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Return to the earth: Woman starts business to scatter ashes in Montana's wild lands

By MICHAEL MOORE of the Missoulian



Frances Coover, center, is owner of Ladies in White, a business she started to provide an alternative to the burial industry. Coover and her friends and team members, Tamara Kittelson-Aldred, left, and Cate Campbell, will carry a person's cremated ashes into the wild and scatter them at a family's request. Photo by TOM BAUER/Missoulian

It started, this sense of nature as a spiritual refuge, early in Frances Coover's life.

As a child, it was the simple pleasures, the surprises, the wonder. The neighborhood birds, a doe with a fawn, a caterpillar so perfectly evolved as to be nearly invisible.

Slowly, though, the sights of wildness merged with the feeling of wildness to create inside Coover a sacred landscape nearly as real as wilderness itself.

"It became a thing I couldn't do without," she said recently. "It became a sort of outdoor sanctuary. If I couldn't be there literally, I carried it inside."

Decades later, Frances Coover still carries the precious cargo of wildness. But now she carries something equally as beloved and profound - the ashes of the dead. And she carries them to the wild.

In doing so, Coover is staking a place inside a business she has long mistrusted - the industry of burying our dead.

"I became sort of radicalized about this in college from a consumer perspective and it's something that really stuck with me," she said. "The expense, the chemicals, all of it. Obviously, it's not something I ever saw myself being a part of."

Perhaps "part of" is too strong a characterization. Perhaps "antithesis" would be a better word for what Coover has planned under the unassuming business name of Ladies in White.

"You can't get around it - what we're doing is burying people, but it's not being done in the traditional manner," she said. "We are returning people to the earth from whence they came. That is what many societies have done for centuries."

Thus, for an industry known for its funeral Men in Black, Coover launched Ladies in White.

"For those who have chosen cremation and who love this earth we call home, Ladies in White offers a way to be joined with a place of special beauty at life's end," the new company's Web site states. "On one- or two-day journeys, the Ladies carry ashes into the Montana wilderness and other forest areas for scattering. Following each scattering journey, Ladies in White makes a donation toward the preservation of our nation's wildlands."

It's a simple, if curious and out-of-the-mainstream, business proposition. For money - much less money than you would pay for a funeral and traditional burial, the average cost of which is more than \$6,000 - Ladies in White will take cremated remains into the Montana woods and mountains.

The women - Coover plans to use two others besides herself for each scattering - will scatter the ashes over an area of maybe 25-by-25 feet. They'll make sure the ashes are off the main trail, in an area unlikely to be disturbed except by wildlife.

"I think the idea of that is sort of nice," she said.

They will not leave monuments, flowers or any other sign of their visit. They will, however, photograph the site, making sure to picture a prominent landmark should the dead's family ever like to visit. They'll also provide a GPS coordinate.

"The people who would hire us aren't likely to visit, but still, you want to know where your loved ones are," Coover said.

Coover came to her new business by a circuitous path. She studied at Kalamazoo College, then moved on to a master's program in early childhood education. That led to a career with Montessori schools, but she later turned 180 degrees and worked with the elderly in a program at the University of Montana called "Promoting Excellence in End of Life Care."

"I guess I covered both ends of the age spectrum," she said.

Then, maybe seven or eight years ago, she attended a memorial service which ended with a request to help scatter the person's ashes. Coover couldn't do it.

"My feet were stuck to the ground," she said. "I couldn't put my hand in the ashes. I didn't like having that fear. I wasn't proud of myself."

Yet Coover saw a beauty in what was happening. Her friend's ashes settled lightly on a beautiful hillside, where they would be absorbed into the soil, enriching, every so slightly, the place where they fell.

"I saw her returning to the earth," Coover said. "It seemed so right, so without fuss."

The beauty combined with Coover's disdain for traditional American burial services - expensive caskets, formaldehyde-laced embalming fluids, millions of tons of concrete for vaults.

"It really all got started after the Civil War, as we tried to come up with a way to deal with all the war dead," Coover said. "Before that, women cared for the body, maybe a carpenter built a wood box and you had a funeral at home. When people say that what we do now is traditional, it's really not."

That's not to say it's wrong. Coover doesn't want to be in the business of telling people what to do with their dead relatives. She just wants to offer an alternative.

