

The Pagel Family Times

Volume 21

May 2017

STRAINED MEASUREMENT

*A hardware store clerk deals with a Czech lady's reluctance to speak English in this story from cousin Bob Zumwalt's new book, *Trapped by a Mouse and Other Stories*.*

During my high-school years, I spent Saturdays and summer vacations working at the Vanek Hardware store. The store, situated just off Hallettsville's Courthouse Square, attracted a lot of walk-by visitors and walk-in customers. At that time, the square was a much more bustling commercial district than it is now. Alois Vanek, the owner, was an affable, stocky fellow of Czech ancestry, whose slightly rounded face flashed a big warm grin at the slightest opportunity.

This was a Norman Rockwell type of hardware store. We sold nails by the pound out of large wooden kegs. Rolls of fencing and chicken wire framed the plate glass show windows, partly hiding their amateurishly arranged displays. We stacked stuff in the windows according to the season, and I dusted it on Saturdays.

Shipping boxes were stacked haphazardly throughout the store. Sometimes,

the merchandise within corresponded to the label on the box, but often, the contents were randomly chosen. If we needed to put something away, and it fit in a convenient box, then that's where it went. Some of the regular customers amused themselves by challenging Al to find a certain item. Al would assure the customer he had the item in stock, and then smile

(continued on back page)



The inspiration for Bob's story was located on S. La Grange Street in Hallettsville, just south of the square. Novosad's Barbecue is there today.

2017 PAGEL FAMILY REUNION

**Bobbie Wolfe will host
the 2017 Pagel Family Reunion
Saturday, June 24th, 10:30 a.m. until 3 p.m.
at the First United Methodist Church Fellowship Hall,
426 St. Paul, Gonzales, Texas**

Map at www.pagelfamily.org

Our catered lunch will be served at noon and will include dessert. It is \$15 per plate, free for children under 12. Please r.s.v.p. to Glenn Pagel by Saturday, June 17th. Please return the enclosed form along with your check. If you get in a bind at the last moment, you may phone (361) 798-2182 or e-mail gpapel@sbcglobal.net and pay at the reunion.

At the Fellowship Hall, we'll have lots of family heritage displays and a scanner if you'd like to share your old photos or memorabilia. Betty Fink will speak briefly on German immigration after lunch.

Please consider bringing something interesting for our silent auction.

Bring the children and teens! Besides our usual balloons, the church has a playground and we will set up a video game area.

We look forward to seeing everyone! See the attached list of places you might enjoy visiting while in Gonzales.

IN REMEMBRANCE

This issue of *The Pagel Family Times* is dedicated to the memory of those who have passed away since last year's newsletter was printed:

Adelia Sughrue Pagel
Alice Farnsworth Pagel
Margaret Stephens Pagel
Dorothy Condor Switzer

(continued from front page)

victoriously after going unerringly to a battered box in the corner and pulling out the merchandise. After a couple of years, I could do that, too, but the customers thought it was more fun to challenge Al.

My duties were to sweep out the relatively small box-free area of the store's concrete floor, sweep the sidewalk and entrance areas, and help customers. I cut and threaded water pipes, loaded barbed-wire and heavy-duty fencing, unloaded shipments from the hardware wholesalers, and waited on customers—those customers who would allow me to serve them.

Although Al's first language was Czech, he spoke English very well, with the slightly clipped Czech accent so typical of many Lavaca County residents of that time. Of course, many of the store's clients were of Czech heritage, who still spoke the language. Lots of Czech got spoken in the Vanek Hardware Store! There were even some Anglos who knew a few words and enjoyed bamboozling me with a request. I never got much beyond *jak se mas* (how are you) and a few numbers.

A cadre of hard-core Czech speakers insisted that only Al should serve them. They just brushed past me when I came over to help them. Instead, they went straight to Al, even if he was busy with another customer. He would turn with a big smile, say something reassuring to them in Czech, and continue with the customer in front of him.

