Armbruster & Co. was known for constructing “holdup proof” stagecoaches with secret compartments for valuables built into the coaches’ floors and interiors. Although the company that would be Armbruster-Stageway later enjoyed a long, successful history of building stretched cars, buses, and limousines, it would seem to simply die of neglect, with the trade name being abandoned by 1990.

All that would change in 2013, when Sean Myers and Richard Lester of Southwest Professional Vehicles Inc. (the largest distributor of funeral limousines and funeral coaches in the country) resurrected the Armbruster-Stageway name, manufacturing six-door limousines, funeral coaches and XTS-XL sedans for the funeral industry.

“Ever since we got into the professional car business, Armbruster-Stageway was the premiere name in six-door limos,” said Richard Lester, vice president of the most recent incarnation of Armbruster-Stageway. “It’s an old name that’s been around forever, and everybody knew that name. It was not gone so long that everybody forgot it. We found out that it wasn’t being used and I thought, ‘I wonder if there’s a website.’ I looked and it was available. We applied to the patent office for the logo, and we were off to the races. I really couldn’t believe it. It was kind of magic.”
A History of Celebrities and Funeral Service

Although the first Armbruster funeral car was custom-built to order in 1934 on a Dodge chassis, and the company would also convert station wagons and sedan deliveries to minicar or ambulance configuration sometime in the 1950s, it would be some time before it became a significant player in the death-care profession. However, throughout the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, Armbruster limousines began to become well-known to the more elite, and were used by the likes of the All-American Red Heads basketball team and Willie Nelson, who toured in his own 1959 Armbruster eight-door Chevrolet.

But it wouldn’t be until the early 1970s that Armbruster-Stageway would begin to market directly to funeral directors, when then-vice president Milt Earnhart coaxed his son, Tom Earnhart, to join the firm. "In the early 1970s, Tom Earnhart saw the market for the six-door limousine for funeral service and began to market directly to funeral directors," explained Tom McPherson, author and co-author of over a dozen books on professional cars. "From 1973 to 1975, you saw the six-door limos built on a Chrysler or Pontiac chassis. This was a radical breakthrough, as each seat had its own door, and they were competing directly with the factory-built limos by Cadillac."

Also during its heyday of expansion in the late 1970s, many celebrities sought out Armbruster-Stageway limousines; owners included King Olav V of Norway, actor Sylvester Stallone and author and commentator William F. Buckley Jr.

By the 1980s, however, the Armbruster-Stageway name was sold several times to various companies; in 1989, it was acquired by Executive Coachbuilders, which relocated operations to Springfield, Missouri, and in the next few years would abandon the trademark.

Meanwhile, Chris Witte, a Fort Smith businessman, would purchase the vacant, former Armbruster-Stageway plants and rehire its workers to build limousines under the new name.
of Federal Coach. But in 2010, after the advent of the luxury SUV and the “party bus” shrank demand for the traditional stretch limousine, the original plants would again be shut down, for the last time. After 123 years, it appeared that nothing was left to represent Armbruster-Stageway, neither its trademark nor its assembled craftsmen.

Putting the Band Back Together
Yet Armbruster-Stageway would once again rise from the ashes in 2012, when Myers and Lester filed and received approval to obtain and use the abandoned trademark, arranged to rehire many of the former Armbruster-Stageway/Federal Coach workers and opened for business in a new building just south of Fort Smith in Hackett, Arkansas.

“I think we were driven by the employees that we wanted to hire,” said Myers, president of Armbruster-Stageway. “We wanted to pay homage to the name and the workers; we kind of came in and put the band back together. We think manufacturers have gotten away from their ideals. Armbruster-Stageway had a very well-received and recognized name that had gone by the wayside, and our goal was to bring back the well-built cars of yesterday.”

In May 2013, the first unit, built on the new XTS chassis, was unveiled at the Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska Tri-state Funeral Directors Association Convention in Kansas City. The response was positive, Lester said. “We decided that we were going to come into town, do it, and do it right … and so far it has worked. When funeral directors see the coaches, some have even used the word ‘sexy’ to describe it. It’s a good looking car.”

Despite some calling them ‘sexy,’ most agree that the design wasn’t over-the-top, either. “I think the style of the new coaches retained the conservative dignity of the funeral industry,” said Todd Van Beck, a veteran funeral director and experienced educator and consul-
tant. “A great amount of sensitive design work went into them, but none of them were ever overdone.”

“I hate to say it, but so many companies just do ‘cookie cutter’ hearse; I think it’s a sign of the times,” added Tony Karsnia, president of the Professional Car Society. “What’s ironic is that we are in a time of encouraging personalization in funeral service, but with standardized equipment. It used to be that a company would offer 10, 20, even 30 different models of a hearse, to make to the liking of individual funeral directors. I have to compliment Armbruster-Stageway on standing out with pleasing models, offering a variety of hearse with both wraparound windows and the Landau style.”

What seems to be the real innovation is just how difficult it has been to design anything distinctive on the current Cadillac chassis. As McPherson explained, Cadillac, for safety reasons, will not allow the manufacturers to alter the A-pillars (the windshield pillars) on the chassis, because the air bags are incorporated into them. As a result, many manufacturers “build from the coach,” and limit their styling to something “recycled from 1977.”

“The people at Armbruster-Stageway have done a particularly good job with what they have had to work with,” McPherson said. “They use historic styling cues to resonate with the funeral industry. They are doing something very interesting, their cars look good. What you see is a spark of imagination and fresh design that incorporates the older styles.”

