
DANE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER



The Dane County Historical Society Office and the Otto Schroeder Records Center are located in the lower level of the Lussier Family Heritage Building on Lake Farm Road just south of the Beltline near Lake Waubesa.

Volume 32

Fall/Winter 2013

Number 2

Just Who Was Otto Schroeder, Anyway?

By Amy L. Gilliland, Ph.D.

Editor's note: Amy Gilliland is a long-time member and friend of the Dane County Historical Society. Through her generous financial donation in 2002, the Society was able to move into its present space at the Lussier Family Heritage Center. At that time, the Dane County Records Center was renamed to honor Amy's grandfather Otto Schroeder. What follows is a slightly abridged version of Amy's reminiscence of her grandfather.

Otto August Schroeder (1899-1992) was the grandfather who gave me an appreciation for history. He was 64 when I was born, and many of my memories are through the eyes of a child. Otto was 5'8" and heavy set. He always dressed impeccably, wearing undershirts and a bolo tie even in hot weather. My grandfather was always telling stories, which got him into a lot of trouble with my grandmother. It seemed that he told the wrong stories to the wrong people: the waitress at his favorite restaurant knew all about his childhood on the farm in Germany. The letter carrier knew he was the oldest of six children, but that he had six older half-siblings as well. The half brother closest in age had reversed names, August Otto. Since they had different mothers, it seemed their father wanted to make sure the name survived – at least that's what he told the grocery clerk at Safeway.



Otto Schroeder, age 77 (1976)

In the late seventies, someone gave him a cassette recorder and microphone for Christmas. From then on

he made tapes of his stories, almost exclusively in German. He sat at his desk looking out the window with the microphone in his thick fingers. Otto's fingers were huge, like bratwursts, swollen with "the arthritis." As an adult, I can only imagine what a punishment it must have seemed to lose the gift of his hands.

Otto had been a brilliant engineer, graduating at the top of his class in 1925. The basement of their Napa, California, home was full of his drawings and mementos from 50 years in his profession. My mother was at odds with his collecting habits – they were always arguing about his "junk." To me it seemed to be a place filled with treasures: papers written in foreign languages, old business cards, newspaper clippings about people he knew, drafting supplies, and Life magazine photos thumb-tacked on the walls. There was a mechanical monkey that would climb up a wire if you pulled on a ring; he brought that out for all of his grandnephews and great grandchildren too.

Unfortunately my mother cleaned out the basement before I got to it. By then I had moved to Wisconsin and had a young family of my own. Very little of my Opa's mementos survive. But I paid attention to all those stories and took photos out of the garbage pile when my mother wasn't looking. I asked relatives and friends to tell me their stories when I was still in high school and college.

Phillipp Hyronimus August Otto Schroeder was born on September 26, 1899 on a small farm in the Westfalia

Continued on page 2

Just Who Was Otto Schroeder, Anyway? (Continued from page 1)

River district of central Germany, near the town of Elben. His family were farmers, and he was the seventh of his father's twelve children. A first wife had died leaving him with six children. The youngest, August, was two years older than Otto. When Otto was 12, his father died and the farm was left to his oldest son who was now a young man with a family of his own. Otto's mother moved her family to Bettenhausen, just across the Fulda River from the city of Kassel, where Otto went to school.

As a teenager, Otto served in the World War I German forces as a supervisor for the assembly of Fokker triplanes. Back in Kassel, a local girl, Selma Fritzsche, captured his heart. She was four years younger than Otto and her family had a very successful hotel and restaurant business. They courted for two years before her father consented to the engagement, and were engaged for another three years. Otto had to graduate and have a position with income before the marriage could take place. As a child, my Opa would tell me that he had to work very hard to be worthy of "his Salie."

Otto studied and eventually graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering from the "Thüringisches Technikum" (now the Ilmenau Engineering School), 160 kilometers away. He joined an engineering fraternity and served as an officer. At that time, every young man joined a fraternal group where he lived, studied and exercised.



