

## **1860, Lead in the Town Flour**

**Story told to the children by Mary Lorang's mother, Gertrud Mertes**  
(pronounced Maartis)

The primitive way of grinding flour began with a mortar and pestle. Then a large flat millstone was used to circulate over the grain and turn it into flour. The stone was rotated by horse, mule or oxen and later by mechanical power.

In 1860, in the town of Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin, the miller needed to repair divots in his grinding stone for making flour for the town. Without knowing the danger, the miller filled his grinding stone with molten lead, to even it out. Here is Henry Lorang's story as told to him by his mother, Mary Gesellchen Lorang, who was born in 1860 and survived this incident.

"Whether the grinding stone was made of millstone or cast iron plates is not known. Since lead is softer than either rock or iron, it gradually wore off and consequently became an ingredient of the ground flour, so fine that when taken orally in the baked bread the digestive organs assimilated it and of course when impregnated into the blood-stream, it became deadly and this is what took the lives of 3 Gesellchen children, Mathias 9, John 8 and Gertrud 6 years old and made others in the town ill in 1860.

The mother of these children, Gertrud Gesellchen was critically ill at the time, with her pregnancy of Mary Gesellchen Lorang and confined to her bed. The food that she ate was brought in to her bed-side and, had she eaten it, she most certainly would also have died, but either by intuition or dream or, as she told it, an apparition had told her not to eat any bread and she forthwith informed the family. They naturally pooh-poohed the idea but Gertrud would not eat any bread and when her "soup" was brought in (the sick were invariably fed soup) and it contained bread, since there was no such luxury as crackers she would find an excuse not to begin eating immediately and when all were out of the room, she would pour the contents in her bowl behind her bed at the wall and continued to warn the family against eating any products made of flour. She told them of the "apparition" and that a shimmering form had appeared to her in the darkness and had warned her "Gertrud es das brot nicht!" "Gertrud eat this broth not!" –Finally at her insistence, a sample of the flour was taken to the chemist and it was found to contain a heavy concentration of lead flour whereupon the miller was questioned and he admitted the lead-repair job. 11 people were sickened or died in the town. All of the flour was confiscated and destroyed according to this story that was

told to us children many times by our mother, Mary Gesellchen Lorang, since we preferred this true story to other doubtful fairy tales” ----Henry Lorang

Letter found here.....

Bakersfield, California  
May-12-64

Dear cousin Barney.

We received your letter and we're very glad to hear from you. You sure have been going around since I saw the last time. We have done the same since I last saw you. We enjoyed the picture very much. You had a very nice wife and family. We know your wife passing was a great loss. We sent the pictures to Charlie. I hope they don't get lost. We had one son Paul, we have three granddaughters and 2 great granddaughters. We enjoyed reading the family tree. I remember mother telling about the time the flour.. filled the grinding plates with lead instead of cast iron. The community got together and took him out of the mill and hung him. We would like to have you visit us but we are in such poor health conditions. We are unable to do so.

We hope this finds you well and thanks again for the nice letter and Family Tree.

Love and best wishes  
your Cousin Frank P. Michels

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### **Henry Lorang notes for the Family Tree created in 1962**

Peter Gesellchen the father of grandpa Peter Gesellchen was born in Hezeroth (*Hetzerath*) Germany & his wife was of French extraction. They had but one son – Peter Gesellchen born at Mehring, Bezirk Frier on July 11. 1822. He was an only child and his mother died when he was but five years old (*Peter had several half siblings, since his father had married 3 times*) and after having grown to maturity there he migrated to the U.S. at the age of 25 years and settled at Cleveland Ohio. Here he met one Gertrude Mertes who had come to America with her parents when she was fourteen years old. Gertrude Mertes was born in Gilbeirene Trieste in Austria (*actually Gillenbeuren, Germany on the Mosel River*) on June 14, 1830 and she was married to Peter Gesellchen around the year of 1848 (*1849*) ( I remember my mother saying that her mother was married at the age of 18 years) (*actually 19*).

Just when they went to live at Mount Calvary Wisconsin is a question but they farmed in that area and there are records of their children being born there. In all there were 8 boys and 7 girls and of these John, Matt and Gertrude died of lead poisoning due to powdered lead which was in the flour because the miller had filled worn places in the mill stones for repairs. Those lead fillings naturally fell out and were pulverized along with the wheat and it so happened that an investigation was conducted at the insistence of mother Gertrude Gesellchen who would not eat what they brought to her sick bed if it had any of the bread in it and she poured it behind her bed because she kept insisting that a voice called her name and said "Essen Nicht Gertrude" in German "Don't eat that Gertrude". When it was discovered by a chemical test that this was true all of the flour at that grinding was quickly gathered and destroyed before anyone else died from that cause.

