

Former Wathena resident Mark Shalz delivers vault for Reagan Funeral

Taken from the June 29, 2004 issue of the Frankfort County (NE) Chronicle

When the millions of television viewers were watching the events that preceded the actual funeral and entombment following the death of President Ronald Reagan, June 5, 2004, only a select few knew of a problem that had arisen.

Funeral arrangements for the president had been made several years prior to his death, and it was not until after his death that it was discovered the mahogany casket that had been chosen was not going to fit the burial vault.

The funeral director in charge of the services was a friend of Joe Suhor, president and CEO of the Kansas City Wilbert Vault Co., who was at a convention with regional vice president of the Missouri operations Mark Shalz and they were contacted to see if an appropriate vault could be found. If not, a suggestion that had been made was to place the casket with the former president's body inside the tomb at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, CA without a vault. Mark thought that was not an appropriate burial for a president.

The search found an oversized vault in Marian, IA (outside of Cedar Rapids) Tuesday, June 8. "We had an idea where an oversized vault was located so it only took a couple of hours," remarked Mark Shalz. The vault would be picked up in Iowa, taken back to Kansas City to be painted and then Mark would transport

they were in disbelief of the events and were sworn to secrecy on the ordeal. No one was to know of the event, with only a few employees at the Kansas City Wilbert Vault Co. knowing where the vault's final destination would be. When making the trip to California Mark was told that if the vehicle broke down just to go buy a new vehicle, not to wait around for it to get fixed. Fortunately, it did not break down until the return trip home, then they exchanged vehicles at a branch of their company.

Unfortunate for Lester, Executive Vice-President and CFO Dennis Welzenbach decided he would be the person making the 25 hour drive to California with Mark. Lester would be sitting at home, watching the historical event on television, knowing his son would have a part of the famous entombment.

When Mr. Shalz and Mr. Welzenbach arrived in California with the vault, pallbearers were having a practice so everything would go smoothly.

Following the California sunset farewell service for the former president, Nancy Reagan left the premises at 10:45 p.m. When Mr. Shalz came around the corner he was taken aback as Reagan's casket was before him with no one around to guard the casket. "I was very surprised that no one was guarding the casket," remarked Shalz.

A catered meal for 700 had been planned following the

Welzenbach to wipe off the dew. When Mrs. Reagan gave her final farewell to her husband her handprints were left on the casket and when the dew was being wiped off the prints could be seen. "It was eerie," stated Mr. Shalz.

Mr. Welzenbach wanted some of the dirt that had been dug as a memento and had even placed some in his pocket, but was told to put the dirt back. He only replaced half the dirt, so he had a small handful left in his pocket.

At approximately 11:00 p.m. the vault company crew began the entombment process, with Mark carrying the front part of the casket, and his boss, Mr. Welzenbach, carrying the rear of the former president's casket. The underground crypt had been opened and went down 20 ft. to where the casket carrying the former president's remains would be entombed. Workers closed the underground crypt

shortly before 3:00 a.m., with the landscapers taking over their part of the operation. The only people at the library were a handful of Secret Service agents, library personnel, mortuary representatives and landscapers. Lights were placed around the area with the light shining away from the final resting place, to ensure that the press would get no pictures of what was going on at the time.

