

Lena Reaser: A Sweet Old Moonshiner Who Loved Children

Memories collected by Ken Kraemer

I am writing this story because I remember this kind, old lady and think there should be some



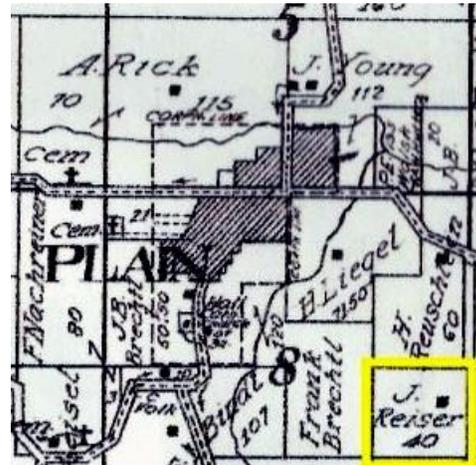
Lena Reaser in summer of 1959. Cropped photo from Jackie Blau Eckhardt

record of her life. Lena Reaser was born as Magdalena Winkler on September 13, 1875, in Bavaria, Germany, daughter of Joseph and Katharina (Geetzel) Winkler. They also had two younger children, Joseph and George. The

Winkler family of five immigrated from Bremen, Germany, and arrived in New York on March 17, 1883, aboard the SS Rhein. By 1885, they were living in Franklin Township in Sauk County, Wisconsin.

The Joseph Winkler farm was located on Butternut Road in Franklin Township. They lived next to the farm owned by Joseph and Mary (Soeldner) Frank in Wilson Creek in Spring Green Township.

In 1895, Lena married John Reaser, son of Ulrich (Eulrick) Reaser and Elizabeth Degen, both born in Switzerland. The Reaser family immigrated to America around 1852. Ulrich died during or after the Civil War which left Elizabeth alone with five young children (one child died in 1867). John was the youngest and was born October 12, 1867, in Franklin Township. By 1900, Elizabeth was listed as a widow in the census, and was living with her son John and his wife Lena; Elizabeth died in 1917. Lena and John lived on a small farm at the end of Dead End Road east of Plain on 40 acres which had belonged to John's parents. The 1922 plat map shows John Reaser's land in Section 8 in Franklin Township.



The 1905 Wisconsin census suggested that the Reasers were struggling. John, who was renting the farm, was a farmer but worked only eight months of the year; Lena was a domestic servant employed 12 months; and Lena's mother, Katherine Winkler

Reaser farm at the end of Dead End Road. Notice the log house and corn shocks. Maybe it is Lena standing on the left. Source: "A History of Plain, Wisconsin" Thering

worked as a servant for four months. Lena's brother George Winkler, then single, worked as a day laborer. By 1920, the census showed the home was owned by John. Katherine Winkler was still in the household in 1930.

John and Lena Reaser had two daughters: Matilda (born in 1895) and Agnes (born March 14, 1915, in Franklin Township). Matilda married Michael Ring on September 3, 1911; they lived in Spring Green. Agnes married Alvin Krueger on November 21, 1942, in Missouri because Alvin was Lutheran, so Father Beschta of Plain wouldn't marry them. They lived in Madison.

John Reaser died at age 70 on January 27, 1938, at his home after an illness of two days. Father Peter Beschta officiated at his funeral; burial was in old St. Luke's cemetery.

During prohibition (1920-1933), people in Wisconsin made moonshine that was consumed in larger cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago. Many Sauk County farmers engaged in its manufacture as a means of earning cash - so did Lena and her relatives and neighbors, as well as the Franks. During a liquor raid in early January 1939, Lena (63), her brother George (56) and neighbor Roman Schoenmann (32) were arrested when moonshine was found on their farms. On Roman's farm, 30 gallons of moonshine whiskey was found, but his 25-gallon still was found hidden on Lena's adjoining farm. The still was promptly destroyed by the raiders. A small amount of unstamped liquor was found on George Winkler's farm a half mile west of Plain. Schoenmann is charged with possession and manufacture of untaxed liquor; Mrs. Rieser with aiding and abetting in the moonshine manufacture, and Winkler with possession of untaxed liquor. (*Wisconsin State Journal*, January 6, 1939). The three pled guilty. Because this was a first offense, Roman was fined \$50 while George was fined \$25 and placed on probation for two years. (*Wisconsin State Journal*, January 7, 1939).

