

THE MEAT PACKER

Just before dusk, two riders on horseback arrived at the intersection of the highway to Memphis and Vaughn's Gap Road. Observers assumed they came to watch the sunset over Nine Mile Hill, half a mile to the west. The equestrians' main interest, however, was not the sunset, but the vista immediately before them: a hillside of grass and trees, home to only rabbits and birds, containing just a large empty farm. For years the only building of note was a white barn with its red roof.

The man on horseback, well past eighty, was Henry Neuhoff, a retired meat packer and businessman. Neuhoff owned the land but used it only to raise cattle and ride horses. He and his daughter, Dorothy Dubuisson, rode out to the farm daily from Dorothy's home on Chickering Road..

On December 29, 1954, Henry Neuhoff deeded the entire fifty-eight acres to Bishop William Adrian and the Catholic Diocese of Nashville. Eighteen acres of the imposing site would become a magnificent Catholic church and school, constructed of bricks the color of burnt orange. A group of young priests, several of them teachers at Father Ryan High School, worked on the stunning stained-glass windows which would adorn the church. Patterns were laid out on the gymnasium floor, the only flat location large enough. Ground was broken for the new church and school on April 4, 1956.

As for naming the church, Bishop Adrian explained it as follows: Since Mr. Henry Neuhoff was an outstanding Catholic layman, the Bishop considered it appropriate that the new church be called St. Henry. But according to guidelines of the Code of Canon Law, the name must be that of a canonized saint. So the *St. Henry* for whom the church is *officially* named was a medieval German king, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire,

THE MEAT PACKER

also known as *St. Henry the Exuberant (973-1029)*, who had built a number of churches and monasteries in Europe during the Middle Ages.

The adjoining forty acres would subsequently become the site of a retirement community for persons fifty-five and over. The church would be called *St. Henry Catholic Church*, and the retirement community would be known as *The Cloister at St. Henry*. Ground was broken for the new church and school on April 4, 1956. The first residents in Phase IA of the retirement community had moved in by June 1983.

Neuhoff and his daughter continued their daily rides, expanding them to the church construction site. As they rode their horses across the site, they watched the men working in the front yard of the church. With pitchforks, the men were digging rocks out of the soil. One worker, his long legs bent under him as he kneeled and tugged on a rock, and his cap pulled down over his face, caught their attention. “It was Father Joe,” recalled Dorothy.

When Monsignor Joseph Siener, the first pastor of St. Henry Catholic Church, heard of this remark, he replied, “Mr. Neuhoff was always impressed by those who picked up a broom.” (1)

Who was Henry Neuhoff?

Henry Neuhoff was born in 1870 in a small village near the Rhine Valley. At age thirteen he began an apprenticeship with a butcher and sausage maker in the nearby Bavarian town of Oberasbach. After completing his apprenticeship, Henry took a butchering job in a neighboring village.

THE MEAT PACKER

When Neuhoff was eighteen, he decided to immigrate—alone—to the United States. The reason for his decision is unknown. His younger brother, Lorenz, also chose to immigrate. We don't know which, if any, of the usual causes of immigration from Germany—fear of conscription, limited opportunity to acquire land, or religious discrimination—played a role for either brother. The Franco-Prussian War had ended thirteen years previously, and with Otto Von Bismarck as Chancellor of the German Empire, a relatively calm period of peace and prosperity existed in Germany.

However, it is possible that anti-Catholic sentiment did have an effect on Neuhoff. The progressive secularization of German society had gained momentum in the 1870s, especially after the establishment of liberal governments in several German states dominated by Prussia. However, the south and west of Germany, including Bavaria, was predominantly Catholic. The Catholic Church vehemently opposed secularization, and liberals considered the Catholic Church as an enemy of progress. Bismarck regarded the Church as a threat to the newly-founded German Empire. He would not tolerate any base of outside power and launched the *Kulturkampf* (*culture struggle*) against the power of the Pope and the Catholic Church. After 1871, a systematic purge of Catholics in the Imperial government arose. The German Empire passed the Pulpit Law, which made it a crime for any cleric to discuss political issues, and the Jesuit Law drove the Jesuit order out of German territory. Nearly all Catholic bishops, clergy, and laymen passionately rejected the legality of the new laws. During the *Kulturkampf* four bishops and 185 priests in open defiance of the legislation were tried and imprisoned, and many more were fined or forced into exile.

