

## Joseph Snitgen- Founder of Snitgen Store

**GUTEN TAG! ICH BIN JOSEF SCHNUTGEN, JA!**

I am Joseph Snitgen, the man who started the Snitgen Store in Westphalia in 1869. I was born in 1829 in Germany in the beautiful Westphalia Sauerland in a town called Nizer. My father was Franz Snitgen and my mother was Maria Stamm. My father was a blacksmith – a very important trade in Germany in those days, and I learned that trade from him.

My father, my sister Maria, and I left our German homeland for a new life in America. We left on Easter Sunday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1855. Many of our fellow countrymen had already left Germany for America and their letters encouraged us to come to the place called Westphalia in Michigan.

At the seaport in Antwerp, Belgium we boarded the sailing ship, *The Helen R. Cooper*, bound for New York. It was a long and tiresome journey. It lasted 56 days on the ocean. Once in New York we knew we were still far from Westphalia. First we got on a boat from New York City to Albany along the Hudson River and then on a slow-moving tugboat on the Erie Canal to Buffalo. Here we got on a train that brought us to Detroit. Since the most difficult part of our journey was yet to come. We needed to buy supplies. We did our shopping in Anton Pulte's store. Anton was a fellow-countryman from Germany.

After a few days of rest, we got on a stagecoach, which started at the train station, and if you know Detroit, it is now the site of the Detroit Opera House. We traveled along what is now Grand River Avenue to Lansing. The trip took 6 days. Once off the stagecoach, we had to travel on foot to Westphalia. This was the hardest part of our trip. It was only 25 miles from Lansing to Westphalia, but it took days through the woods along Dexter Trail. My sister Maria often said that if she had known of all the difficulties she would not have left Germany. You know Maria; she married Ferdinand Platte.

Once in Westphalia we received a warm welcome and much help. We celebrated our first Holy Mass with Fr. Godez on the Feast of Sts. Peter & Paul on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June. So you can say, our trip from Germany took more than 3 months.

I was now 26 years old and I was ready to settle down. I asked Christina Lehmann for her hand in marriage and she said yes. She was the daughter of John & Katharina Lehmann. They were one of the first families to come from the Eifel area of the Rhineland in Germany. Our wedding ceremony was celebrated by the devout

pioneer priest, Father George Godez. In 1856, Westphalia was still a small village, and life in this time was tough. However, as the population of Westphalia was growing rapidly, there was talk of building a new brick church, a church that would seat over 800 people.

Blacksmiths were needed to tend the horses and wagons. Since I had learned that trade in Germany, I started a blacksmith trade. In the first years, I conducted that business from my home in town. But since business was good, in 1869 I built a two-story 24' x 64' brick building on the southwest corner of Main Street. I believe the builder was Joseph Bohr.

I continued my blacksmith work in the south end of the store. I also built, entirely by hand, wagons and sleighs. An outline of the carriage entrance on the east side of the building can still be seen today. A German painter, Mr. Molinbrey, painted these vehicles; he ground and mixed his own paints. My hardware business was in the front part of the building along with the post-office. Ja, I was the postmaster.

In 1875, I expanded my business to a general store, selling groceries, floor coverings, footwear, and many other items. Before the automobile, my grocery wagon traveled through the country. The housewife could buy thread, spices, anything she needed. Many times we would trade groceries for the farmers' butter, poultry, and eggs. I also was an agent for the Toledo Pump Co., Jackson Wagon, and White Sewing Machines. These items were brought to the village where customers could purchase them.

My home at 202 W. Main Street was built in 1871. This house has withstood the test of time. You can see it today. It is now owned by Luke and Betsy Freund. I needed a big house. Christine and I had 15 children. Ten of these children lived to adulthood.

My son Anthony was one of the ten, and he was the son who joined me in the business – Joseph Snitgen and Son. One of my first employees was John Klein, an early emigrant from the Rhineland. He worked as a wagon maker. Other employees were Gustave Heyer, Eva Freund Voss, Nick Schafer, and my daughter Mary, who married Matt Belen.

I had lived a good life and by 1896 it was time to retire and to turn the business over to my son, Anthony. He ran the Snitgen Store until 1918. Then his sons Alfred and Hilary managed the store as Snitgen Bros. In 1966, after 99 years in the general store business, it closed.



Looking back over the years, I thank God that

I was able to come to America – to Westphalia.

I was able to celebrate 50 years of marriage.

I was Westphalia's postmaster for 10 years, and

I want to tell all you Republicans – I was a staunch Democrat!

And with that, I'll say **AUF WIEDERSEHEN.**

