

A profile of

Joseph Fiedler

a hermit

1872-1959

written by **Burdette Blaska**

his paternal great-niece

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Mr. F.

Mr. F. was born in the township of Waterloo, Wisconsin in 1872 in a log cabin that had two rooms on both upper and lower levels and was furnished with hand-hewn furniture. The farm home was situated in a marshy, rather isolated area not too far distant from the locality in which Mrs. F., who has already been described, spent her early years.

Mr. F's parents, who were born in Austria, came to the United States when they were about 20 years of age and settled in this small community. Little is known about his parent's early education and training with the exception that his father was thought to be fairly well versed in Latin, English, mathematics, and had some skill in carpentry. He was called upon to write documents for people in the community, was instrumental in building the community church and school, and took part in the civic growth of the then small and isolated settlement. It seems evident that he had a fair degree of financial security when he arrived in this country. Less is known about the mother of Mr. F. as he is reluctant to discuss his early life, and, relating to questions about his parents, he feels "the dead should be allowed to rest".

Mr. F's father married twice. When the child of his first marriage was three years old his wife died, and he remarried. In this marriage there were three children born, two of whom died in infancy with Mr. F. surviving as the only child of that union. His half-sister was little company for him as a child as she was several years older than he, married when she was seventeen, and moved away from the home and community.

Mr. F. spent his early life in the small community assisting with the work of farming on his father's 20-acre tract of land. He completed about six grades in the rural school, but he claims he has an education comparable to a college graduate due to his extensive reading which, on evidence, is mainly economic journals, stock and bond reports, and literature concerned with business and finance. He learned no

special skills, never needed to become adept at farming, but apparently developed a shrewd understanding of investing money in enterprises that steadily increased his income through his lifetime.

In 1890, when Mr. F. was about 18 years of age, his father died. Although his father's investments were sufficient to allow him and his mother freedom from work and financial stress, he never changed his residence. It is said that he had some interest in local girls, but his mother apparently was possessive, opposed his interest in young women, and didn't encourage him to marry. Consequently, he continued to live on the farm and care for his mother until 1910, when she died at the age of 75, he being 33 at this time. Then, with no obligations to anyone, he still continued to live on in the log cabin, alone.

He made no social contacts in the community, participated in no social functions, assumed no civic responsibility, and didn't even exercise his right to vote. His time every day in the log cabin consisted of visits to the Catholic church, post-office, bank, stores, and to inspect his land in surrounding areas and collect the rents. He welcomed the relatives of his half-sister when they called on him, but he never made an effort to visit them as they didn't live in the immediate vicinity. He had no other relatives. As time went on Mr. F. became increasingly more of a recluse, and continued to live in that fashion.

It seems apparent that Mr. F.'s sole obsession and interest in life was the accumulation of wealth and its preservation. He purchased only the bare necessities for living. When the model T. Ford appeared on the market he bought one, drove it until it no longer ran, and never replaced it as he then "burned" piles into town with a neighbor. Strangely enough he still renews his operator's license regularly in spite of not having a vehicle to drive. He kept two horses as pets until they became feeble and he had to dispose of them. For heat and cooking purposes, he had only an old-fashioned double-ovened, wood cook stove on which he prepared his own food, mainly from cans. He scrubbed his cabin and, in his younger years, kept it very clean. Later on it became quite cluttered as he never disposed of any of his accumulated papers or possessions.

In 1946, when he was 73, he bought a kerosene stove for additional warmth during the cold winter nights. One night this overheated, exploded, and burned his cabin and almost all of his personal property. Apparently, he kept his money and valuable papers in the second story level as when he discovered the fire, he went to get them. By the time he returned to the ground floor, he was forced to run through the fire and was burned, though not seriously. Still reluctant to leave the area, he stayed with a neighbor for a few months and then returned to his own farm. To the consternation of all who knew of him and his comfortable financial status, he bought a 10x12, pre-fabricated, one-room shelter similar to those which small farmers might use for a chicken coop, and lived in it. This he furnished with a cot, a laundry stove to provide heat for warmth and cooking, a lamp for light, and a couple of old blankets, one of them a horse-hide affair that was apparently a relic from the days when they were used as a lining for a bob-sled. He lived in this shack for almost a year at which time his half-sister's daughter who was visiting in the town was told by local residents that the old man was freezing to death. On visiting him, she found this to be true, but as on her previous suggestions that he come to live with her and her family, he resisted, telling her that he would think it over and let her know in two days. At the end of that time he notified her that he would accept her invitation. Moving was simple as the man had only a pre-board box of clothes and a machine which were of little worth, and his papers. After arriving in his new home, it was evident that he was half frozen as he kept his coat on for three or four hours in a room in which the thermostat registered over 90 degrees F.