Otto in his fraternity officer's uniform, circa 1924

Group exercise was thought to build character and health. He remained lifelong friends with his fraternity brothers, several of whom also came to live in the United States. A week after marrying on October 25, 1926, Otto and Selma had first class tickets on the Hamburg Line to go to America. They arrived in New York. As a child I was always disappointed to hear they didn't come

through Ellis Island, which sounded like an important place. Instead, they had first class tickets and a sponsor – August Schroeder, Otto's older half-brother.

Soon, Otto and Selma crossed the country to see August, who lived in Fresno, California with his American wife and two children. Otto and Selma settled in San Francisco, where their only daughter, Ilse Elisabeth Luise, was born in August 1927. Otto had received his U.S. citizenship in 1933; he officially changed his name to Otto August Schroeder. He insisted that my grandmother get her citizenship too, and she finally complied in 1938. It was harder for her to let go of her German citizenship.



Otto Schroeder's citizenship papers, 1933

Soon after, things became scarier for German naturalized citizens living in coastal areas. They were living on Balboa Street in San Francisco and buried many family photographs, German books or mementoes in the back yard. My mother remembers the undercurrent of fear very clearly. All my life, no one would discuss the war years except in the sketchiest of terms. Even when everyone was dead and my mother was in her eighties, she still wouldn't tell their stories. Several of their friends who had not become (or were recently) naturalized citizens were detained in camps under the "Enemy Aliens Program." Several of Otto's brothers, nephews, brothers-in-law and fraternity brothers served in the German army. So any communication during those years was very limited. It wasn't until after the war they found out the extent of the destruction; Selma's home had been bombed and

Continued on page 3

Just Who Was Otto Schroeder, Anyway? *(Continued from page 2)*

destroyed and many friends and family members had died.

Ironically, Otto worked to build naval barges for the U.S. war effort. In 1941, he was offered the job of shipyard engineer for Basalt Rock Company. Basalt had won the contract to construct ships for the United States Navy. In Napa, Selma and Otto bought a two bedroom stucco house at 968 Jefferson Street. A few years later, they switched homes with a widow in the house next door, Amy Prouty (my namesake). Selma and Otto lived in the historic shingle style Victorian home at 1801 First Street for almost 50 years.

After World War II ended, Otto and Selma spent the next five years living abroad. He rarely returned to California. Daughter Ilse was making plans to move back to Germany permanently when she met my father in 1959 at a ski resort and decided to stay. Otto and Selma also returned to Napa, where Otto retired in the early 1960's. My parents, Ilse and Allen Gilliland, were married in the First Street house in 1961 and I was born soon after.

Otto saved everything he could in the basement and attic, but he also hid things in unlikely places. I think part of it was the idea that something could be used again; or that a hand painted "Welcome Home" sign held a wonderful memory. But there was also the sense that possessing some items could threaten one's safety. However, the strongest idea was that old things had meaning. Through loss – of people – of his homeland – of his idealism – objects represented a time when something of value occurred. They represented a frozen frame of what life was like Before. In his past objects, he saw what he believed to be true at that time, what he thought the world was like. Time always twists our perspective; we never look back at the same event quite the same way each time we reflect on it. We've learned and experienced too much in between. I can hear Otto's rich accented voice telling me, "You see, that's it now." Then he would launch into another story.

It isn't as if Otto sat me down one day and said, "This is why the past is important. This is why we should keep things." His actions showed how much he valued his things – like the mint green and white 1956 DeSoto Firedome. Even after they purchased new cars, he drove the DeSoto until 1986. Not because he appreciated cars but because it was still useful. My grandfather also repaired as much as possible. Since he was an engineer this was sometimes problematic. Glue could fix everything – to this day I



Otto welcomes visitors to his 1801 First Street house in Napa, CA, 1985

have crystal wine goblets with Kerr jar lids glued to the bottom.

In 1989 they moved from the historic Napa house to a retirement community. Otto passed away in January 1992 at the age of 92. Selma lived until 1997, when she was 96.

As for me, I've always been interested in how human nature and emotions have influenced what we consider history. I moved here in 1983 to go to graduate school because it felt like home. When I saw George Hesselberg's article about the historical society's need for a record center years ago, I thought immediately of Otto Schroeder. It was my philanthropy but it was his inspiration. He was never able to come here to see my home in Madison. He would have enjoyed it; having been to Germany, the countryside looks a lot like Kassel.