“We wanted to bring back the look of the late 1950s, early 60s, with interesting wrap-around glass in the back,” Myers explained. “We decided to style it first, then reverse-engineer it. Our intention was to build a top-of-the-line look first.”

**A History of Serving Those Who Serve Families**

Myers and Lester have had experience in learning what it is that funeral directors want and need in their cars. Lester had originally acquired what was then called Superior Southwest in 1982 in Dallas with Myers’s father, Carl; in 1988, the partners purchased Crain Sales
in Atlanta, Georgia, and became the largest distributor of funeral cars in the United States. When Sean Myers was 19, he began his career in the business, sweeping the floors in the shops. “I learned everything from the back shop where we do maintenance, to used car reconditioning. I do everything, including cleaning the toilets,” he said. In 2004, the elder Myers became ill, decided to retire, and sold his share of the company to Sean.

Based on what Myers and Lester learned from serving funeral directors for years with Southwest Professional Vehicles, Armbruster-Stageway cars would not be just about good looks. “In our history with delivering cars, we got to know the problems out in the field, and we knew what we wanted to do with Armbruster-Stageway,” Myers explained. “It gave us a hands-on, day-to-day experience in what funeral directors needed in their vehicles. What was most important to them in the hearse was to get the back of the car as wide as possible. Now, we could control what the finished car was going to be.”

The unique, yet practical, features of the Armbruster-Stageway hearses is that the back door is 45 inches wide in the rear, enough to accommodate a double, oversize casket. Myers and Lester also saw how funeral directors would often struggle against the rear door when loading and unloading a casket. In order to eliminate this problem, it was decided a double hinge would be used in the rear door, so that it
could swing open 165 degrees and out of the way while loading and unloading.

“Design is now computer-generated, and so many companies rely on solely that, too much,” Karsnia said. “Armbruster-Stageway has done an excellent job of taking a step back and working to design something modern, functional, with quality, but with a touch of yesterday. I think they’ve hit a home run with that.”

Myers agreed. “The response has been phenomenal,” he said. “We have had a long wait list for deliveries, since the beginning. We didn’t want to increase production too much, because we never want to get into a situation where we would have to lay people off. We just let people know our cars come with a wait list.”

In 2014, as if to demonstrate its renewed success, an Armbruster-Stageway vehicle would once again be used by a celebrity – this time in the funeral of former Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry Jr. But despite the appearance in something so high-profile, Armbruster-Stageway’s public image has historically been more subdued.

“Armbruster-Stageway has always played it low key; they were never at every convention or blitzing the magazines with ads,” Van Beck said. “And yet, the name survives despite that.”

It seems Myers plans to continue this tradition. “We build five cars a week, 250 per year. I think it’s a nice, comfortable level,” he said. “Our goal may not be to have the highest volume but to have the highest quality. I wouldn’t rule out us growing in the future, as long as we can keep volume and our workers. I think that speaks to a lot of our funeral directors in small town America, who need those manufacturing jobs in their community in order to thrive.”

**Business by the Golden Rule**

Although there is a generation between them, Myers and Lester act like family.

“He’s kind of like a son in some ways, a brother in others,” Lester said of Myers. “Our working relationship has been fantastic because of it. We don’t have any of that dot the i’s and cross the t’s stuff. We do things by the Golden Rule, and if you do that, you can’t go wrong.”

That philosophy carries through to how the company conducts business, Myers said. “We care about the product,” he said. “For me, it’s my reputation on the line. I think it’s similar to the quality of care in a funeral home. If I put my name on it, I’m going to make sure I provide quality.”

Lester agreed. “All too often people go out and buy something, and the people there are nice to you and they take your money, but then they don’t want to hear from you afterward,” he said. “Nowadays there’s a lot of corporate bureaucracy, and it’s hard to get a decision made, it seems nobody’s in charge. It’s frustrating. We wanted to provide a vehicle funeral directors want, with the styling they want, and to be treated the way we’d want to be treated.”

**“A New Era of Distinctive and Individual Styling”**

Armbruster-Stageway has a bright future in funeral service, McPherson said. “Aside from their physical premises, a funeral director’s motor equipment conveys to the community an image of the levels of service and professionalism their firm renders,” he said. “As it moves about the community, the funeral coach, bearing a funeral home’s nameplates, is a traveling business card and a pretty accurate reflection of the owner’s business and the standards he has established and maintains. The advent of distinctively-styled vehicles from Armbruster-Stageway may well have a dramatic impact on the industry as a whole. These vehicles may well usher in a new era of distinctive and individual styling.”

Perhaps the current success of Armbruster-Stageway, and its future, lies in the passion and dedication of its owners.

“If your heart and soul isn’t into something, it’s not going to be the best it can be. It’s the last thing on my mind when I go to bed, and it’s the first thing I think of when I get up. This is all we know, and we love what we do,” Lester said. “Armbruster-Stageway is back now, and it’s going to stay.” •

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**The trademark of Armbruster-Stageway is officially filed as “abandoned” with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.**

**Sean Myers and Richard Lester file to obtain the Armbruster-Stageway name.**

**1990**

- The Fort Smith plant at Federal Coach is shut down.

**2010**

- The first newly restyled Armbruster-Stageway coach is unveiled at the Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska Tri-state Funeral Directors Association Convention in Kansas City.

**2012**

**2013**