

John Fink (1873–1950)

Hello, *Guten Tag!* Come right up and have a seat if you like. If you're of a certain age, you will remember me. I'm John Fink and I stand here before you today both honored and humbled.

I guess you could say I wore a number of hats throughout my life. First and foremost I'd say I was a family man. However, I was also a businessman here in Westphalia. But I cannot forget to mention my hobbies, which were just as important. I was a beekeeper and I proudly served as the Director of the Westphalia Band for many years.



Let me begin my story with my grandfather, Peter Fink. He's the man who made the difficult decision to leave Germany for America. When he left, he was married with four young children. My father, Louis, was one of those children. The family arrived safely in the spring of 1854 aboard the ship *The Agnes*.

From New York City my grandfather and his family set out for Detroit where they had first intended to stay. My grandmother's brother, John Gnau, was already established there. However, a cholera epidemic sweeping the city changed their plans. They bought a horse and wagon, packed up their few belongings, and headed for Westphalia.

After more than a week of difficult and dangerous travel along the Dexter Trail, they reached Clinton County, where Peter bought land in Section 27 of Dallas Township. There, he built a log cabin for his family. Later he built a larger frame house that still stands on Tallman Road.

My father, Louis Fink, was born in [Stadtallendorf, Germany](#) in 1844. It is a small city in the state of Hesse. Therefore, he was ten when the family began their move to America. One can only imagine the excitement he must have felt.

When my father was twenty-four, he met a young girl that he would marry: Theresa Platte. She was the daughter of Eberhard and Theresa (Baltes) Platte. My grandfather Eberhard is also being honored here today.

My father and mother made their home at on Oak Street in Westphalia. That's where I was born in 1873. I had an older brother named Julius, who died of consumption at the age of twenty-five. Now a-days, consumption is better known as tuberculosis. My sister, Mary Paulina, never married. She died in 1916. My mother died when I was two and a half in childbirth with stillborn twins.

My father remarried Elizabeth Hellman. My stepmother unfortunately developed mental health issues and spent much of her last years in various state-funded institutions.

My father was a member of the first band in Westphalia in the 1870s. These men played for special occasions in town such as picnics, political rallies, and especially the Corpus Christi Processions that took place in the streets of town. My father organized a second band in 1884. They also played for many occasions in Westphalia and surrounding towns like Ionia, St. Johns, Grand Rapids, and others.

In spite of sad events in my childhood, I had a very blessed and wonderful life. One of the biggest reasons for this was my marriage to Catherine Martin when I was twenty-six. Most everyone called her Katie, and she was the love of my life.

I mentioned hats earlier, and a hat played a role in this part of my life. I first approached Katie in the vestibule at St. Mary's Church, where I commented on how much I admired her beautiful hat. One thing led to another...the rest is history. She was known to wear many beautiful hats throughout her life.

Katie was the daughter of Adam and Margaret (Geller) Martin, who is buried next to her maternal grandparents, John Joseph and Catharina Geller. This makes Katie also related to another person on this year's Cemetery Walk: Herman Geller.

Katie and I also lived on Oak Street, first in the house now owned by Dave and Linda Platte and later in my parent's house across the street. Our seven children were all born on Oak Street. Our first child, Julius, died at the age of sixteen with a ruptured appendix. Our second child, Leonard, was only twenty days old when he died from whooping cough. We had one daughter, Eleanor, and four more boys: Harold, Alfred, Louis, and Francis.

I never needed an automobile because everything was within walking distance from our home on Oak Street. I could easily walk to my job at the Joseph Arens General Store, where I started as merchandise clerk. This store was in the large brick

building at the corner of Main and Heyer Street, built in 1869. It is now Al Smith Plumbing.

I eventually became a co-owner of the business with William Bohr and William Arens. In 1932 our business moved to the Hengesbach-Arens building across Heyer Street in what is now Beaufore's Barber Shop. In the late 1930s, Mr. Arens sold his interest making William Bohr and I sole owners. We sold menswear, household and yard goods, toys, and a full line of groceries. Some of you may even remember how I enjoyed decorating the store window at Christmas, much to the delight of the children, who's excited faces I enjoyed seeing. Owning a business gave me the privilege of helping a few kids out during the depression as well.

When Katie and I lived on Oak Street we had an orchard in the backyard with many fruit trees, especially cherry trees. We also had grapevines and I dabbled in making homemade wines. Katie would serve it to her card club members and everyone enjoyed it very much! Her club was called the TOB Club. If you'd ask any of the members what it stood for, the reply was always, "that's our business."

The orchard was also the perfect place for my beehives. Beekeeping started in the family when my grandfather Peter found a swarm of bees in the woods by his house near Stoney Creek. The beekeeping tradition continued with my father Louis and carried on to me. My son Louis would eventually takeover. The tradition has spread to the fifth generation; my grandson, Jim, is now the beekeeper of the family.

Yes, Katie and I had a happy home with our children. It was music and singing that helped make our everyday life so happy. My father instilled in me a love of music. He did come from the country of Beethoven and Bach, after all; indeed, as you have already read, his love for music led to two bands in Westphalia!

I became a member of my father's second band about the age of twelve. I played the clarinet. I continued my music with a third band known as the Westphalia Coronet Band, which was directed by Ferdinand Platte, my cousin. In 1922 I became the band director and I held that position for thirty-eight years. The members wore white caps and white uniforms. Like all the earlier bands, we were an important part of the community. We played at picnics, Friday evening concerts, as well as Saturday evening dances and Sunday afternoon concerts at Electric Park. Electric Park is on the east bank of the Grand River above the dam (about nine miles west of Westphalia). There was swimming, a picnic area, baseball field, swings, and slides for the kids. We performed at the bandstand there every Sunday in the summer between 1916 and 1940! What a run!

Music, as I stated, impacted my family life. Katie loved to sing. She was known to sing a song or two while she milked cows and peddled the milk around town. Our sons Harold, Alfred, and Francis were also members of the Westphalia band. Harold played the saxophone, Alfred the clarinet, and Francis the trumpet. Eleanor also had musical talent; she sang in the St. Mary's Choir with her beautiful soprano voice.

Francis (better known as Frannie) got his musical start young. He began playing when he was nine. Many said he handled his instrument like an old master. He later formed his own band and played at many events; some of you may remember dances at Spitzley's Hall where his band (Frannie and the Swingsters) played.

Yes, I have great memories and among the best are my band students. Seeing their success made me happy indeed.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the end of this hilltop visit where our departed loved ones sleep beneath these trees. Before you leave, listen to the wind that moves between the trees, and imagine heaven's choirs and symphonies echoing melodies the earth has never heard before. Please accept my best wishes for all the good things in life.

Auf wiedersehen, and keep a song in your heart.