It's Time to Renew Your Membership in DCHS!

A Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

Thank you for being a member of the Dane County Historical Society. We really appreciate our many members who have given of their interest, their time and their money to partner with the Society in achieving its mission of preserving the history of our county. Your support means a great deal to the Society; and it gives us a boost for the important work we do on behalf of everyone who values the heritage of this county. We strive to be the steward of our county's memories and stories.

So at this time, I invite you to please take a moment to renew your membership. Society memberships run for a calendar year, and now is the time to renew for 2014.

The Society celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2011. After all these years, the Society continues to be a vibrant organization that is busy with programs and projects, and with members who are very enthusiastic and loyal.

This is a particularly exciting time to be involved in the Dane County Historical Society. We welcome your participation in any of our ongoing projects. Help us:

- Offer public speaker and author programs
- Maintain and improve the Otto Schroeder Records Center and make its collections accessible to members and to the general public
- Facilitate cooperation and sharing among the more than twenty local historical societies in the county.

Our 2014 membership fee schedule remains the same as in previous years at just \$15.00 for an

Individual Membership and \$20.00 for a Family Membership.

Please consider renewing your membership at our GOLDEN MEMBERSHIP level. Golden membership dues are applied to the Society's Legacy Fund, which we are building to ensure that the work of the Society will go on. Golden members will also receive a complimentary DCHS tote bag.

And, this year we are offering the "two-for-one" opportunity for you to share your love of history with someone else to ALL renewing members, not just for those that renew at the Golden Level. For 2014, renew your own Society membership and give a friend or family member a One-Year Gift Membership for FREE. Just give us the name and address of someone you would like to receive a complimentary membership in Dane County Historical Society for 2014. We will send your guest a notice that you have given them this wonderful gift of history. They will enjoy full membership benefits for the upcoming year.

Please take a moment to fill out the membership form included with this newsletter and mail in your renewal today; or use our online membership option, available through the DCHS website, to renew your membership online: (<http://www.danecountyhistory.org/member/index.html>). We thank you for being such a good friend of the Dane County Historical Society.

Sincerely,

Mary Clark

Board Officers Elected

At a recent meeting of the Dane County Historical Society Board of Directors, the Board elected officers for 2014.

The organization's bylaws prescribe that "Board officers shall be elected annually by the Board of Directors from among their number at the first meeting of the Board following the annual meeting. Officers serve for a period of one year, and may be re-elected for additional one-year terms."

Officers for 2014 are:

President – Mary Clark

Vice-President – Joanne Jensen

Secretary – Barbara Furstenberg

Treasurer – Ann Hartung

Three of the officer positions are being filled with returning incumbents. We have often had difficulty filling the Board's Treasurer position, as that position has many detailed and time-consuming duties to perform. We have in the past had a vacancy at this important Board officer position, leaving those duties to be divided among the other officers. This year, we are pleased to announce that Board member, Ann Hartung, has stepped up and will be filling that important Board officer role for the 2014 year. Thanks Ann!!

DCHS Annual Open House

The second annual Dane County Historical Society Open House was held on Sunday April 28, 2013. As with our first open house held last year, this event was very successful for the Society. We had a good turnout and it was great to see several of our newer members in attendance. It was a great way for us to introduce the Society and what we do to new and existing members and to the general public. We had many of the collections from the archive on display, as well as other local history exhibits. We generated several new memberships from those in attendance. The day was beautiful and everyone indicated that the open house was fun and successful. Thanks to everyone who helped and who attended.

One of the exhibits we were proud to show off at the Open House was the Gordon Schoolhouse Quilt, which was mounted and displayed for us by Marianne and John Volker from the Verona Historical Society. The beautiful quilt was made in 1928 by the Gordon School Mothers Club.

The Gordon Schoolhouse still stands on the corner of Co Trunk M and Mid-Town Rd in the town of Verona. On Sept 14, 1928 a tornado struck a large quadrant of the town taking the Gordon Schoolhouse with it. The school district borrowed the \$6,000 needed to rebuild the school. But still in need of all new books and supplies, the mothers decided to hold a fund raiser. They each paid 10 cents per square and crafted a quilt with 150 signatures in beautiful hand embroidery. Upon completion, the quilt was raffled and proceeds bought the needed school supplies. The Gordon Schoolhouse Quilt remained in a town of Verona home until 1997 when it was donated to the Verona Historical Society by Mrs. Ruth Miller as part of a quilt expo. It now is displayed by the Verona Historical Society.

