



THE ELECTROLIER

Newsletter of the St. Helena Historical Society, Fall 2004, Vol.2 No.4

Fritz Rosenbaum: A Fairy Tale Existence

by Lin Weber

Born in 1833 in the resort town of Pyrmont in Lower Saxony, Friederich "Fritz" Rosenbaum accomplished what most of his German Jewish peers could only dream of. He traveled to the golden hills of California, got rich, and enjoyed—for a time—a life of privilege and prestige. Two other Saxons could have written Fritz's life story. The brothers Grimm collected and popularized their famous fairy tales when Fritz was a boy, drawing from folklore in places like Hamelin, which was just down the road from Fritz's place of birth.

Fritz made his fortune not by mining gold, but by founding a San Francisco glazing company where he made, imported and sold luxury items like mirrors, beveled glass and stained glass windows. In 1872, when he was at the height of his career, he bought land in a town that, like Pyrmont, was famous for its mineral springs: St. Helena.

Fritz's purchase, north of Beringer Brothers and just beyond John Weinberger's winery, included hillside acreage for growing grapes and a lovely view of the valley. In 1878 he built a four-bedroom home there, to which he added a turret and wrap-around porch in 1882. He named it "Johannaberg," for his wife.

Today it is the site of St. Clement Winery.

Like many St. Helenans, Fritz planted grapes, and in 1879 he crushed his first vintage. His sons August (13) and Fred (15) assisted him. Their first effort yielded 3,500 gallons of juice that they opted not to sell but to ferment for their own use. The next year they installed a modest winery in their basement. They made 5,000 gallons. There is no evidence that they sold any of that, ei-

ther.

Fritz spent most weekdays in San Francisco at the glass company. Fred Jr. left school and split his time between the glassworks and the winery. August's main residence was at Johannaberg with mother Johanna and his three sisters.

For the Rosenbaums, owning a home and winery in the Napa Valley was a fairy tale come true. Fairy tales, however, often have a dark side. The seemingly charmed family experienced an all-too-familiar reversal of fortune.

Armies of phylloxera were indulging in a devastating march through the Napa Valley. Replanting ravaged vines was costly, and the bugs were finding the replacement vines to be as tasty as the originals had been. Grape growers were losing money. The Rosenbaums planted more vines and tried to stay ahead of the bugs. Each year they crushed the grapes, storing it all beneath the house, which must have smelled strongly of fermentation.

The redolent wine proved to be a powerful temptation for at least some of the Rosenbaums. Young August was a full-blown alcoholic by the time he

was 20. As the disease progressed he developed *delirium tremens* and underwent episodes of paranoia. He finally died of acute alcohol poisoning in 1889, at the age of 23.

Not long after, Johanna's health failed. She died in December 1891 at the age of only 48. On New Year's Day, 1892 Fritz and the remaining children received her body at the Lodi Lane train station near their home. She is buried next to her son in St. Helena Cemetery



Young Fritz Rosenbaum

WANTED! ... *Voices of St. Helena*

The names and dates of the places and events that have made St. Helena what it is are fairly easy to find. The anecdotes, personal struggles and triumphs that accompany those dates and events, however, are often hidden in the memories of our community members. When those people are lost, a vital clue to understanding our history is lost with them.

We are excited to announce the beginning of a new St. Helena Historical Society Program that will seek out and record the personal stories of people whose lives and families have molded our town.

Pat Alexander, a history major at Napa Valley College, has joined SHHS as a Volunteer Intern to take on this project. She began with extensive training in October and intends to complete a framework for our program and accomplish 1 to 3 prototypical interviews by the end of her term of study. We are delighted to hear that she is so enthused about the project that she intends to stay on as a volunteer.

Oral History is a recognized scholastic discipline which is guided by professional standards. Several organizations provide leadership regarding process and ethics and we will structure our program accordingly. We are also fortunate to have several experts in the field within our local historical community who have been generous with their time and knowledge throughout Pat's orientation period. Dorothy MacKay-Collins, a member of the SHHS and a professional Oral Historian has offered the materials she uses in workshops she teaches on the subject. Erika Wolf, Oral Historian for the Veteran's History Project in Yountville, and colleague Rita Umphries have taken Pat under her wing and given her hands-on training in interview preparation and execution. Lauren Coodley, NVC History Chair and Pat's internship advisor, is also an experienced Oral Historian and has provided much coaching. Lauren is the author of the recently released book: [Napa, The Transformation of an American Town.](#)

Several local historians who do interviews as a part of commercial research projects have offered to contribute their relevant tapes and findings to the archives of SHHS so they too can be made available for educational and research purposes. We are extremely grateful for the outpouring of support for this project.

Our program is in its infancy. However, we envision that it will develop into a fully professional and respected Oral History program within a few years. In the meantime, we interview people so we don't lose valuable stories while we are building our expertise. We will begin to make the archives available to researchers and local community members as soon as is practicable.

We are dedicated to collecting a range of stories that reflect the rich diversity that has resulted in our complex city character. If you have a great life story related to St. Helena or you know someone who does please contact us so we can add to our growing list.

Through this program we can bring life to the rich history that is at the heart of our mission by providing future generations with a personal glimpse into the unique lives of the people who make it. Please watch future newsletters for opportunities to join in the fun and the work!

