

JOHN RATH

Guten Tag!

It is such a pleasure for me to see you all here today. I wanted to share my story with you modern local people. You see I was one of the very early settlers in Ackley. In fact when I arrived here there wasn't really a town- It was just an area that had been platted by a team of four men hired by the railroad. I had such a vision of what this very fertile area could be with hard work from a community of citizens and support of businesses and the railroad.

My story actually begins on November 26, 1840. I was born to Andreas and Ann (Reich) Rath in the Black Forest area of Brietnau, Germany. My father was a weaver and owned 5 acres of land. Times were very hard for my family and often my parents struggled just to have enough food for the family. At the age of 15, I came to Dubuque to avoid being in the army in Germany and also "to eat". My uncle George was in Dubuque and he offered me a job there, as well as a place to stay. It may seem strange to you that I wanted to avoid the draft in Germany, but here in Iowa I volunteered for the Iowa 31st Infantry to fight in the Civil War. I enlisted in August of 1862 along with my brother George. I kept a diary for about 2 years from 1862-1864, which is now in safe keeping at the Ackley Heritage Center. I saw some horrible fighting during the Civil War. After just a few months of training we were taking heavy casualties in the deep south of Louisiana. I'll always remember our very famous General, William Tecumseh Sherman. If you're familiar with American History, you will recall that he was the general who led the famous "March to the Sea" which destroyed much of what was left in the south and helped to bring an end to that horrible war. We fought at Vicksburg and at Missionary Ridge, where my brother George was killed. I returned home from war on July 4, 1864.

I had seen enough of battles and war and was so happy just to be alive and back in Iowa. I went to work in Cedar Falls briefly and then ended up in Ackley working at the local elevator for a man named Michael Burns. Later, I bought that elevator. With the wonderful land in this area, I knew this had to be a good business. As I mentioned earlier, Ackley wasn't much of a settlement at this time but since the railroad had platted the town, I was sure that with the coming of settlers and a few key businesses, the community could thrive. The year of 1865 was the "blossoming year" for Ackley and things really started to happen. New settlers were making their way west, many of them Friesians from the northern part of Germany, as well as the Irish. I soon established a lumberyard to provide materials for the new buildings and homes that would surely be built. This business proved to be very successful!

In 1871 my brother, Andrew, came to Ackley to run the elevator. I later sold that elevator and bought the branch bank from Parkersburg, which was located in Ackley, from Mr. Wolfe. I was able to do this since I had made good money on land that I had bought several years earlier from the government and later sold to arriving settlers. The Rath State Exchange Bank was located where the laundromat is today.

I married Elizabeth Moser from Dubuque on October 5, 1865 by Rev. A. Van Vleit and we had 9 children in the following 15 years. In 1878 we built our large brick home to accommodate our growing family. Our home is known today as the mansion that is part of the Presbyterian Village. Our oldest son, Sherman, named for the famous general that I served under, worked in the bank with me and eventually ran it. Our second son, Charles, became a Presbyterian minister. To our third son, John W., we gave \$25,000 in 1891 to start the Rath Packing Plant in Waterloo. Cousin Ed came from Dubuque to manage this business since he had experience in slaughter houses. Our other sons Walter and Howard went to college and then headed to Pasadena, California where they spent their lives in the banking business. Our daughter Carrie died at a young age. Daughter Elizabeth married Mr. Bemmer from Ackley and they also moved to California where he was in the real estate business. Daughters Emelia (Milly) and Clara never married and stayed with us during most of the year but spent their winters in California with members of the family there. We commonly had hired help in our home. Usually this help came

in the form of immigrants who were relatives of ours. We would purchase their passage in exchange for their work. It seems like about the time their debt was paid they would marry someone local and the process would begin again.

Elizabeth and I were very community minded people and we belonged to and supported many local activities. I bought land for the Ackley City Park and gave it to the city. I sold shares and organized plans for the big Ackley Hotel. I felt that it was important to have a quality hotel for the many salesmen that arrived by train each day to supply our varied and growing business community. I also bought the machinery and equipment as well as the light plant then gave it to the city so that we could have electricity in town. One of my favorite endeavors, however, was that of helping to organize the First Presbyterian Church in 1867. This was early on in Ackley and several of us realized that the church was essential. We started meeting in the schoolhouse but soon outgrew that and built a frame building where the library now stands. Later we moved that building off and built a large impressive brick church building on the same site. The fact that this congregation is still here and a vital force in the community is very good to know. Elizabeth and I served on the cemetery society, taught Sunday School and generally helped out anywhere we could.

I suffered from a cerebral hemorrhage, a stroke, which killed me in just one day. My death came on June 20 of 1914. I had a very good life in this community and hope that I left a legacy for others to follow. While people say that I was a small and stern looking man, I want to be remembered not as that, but rather as a person who invested a lot of himself and his resources in a place that meant so very much to him. My beloved wife Elizabeth lived just 3 more years and died in 1917. Our family maintained ownership of our home until 1933 when it was donated to the Presbyterian Church to be used as a home for the aged. It was described in the newspaper as a "splendid property devoted to a good purpose".

There is only one Rath family member left in Ackley! My Brother Andrew's granddaughter, Helen Rath, is here and is really the town historian. I rest in peace and thank God for the life and love I knew in this wonderful small town on the Iowa prairie.