I felt so helpless and inadequate about this, until I finally understood what was going on. I came to realize they probably just wanted something simple, like a few lag screws or stove pipe joints, and they could have related their needs to me in English. This was not the quick-turn-

around commerce of today; these customers wanted more for their hard-won dollars than some pieces of hardware. They wanted to share a few pleasantries, talk about the weather, and engage in a little human discourse to break the isolation of living on the farm and dealing with farm animals. And they could do this most easily in their mother tongue.

I remember one little old lady who often rebuffed my attempts to serve her. She was short and small-framed, wore narrow metal-rimmed eyeglasses, and had some streaks of gray in her sternly coiffed brown hair. Once, the indomitable lady came in during Al's noon-time dinner break. She looked all around the store before realizing that this time, she had to deal with me.

I approached her and politely inquired, in my best retail style, "May I help you, m'am?"

She stared at me suspiciously, and then stated in perfectly understandable English, "I need chicken wire. Three feet high."

After reflecting on her good use of English, I asked her to clarify what she needed, "Do you want two-inch mesh or one-inch mesh?"

She pondered my question awhile, and then wisely said, "Show me!"

I grabbed a pair of wire snips from behind the counter and escorted the lady outside, where the chicken wire rolls stood against the show windows. I showed her the difference between the two mesh sizes.

She pointed to the one-inch mesh and said, "That's what I want!"

When I asked her how much she wanted, she replied, "I need 30 feet!"

I placed the free end of the roll carefully at the edge of the sidewalk in front of the store, and set a couple of bricks on the wire to keep it from rolling up behind me. Then I unrolled the wire for the entire length of our sidewalk, which was exactly 25 feet and two inches, and extended the wire onto the next merchant's sidewalk for an estimated five feet more. I added an extra two feet for lagniappe. I placed

two more bricks on the rolled-out wire, reached for my snips, and cut the wire.

"Wait!" the lady called, "You didn't even measure that. Where's your yardstick?"

I carefully explained how I measured the wire, relative to the length of the sidewalk. But she was completely unsatisfied with my explanation and demanded, "I need exactly 30 feet. Get a yardstick and measure it!"

Exasperated, I retrieved the yardstick from within the store and painstakingly measured the unrolled chicken wire, making sure she could see what I was doing. When the yardstick came to the 30 feet demanded, I cut off about 20 inches of excess wire. I thought I had added 24 inches, but that's what lagniappe is all about.

The lady was wordless about what I had done, but she knew she was getting the exact amount of wire for which she paid.

About two weeks later, she came in when Al had gone to the bank. Again, she said to me, "I need some more chicken wire. This time, 60 feet."

I went through my usual wire measuring routine and rolled out her 60 feet, according to the sidewalk. I added another two feet of lagniappe and cut the wire. She didn't say a word. When we completed the transaction, she smiled and said, "Thanks!"

She knew she was getting something extra, and that was important to her.

Both of us had learned to respect each other. I had gained more of an understanding about the way she was thinking, and she had learned she could trust me. This little lady came into the store many times after that. She would walk over to Al when he was not busy, but she readily let me serve her when he was.

Amazingly, I even succeeded in making a little small talk with her, although that was not my strong suit! She was happy to talk with me—after I inquired about her chickens.

This issue of *The Pagel Family Times* was edited by Rox Ann Johnson, historian of the Pagel Family Reunion, who takes full responsibility for its content. Comments and questions may be directed to her at 6907 E. State Highway 159, Fayetteville, TX 78940, (979) 249-3236, e-mail roxannjohnson@me.com. Please notify us of family births, deaths, and marriages.

The Pagel Family Times © 2017

Like Us on Facebook

Check out our new Facebook page, The Pagel Family in Texas, for the latest family news, plus photos—both old and new.

www.pagelfamily.org

Our cousin, Clay Maeckel, generously provides space on his server for our family reunion web site. Check it out!