

An Extraordinary “Ordinary Farmer” By Mike Meisinger

This story won first place at the 2022 AHSGR annual convention.

“Fred Meisinger, a farmer east of LaSalle, died Thursday...”. So starts the obituary of my grandfather. To the casual reader, there doesn't seem to be anything particularly interesting about this ordinary farmer, but like most of your German-Russian ancestors, his life was anything but that of a typical American farmer.

My grandfather was born Friedrich Meisinger in the Volga German Colony of Messer in 1887. He grew to manhood and married his sweetheart on Valentine's Day in 1906. They were married in the school because the church did not have heat.

He had to leave his wife and 3-year-old daughter to serve in the Czar's Russian Army from January 1, 1909, until December 31, 1912. While in the army he was trained to lay and disarm land mines. This was, of course, a very dangerous job, but the Germans were considered expendable. He was stationed on the Chinese border. They were under orders to shoot any opium addicts they found. It was so cold as they were crossing Siberia by train that spit would freeze before it hit the ground. While stationed on the Chinese border, Fred learned to speak Chinese. Along with German and Russian which he already knew and English that he would later learn, he could speak four languages. When his enlistment was up in November 1912 it took him 2 months to get back home. (Had he stayed in Russia, in the event of war, he would have been liable for front line military duty until 1919 and liable for non-front line army service through 1930.) (Insert Figure 1 about here)

He left Messer for America 17 days later and arrived in New York City on March 13, 1913. His younger brother, Alexander, was already in Torrington, Connecticut and Fred joined him there. Fred and Alexander worked at the American Brass Company, an ammunition factory. Fred and his brother saved their money and sent tickets to Russia for Fred's wife and 7-year-old daughter and Alexander's fiancé.

Fred's wife and daughter arrived in America on September 16, 1913. Alexander's sweetheart was not with them. Her father would not allow her to travel to Alexander in America since they were not married. He sent her ticket back. Alexander was determined to marry his sweetheart and made plans to go back to Russia (Insert Figure 2 about here). Fred advised him not to, that conditions were bad, and if he went, he might not be able to come back. Alexander didn't listen to Fred's advice and went back to Russia and was married to Maria Schimdt in Messer on November 6, 1914. Sadly, as Fred had predicted, WWI followed by the Russian Revolution kept Alexander from returning to the United States with his new bride. They suffered through the revolution, famines, and deportation to Siberia (Insert Figure 3 About here). Two of his sons were killed in WWII. He died in Siberia.

Things went relatively well for Fred in Torrington until after the end of WWI, and another daughter was added to the family in 1914. (Insert Figure 4 about here)

A few years later there was a strike at the plant where he worked which wiped out the family's savings. Fred was a farmer in Russia and longed to get back to the land. He had relatives in Oklahoma, so he decided to try his luck there. This was during the great flu epidemic of 1918-1919 and during the trip to Oklahoma Fred became gravely ill. He did survive and after regaining his strength went to work in the

cotton fields. He very quickly decided that was not for him. Other relatives in Colorado told him there was farming work there which was more like what he was used to.

In Colorado Fred first worked as a hired man on farms west of Greeley. Another son was born into the family. Word got out that he was a hard worker and a good farmer. One of the local banks contacted him because they had foreclosed on a large farm and needed someone to farm it for them. Fred told them he didn't have any money to buy livestock, equipment, or even seed. They said they would supply that if he would agree to farm for a share of the crops. This arrangement worked out very well and Fred farmed there for more than a decade. Another son joined the family in 1925. Fred lost his wife to cancer in 1937. They had been married over 30 years. With a 12-year-old son and a 320-acre farm to manage, being a widower just didn't make sense. A marriage was soon arranged with a German woman from Wyoming. She was the daughter of Moravian Missionaries to Greenland and was born there. This second marriage would also last 30 years. Fred became a US Citizen on June 30, 1928, in Greeley, Colorado. He was very proud to be a citizen and made sure he voted in every election.

After many years of saving, Fred was able to purchase his own farm in 1937. He farmed it until he retired. It became known as the “*Potato Farm*” since that was one of his favorite crops. In retirement, Fred enjoyed helping his sons on their farms and playing with his grandkids. He never lost his sense of adventure. When he passed away in 1967, among the papers found in his bible was a newspaper clipping from 1958 talking about space travel to the Moon. If Fred was a little younger, he might have signed up for the trip.

My grandfather lived a long and interesting life, spending time on three continents and learning four languages in the process. His story is not unlike the stories of your ancestors. Even though our German-Russian ancestors may have worked at common professions, their lives were far from common. We should take pride in what they achieved and honor them for giving us the opportunities we have enjoyed.

(Insert Figure 5 about here)

Mike Meisinger has been researching his father's German Russian ancestors ever since he wrote a college term paper about the Germans from Russia in 1973. He is a past Vice President of the AHSGR Board Directors and is the Village Coordinator for Messer and Neu Messer. Three of his mother's ancestors were Revolutionary War Soldiers, and through that heritage, he is a member of the Sons of the American Revolution. He was a volunteer assistant at the National Archives in Kansas City from 2012 until it was closed to the public due to COVID-19 in 2020. As a volunteer he helped beginning genealogists get started with their family research.

Figures

Figure 1



Karl, Alexander, and Friedrich Meisinger

Figure 2



Alexander and Maria (Schmidt) Meisinger on their wedding day.

Figure 3



Alexander and his wife in Siberia in the 1960.

Figure 4



*Fred and Amolia Meisinger and their two daughters; Mary and Olga.
Taken in Torrington, Connecticut in 1914.*

Figure 5



Mike Meisinger