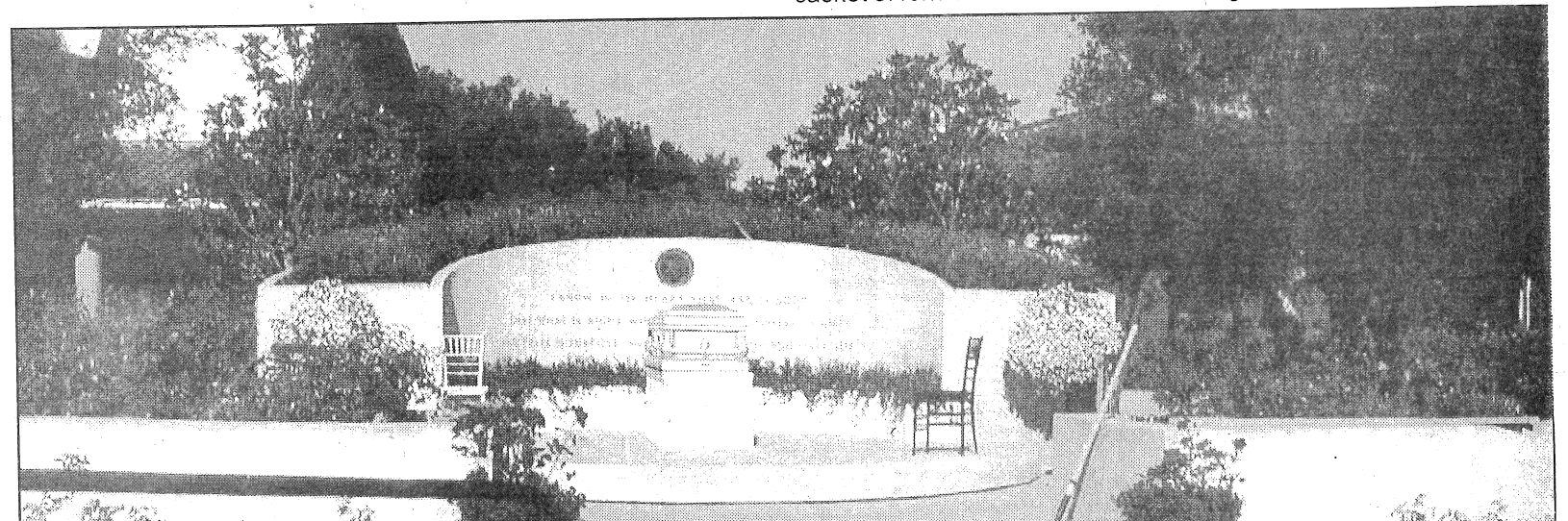
Mark commented, "This has to rate as one of the top five events in my life, with my two children being first. I had chills and there were tears in my eyes."

As with any parent, both Lester and Marilee Shalz were extremely proud of Mark. "This is something that you wouldn't expect a small town boy to do. The whole time we were watching on TV we were wondering where Mark was," remarked Marilee.

(Editor's Note: Mark Shalz lived in Wathena as a child and now resides in Kansas City, Mo. He is the son of Marilee and Lester Shalz of Frankfort, Neb. Marilee and Lester Shalz have purchased a home in Wathena and plan to retire to Wathena in the near future.)



Pictured is the vault delivered by Mark Shalz for the mahogany casket of former President Ronald Reagan.



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The search found an oversized vault in Marian, IA (outside of Cedar Rapids) Tuesday, June 8. "We had an idea where an oversized vault was located so it only took a couple of hours," remarked Mark Shalz. The vault would be picked up in Iowa, taken back to Kansas City to be painted and then Mark would transport the vault to the west coast via pickup. Mark could take a relief driver of his choice along with him and Mark's choice for his relief driver was going to be his father, Lester Shalz of Franklin. He made the phone call to Franklin to speak to his mother, Marilee and Lester, but

television, knowing his son would have a part of the famous entombment.