One of the most popular things about an Open House is that we get to select and highlight some of the materials from the Otto Schroeder Records Center; several dozen collections and individual items were brought out and set on tables around the room, for attendees to view and browse through. This was a rare chance for people to see archival materials held by the Society. Since the archive is not open for the general public, most people never get to see the gems held within the walls of the Otto Schroeder Records Center.

Just a few of the unique collections that were displayed at the Open House included the following:



Board Members, Marianne Volker and Joanne Jensen admire the Gordon Schoolhouse Quilt on display at the 2013 DCHS Open House

- **Map of the Four Lakes Country, Wisconsin.** This large, colored map (circa 1892?) shows railroads, creeks, post offices, smaller lakes, Lake Mendota, Lake Monona, Lake Wingra, Lake Waubesa, Lake Kegonsa, and the location of local Indian mounds.
- **Eloise Gerry Scrapbook** (1929-1972). A scrapbook kept by Eloise Gerry, a pioneering female scientist in the field of forest products research, who was a longtime employee at the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison.
- **John S. Donald Campaign Letters** (1928). Two campaign letters (dated August 1928), from John S. Donald, a Dane County farmer and political progressive, seeking support for his candidacy for U.S. Congressman on the Republican ticket.
- **Darwin E. Bruns Papers** (1945-1966). Various papers of Darwin E. Bruns of DeForest, chairman of the Dane County Board of Supervisors in the early 1960s.

Continued on page 6

DCHS Annual Open House *(Continued from page 5)*

- **Independent Order of Good Templars, Lodge No. 377 (Cottage Grove, Wis.) Records** (1987-1989). The collection consists of two volumes which contain the group's constitution and bylaws, names of members, and minutes of meetings that document attendance and social activities.
- **Dryden Family Papers** (1886-1911). The archive does not contain much in the way of personal family papers, making the Dryden Family Papers all the more interesting. This collection includes a letter dated 1911, written by John Dryden of Kearney, Neb., recounting a visit to Dane County. The letter contains personal observations on the changing physical characteristics of Middleton, Madison and the Blue Mounds area; and a summary of the testi-

mony given in the trial records covering the murder of a family member in 1866.

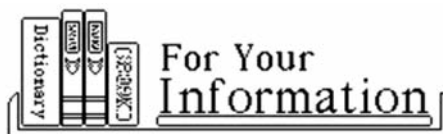
- **Presbyterian Church of Verona Session Book** (1846-1905). The book consists of meeting minutes, lists of pastors and elders that served the church, registers of baptisms, weddings and members. It includes copies of the original session records transcribed by Robert Christison in 1887. This rural Scotch Presbyterian church served residents of the Towns of Verona and Springdale.

The Society's annual Open House, has already become a popular activity. The Board of Directors is already planning for the Third Annual Open House to be held next spring.



Dozens of items and collections from the Otto Schroeder Record Center were displayed for visitors at the Open House.

Dane County Bookshelf



Occasionally, the Society hears about publications related to Dane County. If anyone knows of additional publications about Dane County, its history or its people, please pass them on to us. If anyone would like to donate books, town or family histories, or other publications about Dane County to the records center, please let us know.

One Small Farm: Photographs of a Wisconsin Way of Life / by Craig Schreiner. Published by Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2013. 128 p : 100 color photos. The book captures in evocative color photographs the everyday farm life of the Lamberty family near Pine Bluff, Wisconsin. These thoughtful photos explore larger questions concerning the future of small farm agriculture, Wisconsin cultural traditions, and the rural way of life.

Donations and Memorials – January-December 2013

The following donations were given to the Dane County Historical Society in 2013. Donations of any amount are always greatly appreciated. Thanks to everyone who has contributed to the Society. We depend heavily on donations to carry out our mission to collect, preserve, and disseminate knowledge about the history of Dane County, Wisconsin.

