

Autobiography of Louis Palenske

This is a three-page autobiography of Louis Palenske, written on his 76th birthday. The fourth page is a short autobiographical synopsis. Funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission through the Kansas State Historical Records Advisory Board.

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LOUIS PALENSKE

These lines were written on his birthday, January 3rd, 1934

Was born on January 3rd, 1858, about one-half mile south of Alma, Kansas. The exact place is about a quarter of a mile east from the old ice-house, near the creek, south of Alma. On that spot my older brother, August, was born in 1855. It was in the first log house my father had built, when he came there in 1855. On the 28th, of June, 1858, came the greatest flood ever known there. The log house was submerged about four or five feet, but as the flood became threatening, they decided to flee for safety, but when they came to high place south of Zwanzigers house, they found the low ground a roaring torrent, so they were compelled to remain where they were. This little dry-spot became an island on which two large oak trees were standing, and father prepared for all to climb them, but as fate would have it, the water began to fall, so that they soon went back to their log house, again. When they got there, everything inside was upside down and had been floating and soiled with mud. The family then consisted of father, mother, grandfather and mother, and three children, I, being six months old. Of course, I do not remember anything about this, but it has been told time and again. During that flood, one man was drowned along the creek.

It may also be of interest to learn from what place my father and mother came from in Germany. If you will look at a map of Germany and find Danzig, in the eastern part; and then look a little west and see a city named Lauenburg, and then look north and see Leba, near the ocean. Just about half way between Lauenburg and Leba, a little village, is where they came from. And very likely, their forefathers have lived there for centuries, or more.

After the flood related above, father and all, decided to move to higher ground, and built a new log house, near the road on the south side of the creek, where we all grew up. The new stone house was built in 1872, which is still standing. During the time we lived in the log house, I well remember the many Indian scares all the people around there went thru. I remember several nights we all slept in corn fields, or hidden out somewhere. But the Indians never in anyway bothered us, but they were plundering and killing at other places.

There were no schools for us to go to, My brother Carl and August, being the oldest, boarded with people during the winter and went to school, where there was a school; but I did not go to school till Alma had a building for school. That was in 1866, and I first went to school in 1867, when I was nine years old. My mother and grandmother learned us the German letters and spelling etc, and up to that time, any of us could speak hardly anything but German; and during several years of schooling we had one hour in the afternoon learning to read and write German.



TWO

The school terms began about October first and ended April first - 6 months. My schooling began when corn was husked and ended when spring work in the field began. Our first teachers, I remember, could all speak and teach German. I went to school every winter till I was about sixteen years old. Just about that time a teacher in Alma was also a photographer in the summer; he told me if I would give him ten dollars, he would learn me how to make pictures, too. By saying good words to mother, (I presume begging) I paid him the ten dollars so that when I graduated, I was a full fledged photographer? Then, nothing would do but get some sort of an outfit to take them with, and also a place at home to take them in. But that was overcome so that I took tintypes as well as pictures on paper. After that, till I was 21 years old, I worked on the farm and during the winter I worked in studios in Wamego, Topeka and Kansas City.

During the harvest of 1877, two young men like myself took a trip to the Rocky Mountains. It was my first rail road ride in all my life, and it cost \$10.00 for the round trip to Denver and back, lasting ten days, also. I still remember stepping into the car as if it was yesterday, and the whole ride too. My oldest brother Carl had been in Denver, and when he came back and told us about the mountains etc. etc., I took a photo outfit to south-west Colorado and opened a studio in a new mining town called RICO. Here I took tintypes, photographs and views. In some way, I got in touch with the Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, and made many views for them, which were published. But, all the same, I came back to Kansas and opened a studio in Alma; but it being a small town, I opened a sews-stand also, and later books, stationery, wall paper, and in years I had a large store, and also selling pianos, organs and sewing machines, and at times had two and three men on the road selling. But along about then; I had met and married the most beautiful girl in all the world. Her name was Emma Thoes, and from that time my luck was made. But just one year after our marriage, I left her and took a trip to Europe, representing the Santa Fe railroad and the Pennsylvania railroad, and the Amburg-American Steam ship Company. I got a free pass between here and New York, also a free pass over and back the ocean. And also got some commissions besides.