THE MEAT PACKER

Bismarck underestimated the resolve of the Catholic Church and did not foresee the extremes that the struggle would bring about. After the death of Pope Pius IX in 1878, he negotiated with the more conciliatory Pope Leo XII, who proclaimed the end of the *Kulturkampf in 1887*. Social Democrats replaced the Catholic Church as the major threat to the German Empire. But a few *Kulturkampf* laws, referring to education, marriage, Jesuits, and politics from the pulpit remained. By this time, Henry Neuhoff was preparing to immigrate to the United States. (2)

Aided by a loan of seventy dollars from his mother for passage, Henry sailed to America in 1888. With frugality and strong German work ethic in a variety of jobs, the sturdy young man repaid his mother's loan. Starting in Rochester, New York, and unable to speak English, he landed a job as a butcher. Two years later, he could speak English well enough to move on to St. Louis. After two years of working in a St. Louis meat market, Henry was able to purchase property and open his own meat market. About that time he met Emma (Anna Amelia Erzen), whom he married in 1897.

1897 was the year of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville, Tennessee, where Henry's brother, Lorenz, had learned to bone and cook hams. Henry and Emma moved to Nashville and settled in the Germantown area.

"I well remember taking many hams out to the park," Henry later told a reporter from the Nashville Tennessean. "I came here to work in the ham business with my brother. He prepared the hams and I peddled them." (3)

In 1906 the brothers partnered to form Neuhoff Abattoir and Packing Company, which later became Neuhoff Packing Company. Eventually, this bustling operation

THE MEAT PACKER

expanded to a fourteen-acre campus along the Cumberland River in the North Nashville neighborhood of East Germantown, the area then known as *Butcher Hollow*. The enormous Neuhoff compound extended throughout the area, from the foot of Monroe Street to Taylor Street and from a high bank of the Cumberland River almost to Second Avenue North, where the Cumberland River Greenway now runs by. The Neuhoff operation consisted of stockyards filled with cattle and pigs in lots and pens and an assortment of huge, pink-colored brick buildings for the killing floors, packing departments, maintenance shops, and management offices.

One of the specialties of the Neuhoff Packing Company was Hampshire hams. The Hampshire breed is one of the oldest pig breeds in existence. The pigs are easily identified by their black coats, which sport a unique white belt around the shoulder and front legs. Hampshire pigs are muscular and have erect ears. Their stripe is still known universally as *The mark of a meat hog*. The meat is deeply-colored, has little fat, and tastes delicious.

At its peak the Neuhoff Packing Company employed more than a thousand workers. Known as a fair employer with good wages, it was a place of intense activity, with cattle shrieking and trucks roaring. After maximal expansion, the plant's average weekly slaughter numbered about 10,000 hogs, 2500 calves, and 1500 lambs. Not only did the company sell the meat, but also the hides, for leather, and even the blood, which was used in fertilizer and hog feed. One worker said, "We saved everything but the squeal."

On the killing floor, the temperature in the summer sometimes reached 120 degrees. The hardest job was the hide cellar. After skinning the animal, sweating

THE MEAT PACKER

workers dropped the still warm hide down a chute into the cellar. The hide went into a vat, and the workers paddled it in brine. Then, after pulling the wet, bloody, salty hides out of the brine, they folded and stored them for several months before loading them into railroad cars. (4)

