

# Case Of The Month: The Case Of The Refurbished Cadillac

Judge Mark Davidson



**Image of a 1918 Cadillac**

For most of us, the last car trip we will ever take is one in which we will be horizontally laid out in the back of a hearse. For some reason, the majority of hearses in America are made from converted cars made by the Cadillac division of General Motors, although there have been Lincolns, and Mercedes Benzes also converted. Until 1908, all hearses were horse-drawn wagons with curtains placed on the side. Someone figured out that if they could turn an automobile into a “funeral coach”, they could move faster and therefore could perform more funerals in a day. That was the start of the hearse industry. For the first ten years, standards were crude. A horse drawn funeral wagon was placed on the chassis of a car that was slightly modified, and turned over to a funeral director.

So it was in 1918, when a Houston funeral director named I. S. Lewis decided to enter the automotive age, and contracted with the Texas Wagon Works company to place his horse drawn wagon on the back of a 1918 Cadillac. The job was apparently done properly, but Mr. Lewis was unwilling, or unable, to pay the bill of \$123.47. In 2020 dollars, given a century of inflation, that is about \$1,599.66. Wagon Works refused to release the hearse, and Mr. Lewis found himself without a wagon or a hearse until the case went to trial.

## Case Of The Month, CONT.



**Image of a 1918 Cadillac converted to a hearse.**

On July 9, 1920, a jury of 12 men listened to the evidence.[i] We know that it was a very short trial, since Judge Charles Ashe of the 11th District Court would hear 17 other motions that day and would try another jury trial. The attorneys for Texas Wagon Works were Byers & Cavanagh and the attorneys for Mr. Lewis were Woods, Barkley, and King. The jury ruled for the plaintiff.

Apparently, the business at Mr. Lewis' funeral home did not improve during their hearseless period, and Judge Ashe ordered the hearse to be sold to satisfy the judgement. No record exists as to who bought it and what use was made of the purchase at the auction on the courthouse steps. One hopes that Mr. Lewis found the money and was able to help grieving families for many years, so that the last rides at the last rites of many Houstonians were in a Cadillac.

[i]

Even though women were allowed to vote in Texas in 1918, they were not allowed on juries until 1954.