

## Mathias Belen

Westphalia Cemetery Walk

Sept 17, 2017

(Introduction)

I invite you to return with me to a Sunday morning almost one-hundred years ago. The place is Matt Belen's Meat Market. My grandfather is waiting on a customer, possibly your great-grandmother, who has a young boy in tow, possibly your grandfather.

(Belen Meat Market, a Sunday after Mass.)

*Guten morgen.* (Looks at watch) Oof, that was a long mass, ya? I should say *guten tag*. That Father Gutha he does go on. And he's so dramatic. Maybe he gets that from all those plays he puts on. My youngest, Genevieve, was the star in one of them, It was called ... "Too Many Drinks." So, the usual...a ring of vurst? ... Oh, two this week... relatives from Pewamo? Yah, my wife's brother is coming over for dinner, like he does every Sunday. Chuck roast with potatoes, carrots and onions. *Gut!* Well have a nice dinner....Oh don't worry about that. You pay me when you can. Wait, wait, wait. We forgot the most important thing. Come here young man. Pick out your sucker. We've got cherry, lime, orange...Ach, take one of each. See you next Sunday. Norb, we need to order more suckers!

(Addresses audience)

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mathias Belen. Most people just call me Matt. I opened the Belen Meat Market in 1895. This isn't the original building. We had a fire back in 1910. Gus Heyer and his fire brigade tried but they couldn't put it out. So we had to rebuild. They tell me that the Portland Credit Union has taken over the space today. A shame. The Meat Market was about the only business on main street that didn't sell beer.

I was born in 1866 in Kinzenburg, Germany, where my mother, Margaretha, grew up. My father, Christopher, was from the Prum area...about the same distance as from Westphalia to Fowler. Our little village is in the west where Germany bumps up against Belgium. It was once in the district of *Westphalen*, the other Westphalia. The German borders kept changing...which is part of the reason we are all here in this Westphalia.

My father came over with his wife, her brother, and their eight children. They left from Hamburg and sailed on the *Caldolia*...or was it the *Caledonia*...it's so confusing...I was only four years old...they even called me "Martha" on the passenger list. My mother had to handle a four year old, my two year old brother, Nicholas, and my baby sister, Eva. We finally landed in New York on June 16, 1871.

It's always hard to leave the only home you've ever known, to say goodbye to people you will never see again...in this world. I don't remember much, but I heard we left because of a man named Otto von Bismark and his persecution of Catholics that was known as the *Kulturkampf*. Priests and nuns were kicked out of Germany. Our own Sisters of

Christian Charity had to move their mother house to Belgium. That Otto, he should have been a butcher like me. He knew more about making meat than running a country. He said, "Public policy, like sausage, should not be made in public." Now as a butcher, I can tell you that's pretty good advice, even if it does come from a Protestant. Also the French and Prussian armies were marching back and forth practically in our back yard, and my oldest brother was approaching draft age, so papa decided it was time to go. And the Belens weren't the only ones. I read somewhere that 1410 people left our district that year. I don't read books much...you get other people's germs.

I grew up on a farm south of town on Grange Road with my ten brothers and sisters. Three more, born in America. When I was twenty-one I had \$21 in my pocket. By the end I was the...well, I did pretty good for the family. When I was twenty-nine I opened Belen's Meat Market on Main Street. Five years later I married the love of my life, Mary Snitgen. God blessed us with six children. So we filled up the seven bedrooms in that house on the corner of Heyer and Oak.

Our oldest, Vera, she died of tuberculosis when she was only 18. Eight years later the same disease took her sister, Anastasia. At the moment of her death, the room was filled with the smell of roses. Some children earn heaven much too quickly!

Marcellinus...Marcy...was the musician in the family. He was such a good piano player that his teacher, Prof Loehner, told him that he had to stop giving him lessons because Marcy knew as much as he did. On Friday nights the young men used to take their young ladies to sit outside our house and listen to Marcy play. At ten o'clock Marcy would stop playing, get up, walk over and close the window. Precisely ten o'clock, every Friday night. Marcy was precise in a lot of ways.

