

MEMOIRS OF
GEORGE W. BECKMAN
(1861 - 1947)

(Memoirs written by George W. Beckman (father of Wilma and Arnold) in the year of 1942.)

Stories of incidents as they happened in life. George W. Beckman

My parents were Germans. My father Rolf Klassen Beckman and my mother Agte Uphoff were born in Ostfriesland, a province bordering on the North Sea, in Amt (county) Aurich an hour's travel (as reckoned then) from Emden, a seaport.

The dates I have forgotten.

They were married there and owned a small acreage (farm) there.

Sometime in the 1850s they sold this and moved to the United States and settled in Woodford County Illinois, about 40 miles east of Peoria Illinois, then very thinly settled.

(There were) no railroads then. Their products (of) grain and butchered (cattle) were hauled with oxen and horses over the prairies. (There were) no wagon roads to Peoria and (the products were) ferried across (the) Illinois River to Peoria, sold or exchanged for flour and other household needs: clothing, boots, and groceries. And there was always a jug of whisky. This took four days, two days to get there, and two days to get back.

As the soil was wild prairie (with) no drainage, poor crops, (and) very low prices, this often caused a lot of hardship. But they were able to grow their meat, milk, butter and eggs. And they could go to the nearby woods and get wood for fuel (and) get all kinds of wild game, and the streams were full of fish. They practically were the Lords of all they surveyed. And the liberty (was great) compared to all the restrictions they were subject to in Germany, where under the Hohenzollern rule, where they were told what they could eat and how much. All profits went into the pockets of the Rulers. As my father often expressed, "It was almost like Heaven to get out from under the Hohenzollern yoke."

Finally there were two railroads built, one running North and South from Rockford Illinois to Cairo Illinois, called the Illinois Central, and a road running from Toledo Ohio to Keokuk Iowa, called the Toledo-Peoria and Western. Many small towns started to build. The farmers were relieved of those long hard trips to Peoria.

The Illinois Central (was) induced to build the entire length of the state from Rockford to Cairo by being granted every other section of land, a strip ten miles wide. The value of the land more than financed the building of the road. In return for this, the R.R.Co. signed an agreement to pay the state 7% annually upon the net profit of the railroad.

Stephen A. Douglas was the man who sponsored this agreement. The R.R.Co. refused to pay this assessment later and became delinquent to the amount of several million dollars. Some few years ago, through crooked legislation, they paid the state a few hundred thousand and received a cancellation of the debt and the agreement.

As I stated, my parents came from Germany with a lot of their friends.

They came over in a large five-mast ship (*in 1857*). They were told it was a strictly passenger boat. This proved to be wrong as it carried freight to some port in Spain and also to Cuba. While in Spanish waters, the vessel was caught in Trade Winds (*and then*) becalmed for several weeks (*with*) not enough wind to fill the sails. And when in the Cuban waters Yellow Fever broke out in the vessel (*and*) a lot died of this disease. Among them (*were*) my grandmother and my youngest sister (*Ella*). This was a hard blow to my mother who had a great love for her mother and the family. (*Note that George was born in America on July 16, 1861.*)

They finally landed at New Orleans after eleven weeks on the water. After the fever quarantine was lifted, they took a steamer on the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers to Peoria. How long this river trip took I have forgotten.

Going back to earliest recollections I remember when I was six years (*old*). I got the great thrill of my life (*by*) catching a big fish on hook and line, a large pike about half as long as I was tall. I rushed home, just a short distance, to show my mother what a whale of a fish I had caught. My dad and brothers, missing me and thinking I had

fallen into the river, they rushed home to see if I was there. Sure, there I was showing off to my mother what a great fisherman I was. It took a lot of persuasion on my mother's part to keep Dad from tanning the seat of my pants. I can't remember that mother whipped any of us youngsters. She would talk to us (and) explain what was right or wrong. We would obey her and do anything to please her, knowing that we had the sweetest mother in the whole wide world.