Tragedy struck when four months after the raid, George Winkler died on May 29, 1939, after being gored by a bull on his farm. He had quit plowing to drive cattle to the barn but did not return home that evening. He was found the next morning in a clump of trees near a creek.

With her husband and brother gone and daughters living elsewhere, Lena was now alone; her remaining brother, Joseph, was living in Waupun. The 1940 census showed that Lena, now 64, was still living in the same house as she did in 1935, but was unable to work. It was about this time that Lena became a caregiver for her former neighbors, Mary (Soeldner) and Joseph Frank, who had earlier moved to a house in Plain. The Frank home was on the northeast corner of Cedar Street and Park Avenue. Ken Kraemer and his family (Leo and Lucy Kraemer) lived kitty-corner from the Franks, so Ken knew the Franks as he was growing up. Ken also knew Lena personally and was moved to write this story of his memories of her. The story includes the memories of others touched by her as well.

Initially, Lena walked to town from her farm. Later, she lived in the Frank house but would visit her own house regularly. Helen Kraemer Taylor walked along with Lena on several occasions when she was a little girl: "Lena would go to her house back by

Parker Giles to check on it often. It was a really, really small house."

Mary Soeldner Frank died of diabetes in 1941 at the age of 81. Joseph Frank died in 1954 at the age of 99. The year before he died, a reporter from the *Sauk City Star* (Plain's Oldest Citizen) May 14, 1953) interviewed Joseph Frank and wrote of Lena, "While we were talking, his housekeeper [Lena], a sprightly gal of 77 summers, joined us. She's known Joe and his family for many, many years. 'When I was just a girl the Franks took me in as a hired girl,' she reminisced. 'Our family was having hard sledding. The Franks were very good to me. I've never forgotten their kindnesses.'

Lena then went to live with her daughter Agnes in Monona, Wisconsin, in a little house on the Yahara River at 714 Interlake Drive. Before she left Plain, a farewell party was given for her at the Leo Kraemer home by neighbors and friends on Thursday afternoon, March 25, 1954. That evening another farewell party was given by members of the Joseph Frank family. The next year, Lena's daughter Matilda died of a heart attack at age 60 in Spring Green on April 27, 1955.

Lena died December 23, 1962, in a Madison hospital at the age of 87. Her funeral was held at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Monona; she was buried in the old St. Luke's cemetery in Plain next to her husband. Lena had two granddaughters, Verena Ring Koch (1917-1960) and Christina Ring Nee (1920-2010). Lena's daughter Agnes drowned at age 84 on August 20, 1999, in the Yahara River while filling a water can to water flowers at her home.

Memories from children from Plain

Lena was a sweet old lady to the children on Cedar Street and Park Avenue in Plain. The Joe Frank house where she worked was kitty-corner from the Leo Kraemer house on Cedar Street. Up the street were the children of Alphonse Kraemer and Mary Frank (Joe and Mary's daughter), Francis and Mary (McCluskey) Bettinger (who owned the hardware store in Plain), Louis and Ruth Bettinger (the banker in Plain) and John and Mary (Brick) Dischler. The Reynold and Delores (Hogan) Kraemer children were next door to Joe Frank, and the children of Edward and Gisela (Frank) Kraemer (Joe and Mary's daughter) were a block away. The village power plant and Franklin Town Hall were at the corner of Wachter and Cedar Street.

According to grandson Florian Frank, Mary had diabetes but then broke her hip and was bedridden. Lena Reaser was called in to be her caretaker. When Joe went to take his usual nap, he died in his sleep.

While at the Franks, Lena did the housekeeping and helped Joe Frank with his garden and chickens. She did the wash using an old washing machine with a hand-cranked wringer and hung the wash on clothes lines behind the house. There was an old barn and chicken coop out back. Lena walked everywhere she went. She walked with a slight waddle but walked briskly. Kids had a tough time keeping up with her and usually ended up walking behind her. She was white-haired, wore her hair in a bun and usually wore untailored "house dresses." When she dressed up, she usually wore a print dress, a black coat, and a black hat with a veil that came down over the forehead.