His pattern of living was changed little in his new environment in spite of having a home, comfort, and companionship. The family with whom he lives respect his individuality, are not critical of him, and as far as is possible, allow him to live as independently at home and in the community of 3000 people as he wishes, and is able to. He is now 83 years old. He has made a few friends in the town with other men his age, and, until recently he usually walked to the little park daily

and met with some of these old men. They could be seen sitting in the park, sometimes talking, or often just looking in the street, smoking, and watching the day go by. Mr. F. enjoys smoking cigars, and customarily has a drink or two of ginger brandy, seldom more, as he is very moderate in this respect.

Though he now has the comforts of a home and a certain amount of attention, Mr. F. continues to remain his unusual self. He is quiet, aloof, converses little, and if pressed, becomes stubborn. He discloses none of his personal affairs to anyone. He insists on taking routine trips by bus to his home town which is about 15 miles away where he visits the post office and bank to care for his business interests. He has his mail held for him in this town instead of changing his address, and usually spends two or three hours at the bank looking over his income reports and depositing his money.

In 1943, when he began to make his home with his half-niece, he agreed to pay her a small amount of money (less than standard) for his board and room. He is now in arrears several hundred dollars, makes no effort to pay it, and dismisses this agreement by ignoring it. At the same time, it is known that rents of considerable amount are paid to him regularly, one from a brother of his kind keeper, and ^{he has} other very adequate resources, but he apparently doesn't recognize this responsibility although the family with whom he lives could well use this income, small as it would be.

Mr. F.'s health has been good until about six months ago, but is now deteriorating as a result of a fall on a flight of stairs which was thought to be caused by a cerebral accident. He has recovered from this accident to a fair degree in spite of his poor cooperation with the physician who is summoned for him as necessary. Probably as a result of this recent illness, senile behavior is now evidenced such as losing his way on the street or even in the house, forgetfulness, general confusion at times, impaired vision etc. He resists bathing, changing clothing, or making himself more presentable. He refuses to buy new clothes so it is now necessary to launder his clothing after he has retired for the night so that his familiar trousers, shirt,

and under garments can be donned the following day.

He is a Roman Catholic although he isn't an active participant in the church activities, and has never felt an obligation to contribute much to the support of the church. He is of the opinion that he lives by the commandments of God, prays the rosary, and until recently, attended services fairly regularly on Sunday. Since his health has begun to deteriorate, he hasn't attended services, and now the garb which he refuses to replace would hardly be acceptable for wear outside his home.

It is now evident that Mr. F. is in need of a guardian because of his failing health and senile behavior. Knowing that he has various pieces of real estate, and assuming that he has stocks and bonds of considerable extent, the remaining distant relatives have been inclined to offer to assist him in the process of making a will or some other provision for the disposal of his property as he has made no arrangements for this as far as is known. But, this is a very difficult subject to approach with a man who objects to interference with the management of his life, intrusion into his personal affairs, and he would undoubtedly interpret an offer such as this as an insult to his intelligence. Consequently, it is expected that his mental and physical health will continue to decline, and he will be well cared for by a very kind and considerate relative who respects his desire for seclusion. This kind lady who was interviewed regarding Mr. F.'s life stated that he continues to feel that he is an important man with considerable status, he doesn't think of himself as old, and never talks about nor refers to death. In view of his decline in health in the past few months, however, it appears likely that it will continue to decline rapidly.

In summary, Mr. F. isolated himself from society, its demands and benefits, quite completely during his lifetime. Influential in establishing this pattern, no doubt, was his early home and community environment. Perhaps his attachment to his mother, lack of companionship during his adolescence and early adulthood prevented his forming friends then, and he has never been able to since. Consequently, he withdrew from society, and lived a life quite similar to that of a hermit.

Because of his financial comfort, it was never necessary for him to work, nor to request help from any person until the infirmities of old age were felt by him, and then only would he consider accepting physical help because he was no longer capable of caring for himself.

Having avoided all responsibility in life, he apparently had little stress or strain, emotionally or physically. Because he never enjoyed the conventional practices of making a contribution to the social structure in which he lived, or experienced the benefits and reverses involved in a competitive society, he was concerned only with himself and his existence on his "social island". An obvious example of his lack of recognition of his obligations to society is his failure to pay his small rent. It is thought that his living expenses during his life probably never exceeded \$30. monthly, and he was so frugal that he deprived himself of even the necessary health and comfort measures (by our standards). But, having lived in this pattern for so many years, it would naturally be difficult for him to realize that any other existed. His only occupation in life, actually, has been the peculiar interest he has had in manipulating his financial resources, always re-investing his funds, never spending a dollar more than needed for sheer existence, until he has apparently amassed a goodly sum of money.

This man undoubtedly substituted the accumulation of wealth for the lack of a normal family life and friends in a typical social environment.