Again, I remember the winter of 1867. This was one of the coldest severe winters I ever saw. I often heard the old settlers talking (about) instances of this extreme cold winter. We lived at the north side of the woods, along the banks of the Vermillion River (when) the most severe cold and snows (occurred), with high winds from the northwest sweeping over the prairies. (There were) snow drifts 15 to 20 feet deep where the thickets of hazel brush, wild plum and crab apple formed a break for the snow. I well remember that I had a little wagon and I went into the brush to get snow for my mother to melt in the large kettle (hung on a hook and chain) to get soft water for a bath. This was way past the middle of May. This cold weather lasted for such a long period. I remember seeing the quail

and the prairie chicken fly to the shelter of the house
(and) drop dead from starvation and the extreme cold.

I was always a lover of wild life. I was especially
thrilled with the Sand-Hill crane, a tall long-legged long-
necked bird (with a) long sharp bill (and) large wings.

(It was) a most suspicious and wary bird. When on the
ground feeding, one of the flock always stood guard, and on
the approach of anything resembling danger, one note from
the guard and they were off the ground with one answering
note. They always flew in a circle, up up, answering a
note from their leader. (They made) a very musical sound,
not like goose or duck. On calm and sun shining days they
would fly circling up up to great heights, often so high
that one could scarcely see them, always answering the
musical note of their leader. It always thrilled me and
I'd lie there for hours watching and listening. When they
were tired of their flight they would glide down to earth
scarcely moving a wing. It was hard for the hunter to come
within gunshot distance. My oldest brother (Claus) shot
one once (and) broke its wing. When he went to get it the
bird got up on its legs to fight, pecked my brother's face,
nearly destroying one of his eyes. My brother used his gun
as a club, breaking its neck. When the country settled up,

these birds disappeared. Years after I saw many of them out on the prairie, out in the west where it was still wild and open.

And when a small kid I was often frightened when in the woods at night by the sudden who-who and ha-ha of the owl. The prairie was full of all kinds of snakes, especially the garter snake (harmless). We would fasten a string around their necks and we'd play that they were our horses and scare the girls at school.

There were lots of wolves and deer. I have often (in the winter) seen deer in the feedlots with the cows. And father built a high rail fence to keep the wolves from eating the pigs and chickens.

In 1870 my father bought a farm in the extreme east side of Livingston County Illinois, a few miles west of the Vermillion swamps. These swamps covered the territory of thousands of acres. In the spring of the year this was a haven for wild ducks and geese. In the morning they would fly out to the farms to find corn in the fields. There was always so much left in the fields. I have often seen the ducks and the geese fly out of the swamp in the morning in

droves to darken the rising sun. But putting all the land under cultivation and all the modern drainage has now (1942) forced all the game and wildlife to go elsewhere. And the greed of the white man has practically depleted all streams of fish.

When I grew up I got the urge to go out west and become a rip-roaring cowboy, but I got started too late. That year Uncle Sam opened up the west for settlement, and as an inducement offered the old soldiers a 160-acre homestead right. This brought on such a rush that the cattleman and the cowboy were driven off the plains in a couple of year's time. Uncle (*Sam*) had already taken the hunting grounds from the Indians (and) forced them into the Black Hills and the Wyoming Bad Lands. This brought the Indians to starvation, and they rebelled. This brought on the Custer massacre.

I stayed out west for a few years and roamed over the plains. I saw where Custer and his men were ambushed and killed by the Indians in the Little Big Horn country. I saw also the plains covered with sun-bleached bones of thousands of buffalo. Most of them were killed for the pure sport of it. The white man's greed and lack of

thought for the poor Indian, or the future, (is amazing).
The Indian killed only for his needs.