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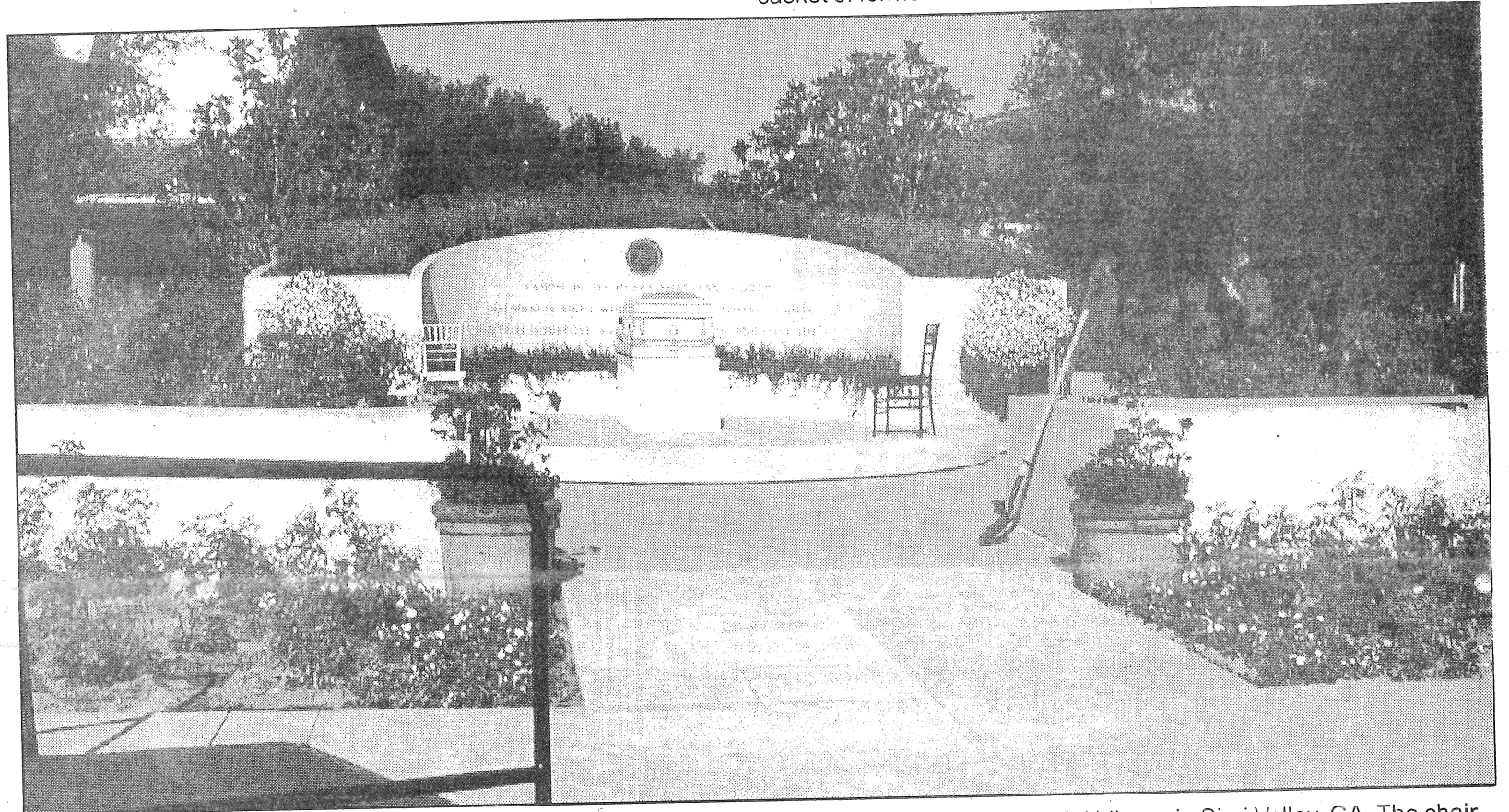
A catered meal for 700 had been planned following the services, but everyone left, so members of the cemetery crew, vault company and landscaping crew were encouraged to eat the catered meal.

Due to the length of the final farewell to the former president, dew had formed on the mahogany casket, which required Mr. Shalz and Mr.

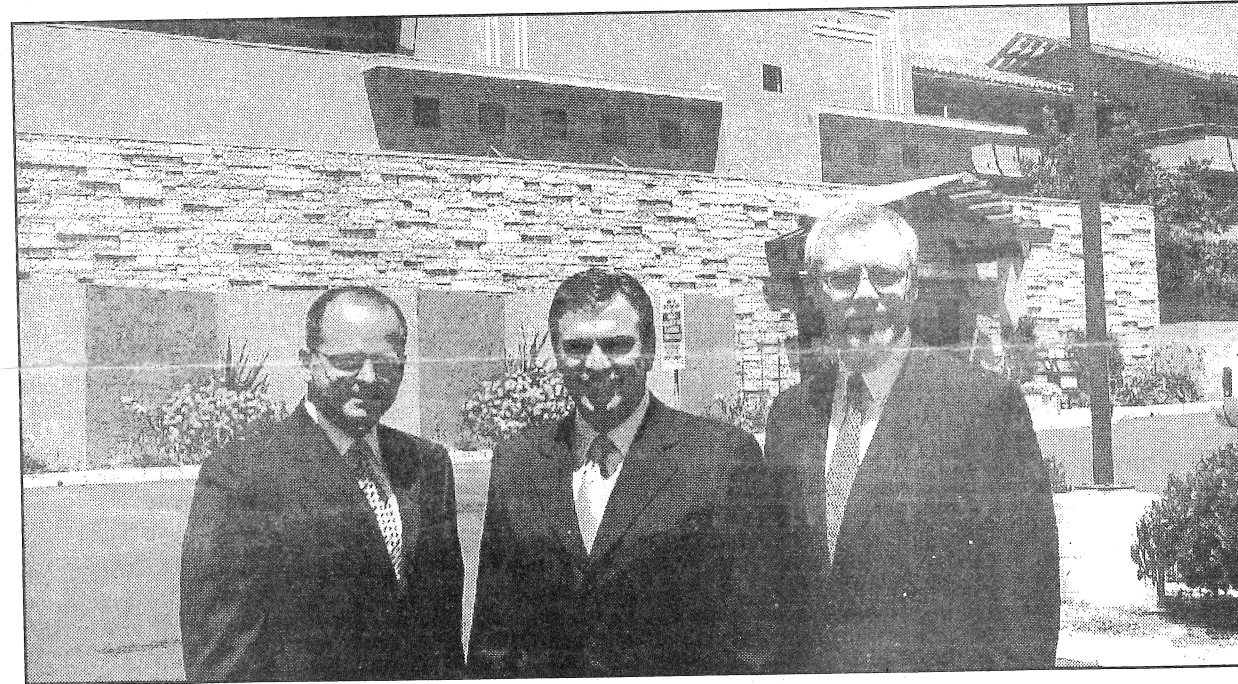
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Pictured is the vault delivered by Mark Shalz for the mahogany casket of former President Ronald Reagan.