Long a staple of holiday tables across Nashville — and virtually nowhere else — *spiced round* from the Neuhoff Packing Company was the centerpiece of Christmas dinner at the Maxwell House Hotel, at The Hermitage, and at homes throughout the city. The thinly sliced, heavily spiced top round was a Music City distinction. In the 19th century, the numerous German meat packers in Germantown found themselves facing winter with an overabundance of beef that needed preserving in those pre-refrigeration days. Harkening back to the spicy meats of their homeland, the Nashville butchers adapted a recipe for *rinderbraten*, which means beef roast. *Rinderbraten* is a large round of beef, brined and spiced with a special mixture of cinnamon, allspice, cloves, and brown sugar. In Nashville, butchers stuffed the beef with pork fat: Special needles injected spiced lard into the meat, then it boiled and simmered. But the popularity of *spiced round* waned when the old independent meat packing operations died out, and when an increasingly health-conscious population turned up its nose at fatted beef. *Spiced round* — even as difficult as it is to find now— is still essential to many Christmas celebrations across Nashville and evokes memories of a time when every holiday party in town centered on the tissue-paper-thin sliced meat that smells and tastes like Christmas. Anyone who has piled up a hot roll with the spicy holiday treat can attest to the good taste of *spiced round*. (5)

THE MEAT PACKER

In 1907 Henry and Emma built a one-story brick house at 1237 Sixth Avenue North, less than a block from the Church of the Assumption, and next to the site of the former Mad Platter Restaurant. The two front parlors featured glass doors, mirrors above oak fireplace mantelpieces, chestnut floors, and stained glass decorations. The front door, with two glass panels, opened onto a gracefully-curved porch with twelve round columns. The house still stands.

As the business grew and prospered, the second generation Neuhoff's joined the partnership. A fire destroyed the entire compound in 1911, but the partners rebuilt.

In 1916 Henry Neuhoff co-founded and was first vice president of the German-American Bank of Nashville. During World War I, however, American animosity toward Germany was so high that the bank changed its name to Farmers and Merchants Bank, then in 1923 to Commerce Union Bank. In 1987 Sovran Bank bought Commerce Union. Sovran later merged with Bank of America and took its name.

Also in 1916, Henry and Emma bought a 322-acre farm on Whites Creek Pike. The original farmhouse dates back to a log cabin in the 1820s. Whites Creek is a neighborhood in the northern part of Davidson County. The community is named for the picturesque creek flowing south along what is now U.S. Route 431.

The level White's Creek valley, settled and cultivated by energetic, thrifty, and prosperous farmers, was once one of the most fertile spots in Tennessee. The valley, up to five miles wide, begins at the foot of a ridge about eight miles north and extends to the bend of the Cumberland River just north of downtown Nashville. (6)

When Henry drove home from the packing company, he would cross the Jefferson Street Bridge, turn left on what is now Cowan Street, and continue northward

THE MEAT PACKER

near the east bank of the Cumberland River. He would proceed north on today's Lock Road and then Baptist World Center Drive. When Baptist World Center Drive crosses West Trinity Lane, it becomes Whites Creek Pike and Highway 431.

The Neuhoff family spent two summers in the valley, then moved their year-round home there. Henry raised cattle, horses, and hogs. After returning home each afternoon, he walked the farm, inspecting his herds. He built a massive concrete barn and silo for his livestock. In 1926 the family moved back to Nashville, at the corner of 23rd Avenue North and Elliston Place.

Almost a century later, in 2016, country music singer Barbara Mandrell and her husband Ken Dudley purchased a segment of the White's Creek property formerly owned by Neuhoff. They converted the former Neuhoff mansion to the *Inn at Fontanel*, which consists of a boutique hotel, a cafe, and a music venue..

In 1930 the Neuhoff meat packing company expanded to Dallas and built a plant on the site of the present-day American Airlines Center, the home of the Dallas Mavericks professional basketball team. The Neuhoff company also owned and operated a packing house In Atlanta.

On New Years Day, 1931, shortly after the onset of the Depression, the Neuhoff family sold all three packing plants, plus inventories, to the well-established 76-year-old Swift and Company for a price Henry wouldn't disclose, but was rumored to be \$2.5 million. The Swift Company kept the Neuhoff name for its acquisition because of its strong reputation. By that time Henry Neuhoff had become one of Nashville's wealthiest and most respected citizens.