Joe died of worms, Laurie 7 months old, of stomach trouble. Katherine died at birth and there was one still born. Those who grew to maturity were in this order Anna, Nick, Mary Anna, Paulina, Christine, Peter, another John and Frank. Gertrude (Mertes) Gesellchen was being consumed by cancer of the left breast which had eaten a large hole under her left arm and my mother took my younger brother Albert who was 5 months old and me along to be with her mother in her last hours of agony. She died on April 10th. 1889 and was buried in Mt. Calvary Catholic cemetery at Mt. Calvary Wisconsin.

My mother Mary Anna Gesellchen Horning wrote that her mother died on April 10, 1889 but that couldn't be because my brother Albert and I went to Wisconsin with my mother at that time and Albert wasn't born until Oct 11 - 1889 so it had to be 1890 - because my sister Christine was born in June 1891.

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**The following articles are thanks to Tracy Reinhardt  
Library Director and Archivist for the Fond du Lac County Historical  
Society.**

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**Fond du Lac Commonwealth [weekly]**

**Wednesday, January 25, 1860**

Lead Poisoning – Quite an excitement, and not a little consternation has been created in the towns of Forest and Empire by the discovery that flour ground at the Forest Mills was mixed with lead ground to powder, in consequence of the miller pouring lead into a broken spot in the grinding surface of the stones. As it wore away he filled it anew, and so on, for several times in succession. The people consumed the flour manufactured there for some time, ignorant of its poisonous contents. The whole neighborhood nearly, were sick, many most dangerously. At last a lady discovered some shining particles in the bottom of her yeast dish, when a thorough investigation took place, which traced the cause to the millstone, unmistakably. Not less than from one hundred and fifty to two hundred persons have been affected by eating the flour. Vague rumors have reached this city that several had died but we learn from physicians that practice in the cases, that not one has yet died, where death could be distinctly traced to that cause, though many are very sick and came near to death's door, who will probably recover. It is a pretty serious affair, and if not coupled with boundless stupidity on the part of the miller, we would like someone to coin a word that would express it more mildly, and yet faithfully describe it.

We are told that some of the flour has been brought to this city and been exposed for sale, now. Let the people beware of the brand, unless they are fully satisfied it was ground quite recently, as we are informed the defect is now remedied, and the owner of the mill is seeking to make all possible restitution to those who have been injured.

**The Fond du Lac Commonwealth**

**J. A. Smith, Editor**

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**Wednesday, February 8, 1860**

From an interview with the proprietor of Forest Mill, about which such excitement has lately prevailed, in regard to flour mixed with lead sent from

the Mill, which has caused the serious illness of several in that vicinity, we learn that a meeting of the citizens was held at the Mill some time ago, and after a thorough investigation of the apparatus, satisfied themselves that everything was right, and have again resumed their patronage. But a suspicion still lurks among the people in the surrounding country regarding the flour, which makes them still distrustful. It has been ascertained that statements derogatory to the mill had been circulated by interested parties, and as soon as this fact became known, reports grossly exaggerating the evil were scattered abroad, and every illness for miles around were attributed to the same cause. The proprietor has signified his willingness to make ample restitution for any suffering which has been caused, and we are happy to state the matter is satisfactorily adjusted, the flour as good as ever, and the excitement subsiding. From the most reliable reports we can gather, there has been no death which can be traced to that cause.

And Tracy wrote this article.....

**Wednesday, May 3, 2017**

### **Lead Poisoning**

It is a rare day when someone comes to the Historical Society library with a tantalizing story that seems incredible, and difficult to confirm its accuracy. That's how I felt last fall, when two women from Oregon visited me with a tale of lead poisoning. Their ancestors had lived near Mt. Calvary, and family lore said that several of the children in their family had died young, supposedly from lead poisoning, and that the poison was in the flour they got from the mill. They were looking for any documentation of this family lore.

I knew I had heard that story before somewhere, but could not put my finger on just where.....so of course, I decided to dig. I was determined to check this out.

I found a story in the book "Wisconsin Heritage" by Bertha Kitchell Whyte, about this poisoning, but even though this confirmed the same story, it still did not give me a date to look for further evidence or at least, a newspaper clipping. The story related how a Doctor Cary, from Greenbush, was treating a patient, and as he was leaving the sickroom, he spotted a pan of dough sitting on a window sill to rise, and he noticed something glinting in the dough. Upon closer examination, he discovered the lead impurities, and immediately sent out a rider to warn all the people in the neighborhood to stop eating the flour.