I saw bleached bones of the buffalo that Buffalo Bill shot without getting off his horse, 100 (*of them*). These bones looked like a snowdrift from a distance. The Grand Duke Alexis of Russia came to the United States to hunt buffalo. Buffalo Bill was his guide, and to show the Duke his marksmanship he killed 100 buffalo without getting off his horse. This was possible since there was a peculiar trait in the buffalo. They traveled in very large herds at the time, and when stampeded they threw their shaggy heads with their nose to the ground and ran in circles until exhausted. Buffalo Bill knew his buffalo and from a prominent point shot and killed 100 as they rushed past him. (*This is*) just another illustration of the white man's greed and the lack of consideration for the future of the Indian.

It is these methods in the annals of the settling of the United States that is a stain on the beautiful Stars and Stripes of the U.S. flag. It can never be wiped off by the ruling Power of the Universe, call it God or whatever you may.

My sympathy is with the Indian. I saw some of the food given to the Indian that was not fit for a human being to eat. Through the greed and rascality of our statesmen and the food processors, Uncle Sam was paid a big price and this was given to the poor devils, the Indians.

In speaking of the sun-bleached bones of the buffalo on the plains, dozens of stoke wagons drawn by oxen gathered them and (they) were shipped east where they were round to powder for industrial use, I believe, in the refining industry.

I will try to relate some of the amusing incidents that took place when I was a youngster (about 15). We lived in an Irish community, most of them ignorant boozers. We called them flannel mouths. Here are some of their names: O'Neil, Hayes, Stranagan, Corraghan, O'Connor, Fay, Monahan, Carmey. Leahey, McCarty, Donohan, Donavan.

One amusing incident happened. There were two deaths on the same day, two ole people, Patrick Hayes and Mrs. Stranagan. They had a wake for Pat Hayes. My brother John and I were invited to the Hayes wake. There were a lot of

relatives and friends there, all drunk, singing Irish songs and telling Irish jokes. They had the corpse sitting up in the coffin smoking a clay pipe. They poured whisky down his throat and just raised hell generally.

The funeral mass was set at 10 o'clock next day at the church about five miles distant. The priest ordered both families to leave their house with the bodies at a certain hour. It so happened that the two families each lived one half mile of the intersection of the main road to the church. As the funeral hour for both was set at 10 o'clock AM and the time to set to leave at the same time, there was a race to get to the intersection of the church first for the religious belief was that the corpse coming in last would be penalized and extra time in Purgatory. It was wintertime and the roads were (so) frozen and rough that it was nearly impossible to drive on them. In those days there were no carriages but there were light spring wagons with long boxes or beds. They placed the Hayes coffin in the wagon and started hell-bent for the intersection of the road. The Stranagan's beat the Hayes by just a few feet and the race was on. And when they arrived at the church the Hayes discovered that they had lost the coffin. The

end gate of the wagon had come unlocked and the coffin was lost miles back on the road.

Chatsworth Illinois was the trading point for the community. *(It was)* a town of about 500 people with 5 saloons, and here *(the saloon)* the Irish would go, get drunk and fight. I saw an amazing thing happen. Pat Carney and Timothy O'Connor *(were)* neighbors in the Irish settlement who hated each other. Pat Carney, a large man, *(and)* O'Connor, a little old shrimp, met on the street. Pat was drunk as usual, *(and)* was going to lick the stuffing out of O'Connor but the old geezer shoved Pat into the gutter where the mud and slush was over a foot deep. Pat finally got back on his feet, walked over to O'Connor and said "Timothy O'Connor, don't you do that twice more." The crowd went wild.

Jerry Merrigan, who had been on a big drunk, swore off on whisky. This is the way he put it. "Here's hoping I'll never drink another drop of whisky that may go down me throat.

When but a boy it fell to my lot to do something that nearly broke my heart. We had on old mare (pure white)

that had been in the family for twenty-seven years, a regular pet. She seemed to delight in having a bunch of us kids get on her back and ride her. She was so gentle. She got so old she couldn't chew her food and was starving to death. She had to be killed. It fell to my lot to kill her. (*Neither*) my dad or my brothers had the nerve to kill her. I volunteered to do this because I could not bear to see her starve to death. I remember I cried so hard that I couldn't see the sights on the musket when I shot her.

