



The life and memories of John Rekart, age 97

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SOUTHEAST HISTORY

In 1941, John Rekart was given a special assignment by the local pastor of St. Agatha’s Catholic Church in Sellwood.

Helen Moell, one of the young ladies of the congregation, wanted to be on the girl’s church basketball team, but she needed a bit more training with her basketball skills, and the pastor wanted John to help mentor her skills.

“When I first saw her dribbling a basketball, she was using both hands,” recalled John. “I had her try bouncing the ball first with the left hand, and then her right hand, but each time it seemed hopeless. She couldn’t make the team – so I decided I had to marry her.”

According to a daughter who resulted from that union – Angela – Helen and John were married only about three weeks later. In this case, it certainly paid to dribble badly.

The wedding took place at St. Agatha’s, and the couple spent their brief honeymoon a short distance away, that evening, in downtown Portland – at the Eastman Hotel. The next morning, honeymoon over, they caught the crosstown bus and were back at work the next day.

Although John was born and raised in Portland, his parents, Anton and Catherina Rekert, originally lived in the small village of Koehler, Russia, located west of the Volga River. Groups of Germans had immigrated to Russia between 1764 and 1766, to better their way of life. According to the “Germans from Russia Heritage Collection”, many Germans were offered the opportunity to cultivate the land, establish their own churches, and settle in segregated colonies of their choosing in the Volga region.

By the late 1800’s these Russian Germans began to lose their privileges, and soon found the harsh realities of living in Russia unbearable. They sent German agents into North and South America to help find areas where they could relocate their families to escape the persecution of the czarist government.

In 1909, fearing induction into the Russian army, Anton Rekert left his homeland and joined another clan of Russian Germans who were living and working in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Leaving his pregnant wife behind with her family, Anton little realized that it would be two long years before he would be reunited with Catherina. His journey took him north to the United States, and eventually Catherina in Europe received a letter containing money from Anton, telling her to make her way to Topeka, Kansas, where he had found work growing sugar beets.

She arrived in Baltimore, after setting out from Bremen, Germany, in 1912 – but she was delayed by immigration officials who had sought to determine what her name was and the name of her husband. A simple question, but the only two words of English she could answer was “Topeka, Kansas”. Whether the authorities eventually decided to call her Topeka, and her husband Kansas, is not known, but she finally was allowed to head west.

When Catherina finally arrived by train at the wheatfields of Kansas, the couple was overcome with joy at reuniting after the long absence. Unfortunately Catherina had to inform her husband of the sad news that their first daughter had died before he ever got to see her.

Within the next few years, a sponsor from a German community in Portland contacted the Rekerts, and invited them to come live in the Willamette Valley – describing Oregon as a land of mild climate and fertile soil, much like in the Old Country of the Rhineland.

They accepted his offer, and the Rekert family – with their new Americanized spelling of Rekart – arrived in Sellwood.

Anton began working for the Beal Pipe and Tank Company on Union Avenue (today known as Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard), and the family rented a house at 17th and Umatilla, just behind the Gottschalk Café.

In 1916 John Rekart was born, the fourth of eleven children of Anton and Catherina. “When I lived in Sellwood”, recalled John, “There were very few paved streets; mainly, there were dirt trails and roads that were rutted.”

Anton put the pipes and tanks aside and entered barbers’ college, and when he graduated he opened Tony’s Barbershop on the southwest corner of 17th and Spokane. Many residents may have since eaten breakfast in that building – which for decades has been home to Bertie Lou’s Café. “My father was one of five barbers in Sellwood at that time,” recalled John.

The Rekart children attended St Agatha’s School, which had just opened in 1912 – and during the summer vacations, John and his older brother Joe earned 25 cents a day carrying golf clubs for the elite businessmen and clients at the Lake Oswego Golf Club. They’d first started caddying at the Waverley Country Club on Ochoco Street and S.E. 13th Avenue, but later transferred across the river. “We usually thumbed a ride over to Lake Oswego, and if we couldn’t find a generous driver we had to walk quite a ways to our part-time job.”

When not caddying at the golf course, John liked to visit with Hank Troh, who owned a small airstrip in what is now Westmoreland Park. Crudely-built and fragile-looking metal contraptions called aeroplanes were parked along an open field there, and if a little kid were lucky he might witness one take off and wobble up into the sky.

Troh was a popular fight instructor in the Northwest, and he later started another airfield near 115th and Division. Flight was still a novelty to the public, and hundreds of spectators would gather to watch these marvelous flying machines, following the planes to be on hand to greet them when they landed. As a result, nervous pilots sometimes landed their aircraft miles away from the crowds they were drawing, for fear of hitting the onlookers. Isolated flat fields like the one in Westmoreland provided an ideal landing spot for pilots.

John Rekart later drove a horse and buggy to deliver groceries for Caldwell’s Groceries – which was in the space now occupied on S.E. 13th in Sellwood by Grand Central Bakery. “Caldwell was a big man; about 5 foot 10, and weighing 300 pounds – and I was afraid that he would tip the delivery wagon over when he attempted to board it,” commented John.

John eventually worked for almost every store and shop in the neighborhood. “When I got laid off at one of the stores, I would just go apply for a job as a store clerk at one of the other little neighborhood groceries, they knew me, and what a good worker I was.”

One of his responsibilities for Caldwell’s involved delivering blocks of ice that were to be used in the store’s huge wooden ice box. John would bicycle over to pick up a 30 pound block of ice at the Sellwood Ice Company, at 9th and S.E. Marion – and then race back to the store in the heat of the summer before it melted.

The ice was carried in a burlap sack for easy handling, and to insulate the ice block from the heat, but by the time he arrived at the store’s front door, the ice block usually felt ten pounds lighter.

When Caldwell’s closed its doors for good, John was offered a position at Wall’s Hardware Store at Lexington and S.E. 13th, at the handsome starting pay of 10 cents an hour.

The two-story wooden Sellwood Firehouse was still standing on the southeast corner of 13th and Tenino during John’s days as a youngster, and the street was often lined with people when the horse-drawn fire engine rumbled down 13th Avenue. “It seemed like there was a fire every year at the lumber company,” recalled John.

When John’s wife Helen passed away, she left behind eight wonderful and loving children – Larry, Madeline, Angela, Mary, John Jr., Tom, Greg and Elizabeth – who together have carried on, and added to, the family’s memories and traditions through their own children.

In 1994, while widowed and living at the Westmoreland Union Manor, John met his good friend Cleo Brainerd, who had grown up in the Westmoreland neighborhood. Cleo and her family lived at 23rd and S.E. Ellis where, she said, a lot of Austrian Germans lived. “Everyone who lived along Ellis worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, and many of them attended the Methodist Episcopal Church on 17th Avenue,” John reminisced. The church is today one of Westmoreland’s oldest, having been around for over 100 years.

John and Cleo married in 2003, and now live in quiet retirement, visiting their children, looking up friends who used to roam the streets of Sellwood and Westmoreland, and commenting on the coming of the new light rail services and the completion of the new Sellwood Bridge. John Rekart is now one of the very few remaining residents who witnessed the opening of the original Sellwood Bridge in 1925, and also had ridden on the Sellwood Ferry which preceded it.

One of the top aspirations on his “bucket list” is now to participate in the opening ceremonies for the new Sellwood Bridge! Indeed, we’re hoping that when the Sellwood Bridge is completed, Multnomah County and Portland City officials will invite those residents who were there when the first bridge was opened, to be present at the opening of its replacement.

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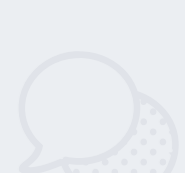
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