To submit a name to the *Voices of St. Helena* list or to get more information about the program contact Tricia Westbrook at 707 963 2019.

St. Helena Historical Society
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(voice mail only)
www.shstory.org

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Committee Notes:

The *Collections Committee* coordinates and manages the acquisition of new materials. It meets the last Monday of the month at 9:00am in the library upstairs meeting room. Current chair of the committee is Frank Harrison. You can email him at jackielfrank@aol.com

I'd like to join the St. Helena Historical Society!

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Individual	\$20	Family	\$30
Business/Organizaton	\$100	Life	\$500

I would like to:

Volunteer _____ Make a donation to the Society _____

Questions? Comments?

Call or email the Newsletter editor,
Kim Farmer, at 963-0630,
ksfarmer@seedgrain.com

HISTORICAL SOCIETY ACTIVITY BRIEFS



John Sales portrays John McCord, one of seven historical winemakers featured at “Spirits of St. Helena,” the second annual tour of St. Helena Cemetery held on November 6.

October and November General Meetings

Joe Calizo gave a talk about the Bear Flag Revolt at the Society’s October meeting, held on the lawn at Sunny Acres B & B. A group of about 25 members and guests listened as he traced the path of the Bear Flag men on their march to the Mexican fort in Sonoma, in the early summer of 1864. Joe has done extensive research of their route through Napa County. He traced their trail through Berryessa, Chiles and Pope Valley, over to Bale’s mill, south along the Napa Valley floor, and finally, crossing the hills to Sonoma. His talk was lively and informative. Afterwards, everyone enjoyed refreshments and an opportunity for informal discussion.

The November meeting was held at St. Clement Winery. Members of the Jewish Historical Society of Napa Valley, St. Helena Historical Society and guests were treated to a talk by Jewish Historical Society of Napa Valley President Donna Mendelson about the Winery’s founder, Fritz Rosenbaum. (Rosenbaum is featured in an article on the front page of the newsletter.) St. Clement Hospitality Director Doug Beck contributed information about the Winery’s history, as well. The talk was followed by a private wine tasting and house tour.

St. Helena’s American Legion Hall

The society held its September meeting at the American Legion Hall. Al Butala and Dave Curtin gave a history of the building. It was built by the St. Helena Seventh Day Adventist Church for \$1,200 and dedicated in 1880. The pastor lived in a side room which is now the Legion bar. The eastern section was used for Sunday school and separated by a wide drop down door.

By 1929 times were hard and the church met with financial difficulties when asked to pay for paving along Oak and Madrona. The cost of paving and needed repairs to the building resulted in a decision to sell to the American legion. The Legion began a long process of repairs. Al Butala told of using foundation jacks to raise the structure and replace the old growth redwood piers.

During renovations all electrical and plumbing was replaced. Some of the antique wiring hangs on the wall in the bar, which is also a museum of military memorabilia. Items include a dummy practice bomb, a framed Japanese flag with bullet hole, and a Japanese rifle. Coors Beer War posters hang next to a plaque commemorating St. Helenans who died in war, a copy of the one outside city hall.

The second half of the program was presented by Erika Wolf of the Veterans Home Oral History Project. Passing out a folder of materials from the Library of Congress American Folklife Center, she explained the process of recording the memories and trials of those who served their country. Erika has recorded over 264 oral histories using equipment and the TV studio at the Veterans Home.

WELCOME! NEW MEMBERS SINCE AUGUST

Pat Alexander
Joseph Barkley
Karen Caldwell

William Dickerson
Betty L. Foote
Guy and Connie Kay

Shannon Kuleto
Jacqueline Mozer
Warren Young

CALENDAR

November

Nov 29: Collections Committee Meeting, 9-11:30 am, Library Community Room

December

Dec 7: General Meeting, 6:00pm, special Holiday reception at Oddfellows Lodge, 1352 Main St. Program presented by architect Michael Rada. Parking lot is on Railroad Ave., behind building. Handicap entrance is on Main St.

January

Jan 4: General Meeting, 4:00pm at the Methodist Church, corner of Oak and Adams Streets. Ann Wolf will talk about the history of the church.

Jan 31: Collections Committee Meeting, 9-11:30 am, Library Community Room.

February

Feb 4: General Meeting, 4:00 pm. Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Federated Women of Upper Napa Valley, Sandy Lowry will discuss the group's history. Please see website for location or call Gwen Becker at 942-0940.

Feb 28: Collections Committee Meeting, 9-11:30 am, Library Community Room.

Be sure to visit the Society website at www.shstory.org for possible changes and updates to events

Mission Statement

The St. Helena Historical Society is a public educational organization. Its mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and provide access to historical materials of all kinds from our community as well as to promote public awareness and participation in the collection of such materials.

Come join us!

December 7, 2004,

**at 6pm
for**

holiday cheer

at the

**St. Helena Oddfellows Lodge
1352 Main Street.
(Parking on Railroad Ave.)**

This 1885 building is being re-stored; many interesting objects have been uncovered. See the 1870 Oddfellows regalia and records. Enjoy refreshments and Christmas goodies with the St. Helena Historical Society! Bring a friend.

**Please call 963-5244 X 187,
leaving a message, if you can
bring an appetizer or beverage.**

St. Helena Historical Society
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