When I got home I immediately began making plans to build a business house, and the result was a 26½ x 50 feet-two-story stone building. We had our store and studio on the first floor and the Masons occupied the second floor for many years. Then along about 1887, we sold the studio outfit to Gus. Meier, and continued the store for a number of years later. But during the fall and winter of 1887 and 1888, I began to plan of opening a bank; had a small fireproof safe,



THREE

but traded that in on a large fire and burglar proof safe with a time lock. Before we had begun, one of the other two banks in Alma failed, and I opened as L. PALENSKE & Co. BANKERS. The object was to make it a State Bank, but at first people were afraid of banks and bank stock, but later on, it was organized into the Alma State Bank, which in 1897 was enlarged to \$50,000.00 and made the Alma National Bank. During all these years I was its Cashier, but resigned in the spring of 1905. Then mama and I took a trip to the World Fair at Portland, Oregon, and visited San Francisco and Los Angeles. Then after a while, I organized the Commercial State Bank, which soon was enlarged to \$50,000.00 into the Commercial National Bank. I was its Cashier till it was sold in 1912.

But the worst of all was when the bank had made a loan of \$2000.00 to a man running a mill at Alma, he could not make a go of it, so he let me have the mill if I paid his note off for him. This I did and became the owner of the mill. (it seemed very cheap) I immediately began to renovate the same, and hired a miller and a helper. But as it was, the mill was incomplete. At first, I had to build a new dam, and later on, put in a large steam plant, and then, later on enlarged the whole system. All this costing thousands of dollars. And at the same time it was operated at a loss; it being the time all small mills were crowded out by the big ones. And in the end of it, I lost the mill at loss of about \$40,000.00; thus, losing everything we had, went broke. The mill and real estate was sold for \$700.00 finally.

Then after a while we opened a studio at McFarlna, but it did not pay, so I opened a studio at Burlington, Kansas. First, I was there alone, and then mama and the babies there too. While at Burlington, we done a good business, and I also built and operated a high-poer transmission line between there and Gridley, and furnished Gridley with electric lights for a number of years. And then, in 1927 opened a studio at Osage City, and operated two studios for almost a year and then finally we sold a part of our studio at Burlington, and all of us moved to Osage City, and then for about two years also had a studio at Burlingame, have discontinued it two years ago.

During all these 51 years, mama and I have always been as one, and have many trips together - to New York, Chicago, Michigan, Milwaukee, Oregon, California etc. and have raised one of the finest family in the world. And thus - we are all of us happy, and prosperous again, and hope to continue so.

Autobiography of Louis Palenske

LOUIS PALENSKE

Was born January 3rd, 1858. Began going to school when 9 years old. (The reason I did not go to school sooner, was - there was no school close enough to go to) Went to school every winter till I was 17; and worked on the farm during the summer till I was 21. After 17, during the winters, I was either at Topeka, Wamego or Kansas City, learning the photograph business.

In July 1877 I took a ten-day excursion to Denver and the mountains.

In 1880, I went to Colorado to take pictures. Worked in a tent taking pictures at Rico; and traveled over quite a bit of the mountains taking views for Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. Then, coming back to Alma, at first, I clerked in a store for a while, but that did not suit me, so I opened a studio at Alma. In the front part I put in showcases and carried magazines, and small trinkets; adding more and more to it.

1883

On January the 7th, was married to Miss Emma Thoes. On January 10th, 1884 I went to Germany for the Santa Fe railroad and Emma stayed and took care of the little store we had. When I came back I began building a stone building, two story high, 26½x50 feet. In the lower part we carried on our store, and back of it our studio. And the up-stairs was used as Masonic Hall.

The business kept on growing so that at times, we had one, and at times two salesmen selling Organs, Pianos, sewing machines.

In 1888 I started banking on a small scale; at first for several months as L. Palenske & Co. Bankers; which after much talk was changed to The Alma State Bank; and on January the 3rd, (my birthday) changed to The Alma National Bank, with a \$50,000.00 paid up capital. I remained its Cashier and Manager to 1905, when I resigned. While I was Cashier of the above - Alma Nat'l Bank, the bank made a loan to Mr. Disbrow, owner of the mill, for its re-construction. And took a mortgage on the mill. Disbrow, after some time, offered to turn over the whole mill if the bank would find him a buyer. Not being able to find a buyer; So, to relieve the bank, I paid off the \$3,000.00 note and took over the mill, believing I could sell it again, soon.