Lena really liked children. She often made cookies and gave them to us. We called them "Lena cookies." Everyone who lived in the neighborhood remembered those cookies, but differed about whether they were molasses cookies or sugar cookies. The consensus seemed to be that she made both, and as Helen Kraemer said, they were "really, really good." Elizabeth Kraemer said, "The sugar cookies were not the hard, white Christmas cookies, but were big and soft and coated with sugar."

Lucy Bauer Kraemer always had several big tins of Lena molasses cookies in the refrigerator - usually frozen. I asked my wife, Norine Bindl Kraemer, to make Lena cookies for me when we were first married, and then made the mistake of telling her they were not as good as Lena's. She never made them again.

We would see Lena sitting on the front porch of the Frank house in the evenings. She had to get out of the house because Joe Frank was hard of hearing and would play German and polka music so loud that one could hear it at the Alphonse Kraemer house. Lena would sometimes have to shout to be heard. The Alphonse Kraemer girls remembered doing errands for her, such as going to the store, taking messages to one of the Frank homes (Mary, Clem, Gisela), or getting beer. Betty Kraemer

Scallon remembered, "Duane Kraemer and I would get beer in a copper kettle. There was a hole at the top by the handle and we would drink beer through that hole on the way home. Grandpa was always upset with us because we drank half of his beer."

Some kids went fishing with Lena at "Sophie's hole" in Honey Creek east of Plain.¹ Mary Frances Bettinger Nachreiner, one of the kids on our street, recalled that Lena went fishing with their family in northern Wisconsin. Lena was along as babysitter for the children, but Mary Frances said, "Lena somehow did a lot of fishing, too. She loved to fish."

Although Lena lived at the Frank house, Helen and Betty remember going with Lena to check on her old log house off Dead End Road. They both remembered that "it was small, had a dirt floor and the floor was uneven." Many of us went berry-picking with her in the nearby woods. Sometime in the mid-forties, I went picking wild blueberries with her on the wooded hills behind Herb Liegel's farm. Another time, we went blackberry picking in the hills at her old farm. She showed me where the buildings had been and was very sad when she talked about their farm and her life there. Lena was always available to help others, and wasn't skittish about what needed to be done.

Lucy Kraemer remembered how Lena helped her prepare chickens for her daughter Virginia's wedding to Raymond Fleming: "A lovely old lady named Lena Reaser (God bless her) helped me, and we picked 70 chickens. I couldn't cut the heads, so I asked her to do it." (*Lucy: Lucy Rose Bauer Kraemer*, 2015).

Lena had a very good relationship with the family of Anton and Merie (Mohelnitzky) Blau who farmed north of Plain. Son Connie Blau recalled Lena patched their clothes and darned their socks. He explained the relationship from a child's viewpoint: Lena was like our grandmother. Farmer's wives had household and farm chores and usually did not have time to sit and talk to us. Lena really liked children and would talk to us like we were people. She would joke and kid with us. She would sing with us. She and Harley (Connie's brother) had a really special relationship. He would always tell

¹ It was called Sophie's hole because an elderly lady named Sophie Peters went fishing there almost every day. The town kids went swimming there often during the summer. We would

play baseball and then go swimming to cool off. We called it the BAB (bare a** beach) because we sometimes went without swim suits, to our mothers' horror.

her that she was his girlfriend, and he sang a song to her called "My Sweet Girl" on the day he went away to the Army in 1954.

Jackie (Blau) Eckhardt recalled: Lena came to our wedding (see photo) in 1957. She was always very nice to us. When our son Gregg was born, she really wanted to see him, so she came to our house in Madison. She gave us \$5 for Gregg and said, "Don't tell Agnes!" When Lena's daughter Agnes moved to Monona, the Blaus would drive Lena to visit with Agnes. Jackie and her husband Al



Eckhardt visited with Lena about once a month when they lived in Madison. Jackie remembered Lena as "a sweet old lady who loved children. Lena would come to our farm. We must have picked her up and taken her back. She often wore a black coat. When we went to town I would often see her walking to Ray Ring's tavern to get a pail of beer. It was a quart-size tin pail with a cover on it. It was what we called a "Sorghum pail."

Ken Kraemer has written a much longer story about Lena's life. Please contact the OFTHS for more information.



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