Donations of \$1000 and above

Archives Processing (Foundry Collection)

- Amy Gilliland

Computer Fund

- Peter W. Clark

Donations of \$100-\$500

Computer Fund

- Sharon M. Mulak/Lloyd F. Velicer

Computer Fund

- Ann Waidelich
- Jerry Remy

Archives Processing (Foundry Collection)

- George F. Jacobs, Jr.
(multiple donations totaling in the \$100-\$500 range)
 - In memory of Frank Schuepbach
 - In memory of Helen W. Ostby
 - In memory of Harry Sauthoff, Jr.
 - In memory of Mary L. Fowler
 - In memory of Douglas A. Klagos

Legacy Fund

- Beverly Kneebone
(multiple donations totaling in the \$100-\$500 range)
 - In honor of Michael Derr
 - In honor of Victor Virnig
 - In memory of Frank Schuepbach
 - In honor of Robert M. Johnson
- Joanne Jensen
- Beverly M. Schwierske
- Karen Bauman
- Ruth A. Wagner

Donations of up to \$99

General Fund

- Thomas Boykoff
- Margie Devereaux/David Hall
- John Gorman
- Ruth D. Haglund
- Kurt/Dana Karbusicky
- Winifred Lacy
- Tom Martinelli
- Alice Punwar
- Robert M. Sprinkle
- Karen Turner
- Melanie Woodworth
- Phyllis L. Young

Computer Fund

- Robert A./Mary M. Bean
- Sandra J. Bennett
- Joe/Barbara Weston Corry
- Mrs. Melvin C. Cottom
- Mabelle R. Ewald
- Meghan M. Meeker
- Teresa Mulrooney
- Martin V. Timmins

Madison Central HS Fund

- Howard W. Bremer/Caryl F. Bremer Family Trust
- Madison Central High School reunion
- Joanne Jensen
 - In memory of John B. Raimond
 - In memory of Joan Cassini Elmore

Legacy Fund

- Joanne Jensen
 - In memory of Don Beale
 - In memory of Mickie Schudlach

History is not the past, but a map of the past drawn from a particular point of view to be useful to the modern traveler.

— Henry Glassie

For me there is no greater subject than history. How a man can study it and not be forced to become a philosopher, I cannot tell.

— George E. Wilson

The historian has been the hearth at which the soul of the country has been kept alive.

— John Morley, *Notes on Politics and History*

History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.

— Robert Penn Warren

Dane County Historical Society
3101 Lake Farm Rd.
Madison, WI 53711

Return Service Requested

Non Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Madison, WI
Permit No. 1

President's Message from Mary Clark



Mary Clark

As another year winds down, I want to take a moment to reflect on the past year. The Dane County Historical Society presented some very interesting and successful public programs during the year – from our Wisconsin Book Festival program featuring *Letters Home to Sarah: The Civil War Letters of Guy C. Taylor*, to our Annual Meeting program on Madison's industrial East Side, we worked hard at getting the word out about the Society and about the amazing history and heritage of our county.

We hosted our second annual Open House at our headquarters and office in the Lussier Family Heritage Center. The Open House this year was well attended and bigger than last year's event ... and we know that next year's THIRD Annual Open House will be even more interesting and fun. Watch for it!

We placed two historical markers in the county during 2013; one in Monona and the other in Fitchburg. Watch for stories and pictures of those markers in the next issue of the newsletter.

I am hoping that you will all take a minute to fill out and send in your membership form for 2014. A convenient renewal form is included with this newsletter. We depend very heavily on the renewals and donations of our loyal members, to be able to carry on and to carry out our mission of preserving and promoting the heritage of Dane County.

Wishing you and your families a happy holidays and a great New Year in 2014.

The Dane County Historical Society Newsletter is published quarterly (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter), by the Dane County Historical Society and printed by The Printing Place. Submissions are due 15 days prior to publication. Reader reviews, testimonials, flak and flattery, are also welcome. Send to: DCHS Newsletter, 3101 Lake Farm Rd. Madison, WI 53711. E-mail: dchs@danecountyhistory.org
Mary Clark, President, Howard Sherpe, Editor, Dane County Historical Society