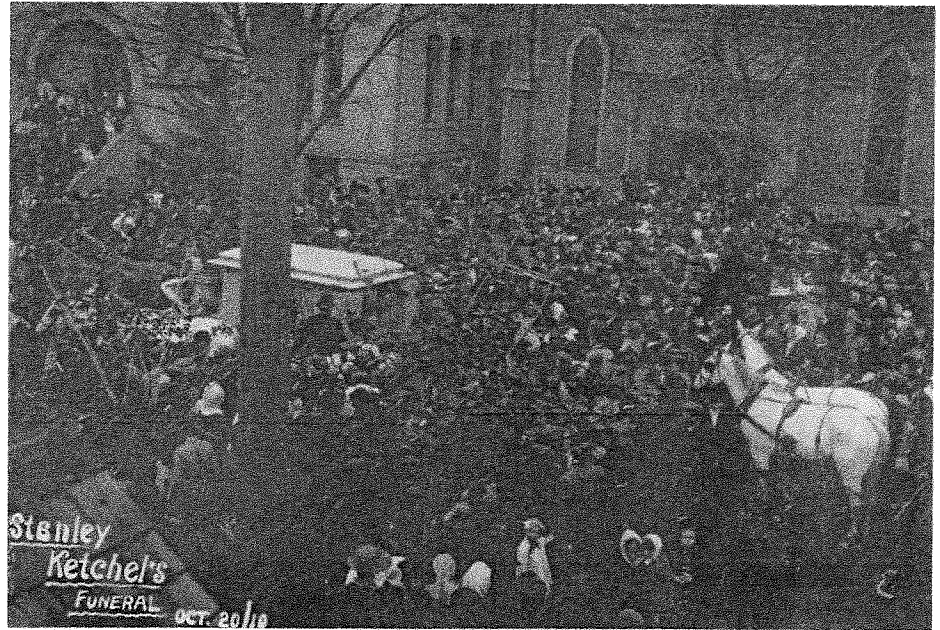
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V.I.P.'s on Mackinac Island. The firm had gradually gotten out of the livery business.

After Samuel H. Metcalf's death in 1919 the business was operated by the sons, Charles A. and Jay H. (the latter a late Penclubber) and the daughter, Miss Madge W. Holt, as a partnership, until 1952. Today the partnership is comprised of the grandson, Samuel C. Metcalf, son of Charles A., and a former Penclubber; William L. Bennett and Oliver J. Ofield.

Although the Cherry St. plant is surrounded by four company-operated parking lots and has just about every other facility known to the mortuary business, the partners are looking to the future, with an eye to expansion. They are seeking permission to provide crematory service at their present location for persons desiring it. At present the nearest crematorium is located in Detroit. The partners also are looking for another location in which to establish a branch.

The firm operates on a non-sectarian basis. It has representatives of four different Protestant denominations on its



### The White Horses Attracted Them

They gave added color to funeral of famed prize fighter Stanley Ketchel  
October 20, 1910.

staff and also has four persons who are Catholics. Thus, Mr. Metcalf points out, the establishment is familiar with the ritual and services of all denominations.

The partners are proud of the fact that they have been a member, by invitation, of National Selected Morticians since 1923. This organization, Mr. Metcalf says, is "the most highly respected of funeral service organizations." It has members in cities all over the United States and in several foreign countries. Because of this affiliation, he adds, the local firm is able to make arrangements efficiently and at less expense for a family when death occurs in other countries or in another community. This is also true when death here requires funeral services and burial elsewhere. Under this arrangement bodies have been returned to and from many foreign lands. ▶

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And then there was the woman who said to her husband, "Be an angel and let me drive."

He did, and he is.

\* \* \*

The city awakened to the yawn of a new day.

\* \* \*

"I don't think both my Mummy and Daddy will go to heaven," wailed the little second-grade tyke in Sunday School.

"Of course they will," the teacher reassured her curly-headed pupil. "What makes you think they won't?"

"Daddy will probably go," she bawled, "but Mummy will have to stay home and baby sit."

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