While traveling for Cummings & Erickson, Peoria Illinois, I got acquainted with a tombstone dealer in Lincoln Illinois. He (*told me*) an amazing story. An Irishman named Pat O'Roarik settled on a farm in Logan County near Elkhart. (*He,*) an ignorant Irishman, who became very rich, owned a lot of land. When he died his widow thought she had to put a fine tombstone for Pat. She gave the order to this dealer. She wanted Pat's name in large letters. Where and when he was born no one knew, so she went to an Irish Catholic priest in Lincoln, who volunteered to go to Ireland and find out. When he came back this is what he found out and the widow had it carved on the stone. 'Pat was born in county Clare, Ireland the night of the big wind in a barn back of Mahoneys.'" Smart people these Irish.

When I was a youngster my folks lived north of the Vermillion and had to cross this river (no bridge) in going to Fairbury to do their trading. My dad had to tie the wagon box to the running gear to keep the box from floating away. While the horses swam and pulled the wagon across the stream, us kids used to think this great fun and got a real thrill out of it.

The farm where we lived had a large pasture. It was divided by the Vermillion River. And in the summertime the cows would cross the stream to feed on the opposite side, and often in the afternoon the cows would not come home to be milked. We would have to go and get them. We boys would undress. It wasn't such a big job, just a shirt and overalls. In driving the cows back we'd get on one of the old tame cows and ride them across the river.

In 1894 I drifted into south west Missouri, Clinton, Henry County, the home of the James Boys, the notorious bank robbers. I got acquainted with a young man about my age (named) Frank Daum. His father ran the grocery store in Clinton. It was through him that I got a chance to (go to) the plantation where the James Boys hid after their

robberies. This plantation was owned by a Mr. Banal, an uncle of the James Boys. This plantation covered hundreds of acres, some of the finest hardwood timber I ever saw. It was tenanted by ex-southern rebels, all friends of the James Boys. No government man could ever get in there to arrest them. Several tried it but they never came back. It was on this plantation that I saw the method of pistol practice that Jesse James did. In a clearing stood a large oak tree. Jesse bored four auger holes in this tree, on the east, west, north and south sides. He would ride his horse at a gallop in a circle around this tree, guide the horse with the bridle rein in his mouth, and as he came opposite these holes in the tree he would shoot into them with both hands right and left. And judging from the scars on the bark of the tree he seldom missed. He was considered a dead shot.

I was in Clinton Missouri the summer of 1894. It was a campaign year: Byans 16 to 1. The democrats held their last rally at Clinton just a few days before election. Governor Lewis was campaigning for re-election. Clinton was his boyhood home. He wanted to show the home folks what a big guy he was. So he staged the big rally, and was it big. All the southern "Rebs" and "Hill Billy's" turned

out. The parade started at Harrisonville, about 10 miles distant, and was joined by the natives en route. The governor (was) in a carriage headed by the state band and followed "as escort" by 100 ex-rebels of the old Quantrill gorilla raiders. These rode on horseback two abreast with their rifles carried on the pommel of their saddles. And here is my recollect of how near to a catastrophe this happened. I had become quite well acquainted with a Mr. David Daum, a grocery man, and I loafed at his place quite often. Mr. Daum was an ex-Union soldier who had enlisted in the army from some place in Indiana. He fought under General Thomas, fighting the Quantrill rebel raiders in Missouri. He was well acquainted with Governor Lewis, an ex-rebel, and hated him as much as he did any of the old Quantrill rebels. After the war Mr. Daum stayed in Missouri, was in business in Sedalia and later started a grocery store in Clinton. He was a man liked by all who knew him, had a lot of friends.