When I sent this story to the two ladies from Oregon, they replied that they had found proof of the story in the mortality schedule for 1860. Great. Now I

had a date to focus on.

The **1860 mortality schedule for the town of Marshfield**, lists the deaths of Mathias Gesellschen age 9, John Gesellschen age 8 and Gertrude Gesellschen age 4, Mary Kramer age 4 and Henry Kramer age 7, all dying of lead poisoning. In the town of Forest, Richard Hampton age 3 and John Gobel age 9 died of lead poisoning. In the town of Empire, Thomas Byrnes, age 68 died of lead poisoning.

At the bottom of the 1860 mortality schedule, the census taker wrote an explanation:

*"From line 31 to 35 inclusive and at any subsequent line, where lead poison is inserted as the cause of death, death ensued by lead being poured into the grooves of the millstone, innocently, by a miller in the town of Forest, which in grinding diffused itself into the flour, and through the consumption of the flour, perhaps from 300 to 400 people became seriously ill and about 10 to 15 died in my District and in the adjoining District."*

Then I found this:

*Wholesale poisoning - A singular case of accidental poisoning in the eastern part of this county has just been related to us as follows: In the town of Forest, Marshfield and that vicinity there have been during the winter, numerous cases of a disease, which from its extent was supposed by the people to be a kind of epidemic. The symptoms were, intense pain through the lower part of the stomach and bowels. It is said that as many as a hundred have been attacked in this manner, and in some cases with fatal results. Suspecting there might be something wrong, about the food they were using, parties visited the flouring mill that does the custom work for the neighborhood, and ascertained that the miller under the impression that the grooves in the stones were too deep, was in the practice of filling them up with a preparation of white lead, and when it wore or came out, of refilling as occasion required. Some of the flour has been brought to this city to be analyzed, and we are informed it has been found to contain a considerable quantity of lead. There is now no doubt among the people of that section, that their sickness was caused by the use of this poisoned flour.*

***Democratic Press, January 25, 1860***

Then I found another story

*"Give him a Legal Examination - The board of health of the town of Forest, Fond du Lac county, have visited the mill from which the poisoned flour came, and report that miller had concluded to mix no more lead with the flour, and that the flour may hereafter be eaten with safety. Last week we published a case of poisoning in Fond du Lac county, where a miller mixed lead with the flour. A correspondent of the Sheboygan Times says, that up to the 18th, Dr. Cary had treated upwards of seventy cases of the poisoned; and that in one family, the parents both lie ill, while three lovely children have been torn away by this act of inexcusable ignorance."*

***Trempealeau Representative, Friday March 2, 1860***

Both of the family legends that I found, indicate that the miller had an assistant, who added the lead. One story says that the assistant disappeared that same night and was never heard from again. The second story says that the people were so upset because so many children had died, that they stormed the mill and hung the assistant.

[Here's my editorial note on this story]

This tale is one of the rare stories of early hardship of those sturdy pioneers. We all reflect on the good times and tend to bury the bad memories, but this makes history a bit lopsided. From our comfy chairs of today we read the local history books, and see only how each person prospered after coming to the area with nothing, and life was good. We read the biographical histories of Fond du Lac county, and don't stop to realize that not everyone supplied a biography to the publisher. So the picture can't be complete. The books don't mention the barns and stores that burned, the failed crops, the people who lost everything and had to start over, and finally the people who despaired and took their own lives.

It is good to share a story of hardship to balance out the scales, to make us all realize from history, that our own hardships are not unique. A life full of unexpected challenges is the norm, and how we deal with those challenges is what makes up our life's journey, as it did that journey of our ancestors.

83	Belmont	4	January	Small
84	Henry Brown	5	January	Small
85	Henry Brown	7	January	Small

  

Total number of deaths	No. of white males	No. of black males	No. of white males	No. of white males	Total both sexes	No. of males
	No. of white females	No. of black females	No. of white females	Total both sexes		No. of females

REMARKS: From Dec. 26<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> inclusive, and at any subsequent date, when said disease is reported as the cause of death, death caused by that being proved will be entered of its collection, generally by a child in the town of West, a hole in passing itself into the floor, and through the consumption of the floor, perhaps from 20 to 40, people became seriously ill and about from 10 to 15 died in my District and in the adjoining District.

1860 mortality record, Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin

1872 History of the New World, written in German  
 Here is where we found this small sliver of some type of metal  
 Between the pages.