Norbert is my practical son. He will probably take over the business. But he'll have to learn to take better care of the merchandise. He played catcher for the "Westphalia Independents." That Leonard Thelen, the pitcher, he had a wicked fast ball, so Norb got the idea that he would pad his glove with a beef steak from the market. Many a cow went into that team's winning streak!

Rita married Joe Freund. She gave us our first grandchild, little Constance Julia.

Genevieve, our youngest, was the hellion. She loved bananas. One day I gave her a quarter and she bought a whole big bunch of bananas. She sat in an empty cardboard box outside Snitgen's store and ate every single one of those bananas all by her self. As she finished a banana, she threw the peels out onto the sidewalk. It took a long time for those peels to rot away. So every time she walked by she was reminded of her misdeeds.

Oh, and I should mention my nephew, Robert Mathias Belen, my brother John's boy. John died when he was only 39, so we took Rob in and Mary and I raised him in that big white house with the blue shutters.

Children are the wonder of Westphalia. It's why our parents and grandparents made the difficult trip from Germany, to make a better life for their children. When I bought my first car I used to... Now mine was not the first car in Westphalia. Five years before, Bill Arnes bought a Flanders. Now who ever heard of a Flanders? Like it's from Belgium. No, I bought a good American car, a Ford. Paid \$600 for it in 1913. Well anyway, when I

bought that Ford I used to give the kids a ride around town, must have been twenty of them hanging out the window and standing on the running board.

Didn't have the first car in town, but had darn near the first flush toilet. Kids would come over just to watch the water go round the bowl and down the drain. Well, it beats that trip in the middle of the night in winter...

Speaking of winter, I wish somebody would invent a gadget that would start the furnace in the morning. I get up early every morning in the winter to stoke the furnace. I feel it's a man's duty to make sure his family wakes up to a warm house.

Oh about that credit union that took over the Meat Market... Kids used to stop by in the morning to buy a nickel's worth of bologna for their lunch. Open on Sundays. It was the only day farmers came into town in those days...for mass. Closed on Fridays. Catholics don't eat meat on Friday...you know that. But they do like wieners. The meat market had a float in the centennial parade. Norb threw wieners to the crowd. The good sisters caught most of them. It was fun to watch Sister Nothburga troddelling off to her kitchen with her apron full of wieners. Well anyway...about that credit union. During the Depression, times were tough here in Westphalia, like all over the country. Some of our farmers couldn't pay their taxes. You don't pay your taxes you lose your farm. So I would help them out with a loan. Friend once told me I should call in a bad debt. But I said, "No. He's going through rough times. He'll pay when he can." And he did.

Haven't said much about my wife, Mary. Her favorite time of the year is Christmas. On Christmas Eve she goes into the parlor, closes the door, and all by herself she decorates the Christmas tree. Then she opens the door and me and the children go in to see the wonder she has created and we sing Christmas songs.

*Lustig, lustig, tral - a-la-la  
Bald ist Weihnachtsabend da*

So that's who I am, Mathias Belen, butcher...that's what I put on my citizen application, "butcher." I didn't apply for American citizenship until I was 52. Forgetfulness? *Nein*, just good old-fashion German stubbornness...I am a butcher, a father, and a Catholic. And proud to be all three!

*Auf Wiedersehen.*

#### NOTES

The family arrived in NYC on June 16 aboard the Caledonia. Matt's application for naturalization says Caldolia. He is not listed on the manifest; he may be the "Martha" listed as 9 years old which is the age of John, who is listed as 4 years old although he was really 9. There was no Martha in the family.

Many thanks to Maureen Quigley, Gert Manning, Jane Conley, Connie Lenneman and Genevieve Manning, who shared so many stories about life in Westphalia with her children.

Tom Manning, Grandson