The morning of the rally, a rumor (was) started by some who hated Mr. Daum, that Daum was going to rotten-egg the governor as he passed Daum's store. Mr. Daum's store faced south toward Main Street at the northwest corner of the courthouse square. Main Street ran on the west side of the

courthouse square (and) then ran east to the picnic grounds. I was loafing in Mr. Daum's store on the morning of the rally. The county judge, a friend of Mr. Daum, came in and told Mr. Daum that a story had been started in the city that Daum was going to rotten-egg the governor when he passed in front of the store. Mr. Daum said that there wasn't any truth in it. This story got around to some of the old ex-Union soldiers, friends of Mr. Daum, and in time about 10 drifted into the store carrying their rifles all set for some fun as they expressed it.

The lower half-sash of the store window front could easily be taken out, which he had done. This left the window counter for us to get behind for part protection. Someone handed me a rifle. I was a stranger to these men and I was proud to see the look of friendship when they found out I was staying with them. As the parade came up Main from the south, the band and the governor's carriage turned the corner in front of Daum's store. The rebel horsemen gave the old rebel yell, two at a time to the end of the 100. I never saw anyone turn white with hate as Mr. Daum did. He stepped to the curb, rifle ready for action. Had the rebels started another yell I'm satisfied that Mr. Daum would have killed the first rebel in sight. The rebels saw

by Daum's actions that they had better keep mum. At heart they were all cowards. The parade passed on without any trouble.

Haysler Bros., great friends of Mr. Daum, operated a wholesale heavy hardware store in the middle of the block on the west side of the courthouse square. When the excitement was all over with, a son of one of the Hayslers came over to the Daum store and asked Frank Daum (*Mr. Daum's son*) and I to come over to their store. They wanted to show us something. They took us to the roof of their three story building and showed us that they had mounted three brass canon on top of the wall loaded with shrapnel (*and had*) pointed them along the street on the west side of the square. If anything had happened to us at Daum's store the three canons would have been fired, and there would not have been a rebel left alive.

In talking to one of the Union vets, he showed me five notches cut on the stock of his rifle, showing the number of Rebs he had picked off. And he told me he expected to cut two more notches to get even with those who caused his family so much grief and hardship. This incident was one of (*the*) interesting (*things*) that happened in my life.

In the early 1900 period I was a traveling salesman for Cummings & Emerson, Peoria Illinois. *(They sold)* heavy hardware. I had Bloomington Illinois and surrounding territory, calling on the mechanical trade in all the towns. I had a customer in Funk's Grove about 10 miles southwest of Bloomington, and (he had) one of the finest small body of timber I ever saw: oak, hickory, walnut and maple. The surrounding country was a rich open prairie. Before the Civil War a man named Funk came from Pennsylvania and bought this tract (of) land from the government and called it Funk's Grove. He raised a large family of boys and as they grew up and married, they built houses and farms. This became a wealthy community as considered in the early days.

As Mr. Lawrence Funk, one of the Funk clan, owned a large part of the grove and adjoining prairie land, (he) had a wonderful stock farm in the early 1900s. He was at that time the largest individual grower of hogs in the world. I've known him to ship a trainload of fat hogs to Chicago in one shipment. A trainload in those early days consisted of 30 or 35 carload. I got acquainted with him by meeting him when I called on my customer.

Here is the circumstance I must relate. One day while calling on my customer at Funk's Grove I saw Mr. Funk drive 750 brood sows across the C & A tracks to a woods pasture where the sows would farrow. Four weeks later when I again came to Funk's Grove I met Mr. Funk and he took me to the pasture to show me what a fine lot of baby pigs there were, hundreds and hundreds of them. One could hardly walk through the tall blue grass without stepping on some of the little pigs. It was a wonderful sight.

Mr. Funk became rich. The times were good. This went to Mr. Funk's head. He got to speculating and sporting around. He went broke and the People's Bank of Bloomington was appointed the executor of his estate. He died a poor man.

This happened to most of the Funk clan. They could not stand prosperity.

The End

(Note: This text was entered and edited (italics) by Karl Arnold Belser in June 2005)