The remains of former President Ronald Reagan were entombed at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, CA. The chair to the right in the photo was used by Nancy Reagan at the final services. The casket pictured in the photo was a rehearsal casket.

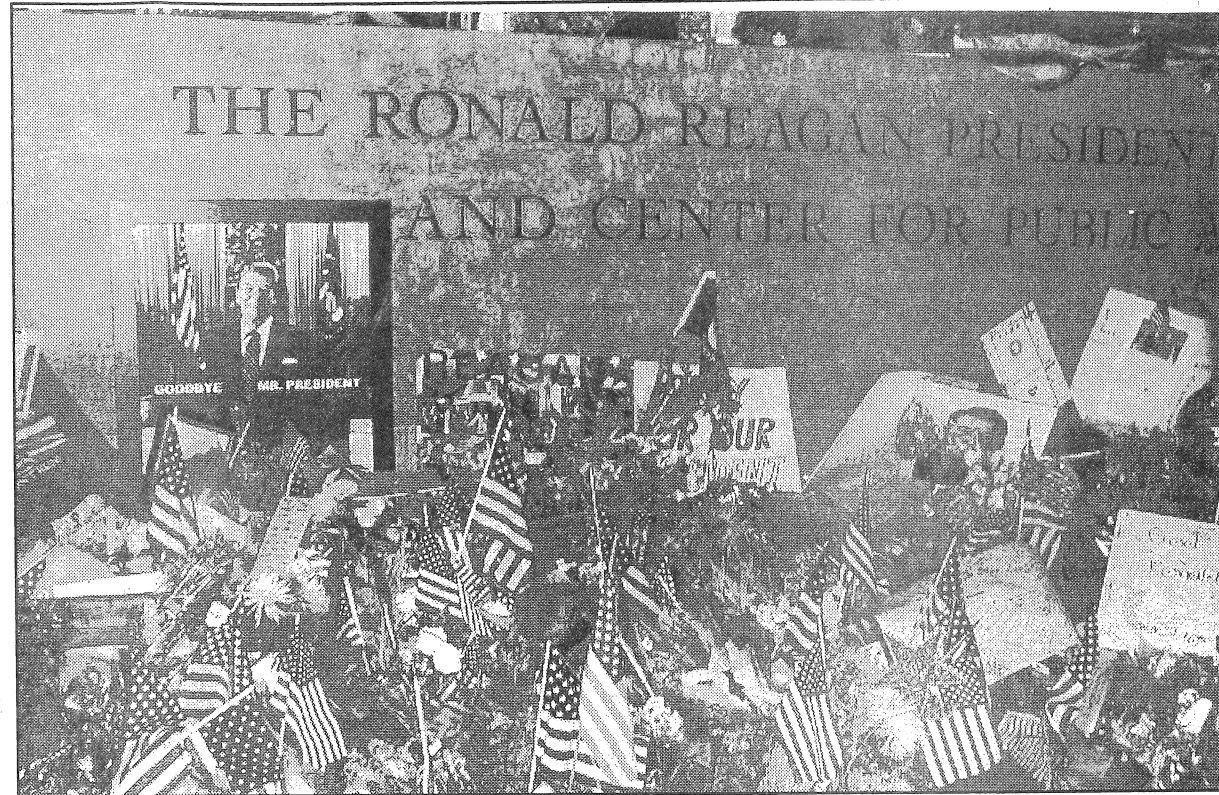


Pictured are Mark Shalz, regional vice president of the Missouri operations of Wilbert Vault Co., Joe Suhor, president and CEO and Dennis Welzenbach, executive vice president and CFO



Two hearses were used in the service of former President Ronald Reagan. This hearse was the one that actually carried the body, with the other hearse at the end, in case of breakdowns. License plates were removed from all vehicles.

Pictured are Mark Shalz, regional vice president of the Missouri operations of Wilbert Vault Co., Joe Suhor, president and CEO and Dennis Welzenbach, executive vice president and CFO



Flags, floral tributes and signs were placed at the presidential library in California paying tribute to the former President.
--photos courtesy of Mark Shalz

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