

German finds niche in food business

Grocery earns reputation with butter barter system

Gerhardt Heinrich Frederick Fienning was born near Osnabruck, Germany. His father was a landless farmer who hoped to protect his sons from conscription into the kaiser's army.

Henry Tiemann worked with the Fienning family on the same large farm until he emigrated to the United States in 1884. Three years later, after establishing himself in Richmond, Tiemann sponsored the Fienning family to join the growing colony of Germans in Indiana.

The family crossed the stormy Atlantic in steerage class, the lowest priced fare available. They

Richmond remembers

By Mary Ellen Donat



The grocery at 330-332 S. 11th St. was owned by Oscar Nolte, far right, and George Fienning second from right. Others in the picture are, from left, unidentified, Mr. Cox, a flour salesman for Richmond Roller Mills; Ralph Hyde of Richmond Baking Company and David Owens, store clerk.

rode in the lowest portion of the ship, an area normally reserved for cargo. The family was forbidden to go up on deck during the 13-day voyage because young Gerhardt had measles.

When the family arrived in Baltimore, immigration officials changed 6-year-old Gerhardt's name to George Henry Frederick Fienning. The family settled in Richmond and the father began working at Gaar-Scott, a local manufacturer. Less than two years later, he died of typhoid fever.

George's widowed mother, Katherina, moved her family into three rooms in the back of a home on Liberty Avenue. In a small garden in the back yard, she grew vegetables to feed her three children.

"They ate cabbage, rice and turnip soup," said George's son, Richard. "They didn't have any meat, so to speak. That was out of the question."

Katherina became a respected midwife who assisted in the births of many area children. Her eldest son, 14-year-old Charles, worked at Gaar-Scott and 10-year-old Elizabeth quit school to look after George and help with the housework. When George was 13, he quit attending St. John's parochial school to work at Duning's Bicycle Shop.

George began working for Starr Piano Company

in 1895. One of his jobs was to help install an organ in the Gennett home on East Main Street. Today the Gennett home is owned by his grandson-in-law, Wayne Vincent. However, George was forced to quit the job in 1905 because of health problems.

George married Frances Von Pein and they had nine children. He built up an A&P route and sold groceries from a horse-drawn cart. On June 28, 1909, he opened a grocery at 11th and South D streets with partner, Oscar Nolte. The family home was at 1011 S. Eighth St.

"We all had our turn working at the grocery," said Esther Fienning Youngflesh.

One of the jobs given the children was to kill and pluck chickens, sometimes 50 at a time.

Oldest son, Richard, who eventually owned the

neighborhood grocery, said farmers often traded their produce for grocery items.

"Farmers brought butter and eggs in. The butter was in crock bowls, we didn't pre-package things in that time," said Richard. "We got 150 to 200 pounds of butter in a week, and had a market for every bit of it. We knew where it was coming from and what we were getting. People would come from all over town to get the butter."

Richard Fienning operated the store until he retired on April 30, 1976. Changing times forced the store to close. By then, Richmond had moved past times of fresh butter in crocks to pre-packaged margarine sticks. Some call it progress.

Mary Ellen Donat is a Richmond native who writes a weekly column on local people, places and events of the past.