

William John Rodenhauser (1842-1919)

William John Rodenhauser was born February 22, 1842, in König, a small village near Darmstadt in southwest Germany. He was the oldest of six children born to Johannes and Henrietta (Schum) Rodenhauser (five of whom survived to adulthood). William's first and middle names were taken from his father and his **paternal** grandfather, George Wilhelm Rodenhauser.

William and his five siblings' parents died within twenty-six days of one another in 1855 of what was believed to have been meat poisoning. Their mother succumbed on January 1; their father, January 26. The likely cause was **botulism**, which, during that time, was thought to be associated with German sausage. Food-borne botulism, untreated, disrupts nerve function, causing **paralysis** and, ultimately, **respiratory** failure. Following this **devastating** loss, the five surviving children were placed in **foster** homes, which was supported by the **proceeds** from the sale of the Rodenhauers' estate. William was 12 years old at the time of his parents' death.

William married Christiana Liederman in König on September 10, 1868. The couple became parents of four children, all of whom were born in König.

Very little is known of Rodenhauser's work life until about 1880, when he began a two-year **apprenticeship** in carpentry. In 1882, leaving behind his wife and their four children—ranging in age from twelve to two—Rodenhauser sailed for the United States, where he hoped for a better life for him and his family. Once Rodenhauser had established himself, he then sent for his family to join him in the U.S.

At this time the Chicago & Alton Railroad connected Bloomington-Normal with both Chicago and St. Louis, among the most highly **evolved** centers of **commerce** in the Midwest. The C&A built repair and maintenance shops on the west side of Bloomington and quickly became the largest employer in Bloomington. The shops were responsible for manufacturing needed items and for repairing others such as train engines and railroad cars for the line.

Apparently, his carpentry skills were quickly recognized as Rodenhauser was hired immediately by the C&A and assigned to a crew of **woodworkers** who were finishing interiors for both freight and passenger cars. Highly skilled craftsmen, like Rodenhauser, were needed to construct the railroad passenger cars that were built at the shops. Expensive and **ornate** details were installed in each and every one of these "first-class coach cars."

The **exacting** nature of their work required, of course, the proper tools. Hand tools were used and were either purchased from a manufacturer or created specifically for certain types of work. Rodenhauser's tool collection included some manufacturer's tools, but also tools of his own invention. He also etched his initials, "W.R.," into his tools, which were eventually passed down to his grandson.

Rodenhauser apparently found all that he had hoped for by **immigrating** to the U.S. While establishing residences in McLean County, he also obtained U.S. citizenship. According to **naturalization** records, he officially became a U.S. citizen on October 18, 1892.

Prior to the outbreak of the Great War (known as World War I today), Rodenhauser and his family and friends enjoyed the community's respect and many opportunities to preserve their German heritage. According to family memories, the Rodenhauers spoke only German in their home, the children attended German School on Saturdays, and the family was free to worship at the German Methodist Episcopal Church. Additionally, Rodenhauser's workmates were almost exclusively German, though people of other **ethnicities** and nationalities worked at the shops too.

However, during and after the war, Germans faced especial difficulties in McLean County as they did elsewhere in the United States. The same large, thriving German American community in McLean County found itself the target of a systematic campaign of suspicion and persecution by “superpatriot” organizations like the Council of National Defense (C.N.D). Germanness all but disappeared from Bloomington just a few years before Rodenhauser’s death, despite the fact that McLean County Germans gave little indication of rallying behind their former homeland.

With few workplace safety measures in place, work at the C&A shops was dangerous, and workplace accidents happened often. In 1907, probably while pushing wood through a steam-powered circular saw, Rodenhauser lost all the fingers on his right hand and, at the age of sixty-five, was forced to retire from the C&A shops. The injury, however, did not stop him from **engaging** in carpentry for personal use. According to family history, there is evidence that he devised a strap to tie a hammer to his injured hand, and it appears he was also able to lay wood tile on the floors of his home after the accident.

This **disability** did not stop him from finding another way to prosper and create a legacy for his family. The Homestead Act was signed into law in 1862, which made 160 acres of land in the West available for free to any loyal citizen or **applicant** for citizenship. The **claimant** was required to live on the property for five (later reduced to three) years. In 1866, the Act was amended to include Black Americans as **eligible** claimants; and amended yet again in 1909, this time to increase the allowable acreage an individual could claim to 320.

Sometime in the year 1909, at the age of sixty-seven, Rodenhauser responded to the **frequent** advertisements in local newspapers and registered for ownership of 320 acres near Galatea, Kiowa County, Colorado, about 160 miles southeast of Denver near the border of Colorado and Kansas. The Rodenhauers—William, Christiana, and son Will with new wife Editha (Mapps)—took up residence in Galatea for the required time to secure rights to the property, an entire section of ground (640 acres) in the “drylands” of Colorado. The ownership document for the tract was issued on March 25, 1913 out of Lamar, Colorado.

The Rodenhauers returned to Bloomington from Colorado in 1912 or 1913 and lived at 707 N. East Street. They then sold or transferred ownership of that house to their daughter, Julia, and her family, and moved to 905 E. Chestnut Street shortly before Christiana’s death.

Christiana Rodenhauser passed away on September 18, 1915 from an illness of about two months with a complication of diseases, what her death certificate identified as “a **stricture** of the **esophagus**,” or a narrowing of the esophagus causing swallowing difficulties.

Sometime late in 1918, when William’s health began to decline, he moved in with his daughter, Julia (back to the 707 N. East Street residence). Following nine months of treatment for “acute cystitis” (urinary tract infection) and a brief stay at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Bloomington, William J. Rodenhauser died on August 29, 1919. His funeral was held the following day at the Goodfellow’s parlors. Befitting of his status in the German community, Rodenhauser’s **pallbearers** were **prominent** citizens of Bloomington and, like him, were German immigrants. Rodenhauser is buried next to his wife, Christiana, and daughter-in law, Lillian, in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: John Capasso, 2021