"We just want to stand in the shoes of our client families and do what they want to have done," she said. "We want to be a comfort without

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being too much of a financial burden."

They are, literally, Ladies in White. Coover and the friends she's enlisted to help her wear all white when they walk into the woods. It's simply a way to make a counteroffer to funeral black. They wear clothes they've made, found or been sent. The clothes have a sort of antique feel, but are sometimes quite new.

There are no historic Ladies in White, and Coover didn't have a problem getting a trademark for the name.

There is considerable history, however, for the scattering of ashes. Folks have been doing so in the Montana woods, mountains and streams for years, despite the fact that it's not legal on national forest land.

And it's not just scattering. You can have your ashes cast into a man-made coral reef, tossed into the sea near San Diego, scattered about a Hawaiian volcano, turned into jewelry, shot skyward in a fireworks display or pitched out of an airplane at 15,000 feet.

Coover doesn't mind any of that, as long as it's earth friendly and relatively inexpensive. She can't countenance families being forced to pay huge bills at the time of their most palpable grief.

"It's wrong, but people are pretty vulnerable at those times," she said. "That's a major part of what I want for Ladies in White: to be a reasonable alternative for people, and to give them a chance to give back in a way they might not have thought of. As the earth receives back the substance of their bodies, the payment to Ladies in White contributes to the preservation of wildlands."

Frances Coover believes most of the business that will come to Ladies in White will likely come from out-of-state residents who visited Montana and fell in love. They would like to have their ashes scattered here, but can't really make the logistics work.

That's where the Ladies in White will step in.

"We are simply an extension of the family, doing what they can't do for themselves," she said.

In gearing up to debut her business, Coover did all the necessary research about permits and potential legal problems. One problem that blindsided her has turned out to be one of the bigger issues - the U.S. Forest Service doesn't permit the scattering of ashes on land it manages. She had been informed by several Forest Service personnel, who weren't aware of the rule, that scattering on national forest land was "perfectly legal." But it's not.

Other land agencies, including the national parks, have their own regulations. But for now, the Forest Service doesn't allow ash scattering. That certainly doesn't mean people don't do it. After all, as Coover notes, there are no "ash police."

Still, Coover wants to do everything above board, and that means, at least for now, she won't scatter ashes on Forest Service land. She plans to use primarily land under the control of the Bureau of Land Management, working under the conditions of a special use permit.

She'll eventually try to get a similar permit from the Forest Service, but for now she'll stick with BLM land.

"I need for everything to be perfectly legal, as we don't want families to be involved in anything that might cause a problem in the future," she said. "Still, it's curious about the Forest Service. I think their major concern is that people would perhaps try to leave monuments and such in the forest. But we don't permit that. We'll leave it as we found it."

That fits precisely with Coover's very reason for starting Ladies in White - as a way to honor both the dead and the land, letting one give to the other, and vice versa.

"We live and we die," she said. "We've all benefited greatly from living on this earth, and too often the earth is left out of the equation. This is a way of returning the investment the earth makes in each one of us."

One way to look at Ladies in White is as a grand recycling venture. It's a characterization Coover is comfortable with.

"I think we are all on a journey," she said. "Life goes on, no matter what you believe. We come from the earth, we return to the earth."

Make what you will of what happens when we die. The body goes lifeless, but what else? Souls going up to heaven? Reincarnation? Dust to dust?

Coover has her own thoughts, but they are outside the mission of Ladies in White.

Ashes to ashes.

"It's a way to build a bridge between our deaths and the ongoing life that is all of us," she said. "It's a way to make our deaths count for something."

Frances Coover has a backpack awaiting a container of ashes. Her white clothes are pressed, fresh, ready to go. She has thought through nearly every dismal outcome that could possibly befall her on her way into the woods. She is ready for them all. She is ready to walk.

As a college student, she was told that God, that holiness, that the world of the sacred, was found between the walls of a church. That didn't strike her as true. The place she felt closest to what she saw as sacred was outside, beyond the walls built by men. She saw God in certain groups of people, in acts of kindness, in the way the earth provides for all, even in the face of human disdain.

"I guess I see our lives cycling back through the earth," she said. "I am already part of that cycle, like it or not. I want to embrace it. This is my chance."

On the Net

To learn more about Frances Coover and Ladies in White, go to ladiesinwhite.com.

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