THE MEAT PACKER

After the sale, the Neuhoff's retired to Florida. On a trip from Nashville in 1932, Henry and Emma had an auto accident near Helena, Georgia, in which Emma was killed and Henry was critically injured. Henry's remarkable recovery was the first of several subsequent recoveries from accidents. Widowed and in despair, he recuperated in Dallas with his eldest son, Henry Jr., then returned to Nashville to resume an active lifestyle. In an effort to occupy his busy mind, he bought a parking lot in downtown Nashville, between 7th Avenue and Capitol Boulevard, behind the Caster Knott Department Store. The parking lot was going broke, and Henry bought it for \$500. This purchase led to a second career— and fortune—in parking lots and real estate. Other acquisitions included the Hermitage Parking Garage and several other business interests.

Many years later, at the age of ninety, Henry Neuhoff was seen standing on the sidewalk in front of his first Hermitage Parking Garage, motioning to motorists to drive in—a way of hawking his wares as he did from the ham wagon in 1897. For Neuhoff, work was just a necessary part of everyday life.

In 1939 Henry's daughter, Dorothy, and John H. Dubuisson purchased a lot at 1407 Chickering Road in Forest Hills from Edwin Warner, Percy Warner's brother. Henry Neuhoff built a house there, designed in the International Style, where he lived thereafter with Dorothy and her family. Known as the Dubuisson-Neuhoff House, it has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since October 27, 2003, (7)

Swift shut down the Neuhoff Packing Company in 1977. After it closed, the buildings and former site of the company in Germantown were filled with enormous piles of trash. It became a haven for the homeless. Most of the trash has been trucked away

THE MEAT PACKER

now, and one of the buildings has been renovated. Various nonprofit organizations, the Nashville Jazz Workshop, a theater group, and a Cultural Arts Project, have used it.

In January 2020, an Atlanta-based real estate investment and development company bought most of the site for \$32 million. The buyer, New City Properties, specializes in adaptive reuse and has turned Atlanta's historic Sears, Roebuck & Company's catalog facility into a popular cluster of restaurants and residences called Ponce City Market. New City Properties intends to maintain many of the historic brick buildings in Germantown and remake them into offices, shops, and five hundred and fifty homes. Plans include a central market area with eateries, public art, and event space. Dilapidated boat docks on the riverfront will be redeveloped and used as boat launches. The back of the site abuts the Cumberland River Greenway. (8)

Henry Neuhoff was present at a family reunion in Dallas at age 93 when he slipped and fell. He did not survive the surgery to repair his broken hip and died April 5, 1964. He is buried in the Calvary Cemetery in Nashville. Henry and Emma had nine children, twenty-one grandchildren, and twenty-two great-grandchildren. Two of their sons ran their own major packing business in Dallas. Two of their daughters, Sister Angela and Sister Helen, entered the Daughters of Charity and worked as hospital administrators. In the late 1980s, during the capital campaign for the new Father Ryan campus, the late Bishop James Niedergeses visited the sisters, who were then retired and living in St. Louis. At the behest of the bishop, the sisters followed their father's philanthropic example, and from a generous bequest received from their father, made a substantial

THE MEAT PACKER

donation to the Father Ryan project. The new library at Father Ryan bears the Neuhoff family name. (9)

Notes:

History of St. Henry Church and School: 1953-Present.

<https://www.parishsonline.com/find/st-henry-church-37205>, accessed August 23, 2020.

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Some Dream Millions, Neuhoff Made Them. Article in Nashville Business Section, Tennessean, July 26, 1970.

1. *Slaughterhouse Revived.* Liz Murray Garrigan. *Nashville Scene.* March 22, 2002.

5. *Round and Round. Nashville's original Christmas meat, the spiced round, makes a hometown comeback.* J. R.Lind. *Nashville Scene.* November 14, 2013

6. Ridley Wills II. *Nashville Pikes, Volume Five. 150 Years Along Buena Vista, White's Creek, Brick Church, and Dickerson Pikes.* Chapter 61, p. 158, and Chapter 66, p.167

7. "Dubuisson-Neuhoff House" <http://focus.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIÍ/03001077>).

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8. The Nashville Post. Jan 22, 2020

THE MEAT PACKER

9. <https://www.findagrave.com>. accessed august 23, 2020

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