

# The Pagel Family Times

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## THE FASCINATING STORY OF JAMES HAEUSLER

by Janis Johnston Richardson

James "Jim" Haeusler is my great-grandfather, father of my maternal grandmother, Christine Heisler Repschleger, and husband of Johanna Elizabeth (Lizzie) Pagel Heisler, daughter of Carl and Johanna Kuehne Pagel.

Jim was the fourth of six children born to Anton and Sophie Haeusler in rural New York, where his father, the first graduate of the Rochester Theological Seminary, served a German-speaking Baptist congregation. Jim lived most of his early years near St. Louis, Missouri, but by 1880, the Haeusler family found their way to Lavaca County, where Jim met Lizzie and settled down to raise a family of eight in Breslau. Over time, "Haeusler" (or Häusler with an umlaut and occasionally spelled Hausler) evolved to "Heisler."

I remember sitting with my Granny at her little breakfast table in Port Arthur, listening as she shared memories of growing up in Breslau, a small town just north of where I now live in Lavaca County. Somewhere in those stories, Granny said that she was her father's favorite before she mentioned that he died in an insane asylum.

Even as a young girl, I remember INSANE ASYLUM hitting my brain in all caps. I assumed this was an exaggeration, but then found his death certificate, and there it was. He did indeed die in the Southwestern Insane Asylum in San Antonio.

I learned the Texas legislature passed a bill in 1889 allocating funds for a state mental hospital in San Antonio, which opened in 1892 as a state-of-the-art facility designed to serve 500 patients on grounds covering 640 acres. By the time Jim Haeusler died in 1918, the facility's capacity had increased to 1800. Over the years, the facility continually expanded after periods of overcrowding and suffered through years of inadequate funding.

My first thought was to contact the hospital and get access to his records. I learned that the hospital had been closed for years, and records from 1911 to 1918 when Jim was there could not be accessed. I talked to someone connected with the Texas State Historical Commission and learned that even a letter from a state senator could not unlock such records.

I needed to find another way to learn about Jim Haeusler's story. I turned to the newspapers. Jim Haeusler's obituary says that "Mr. Haeusler was for a long time a valued citizen of our county, living at Breslau up to 10 years ago when his mind failed him and for the past eight years he has been an inmate of the S.W. Insane Asylum. He has many friends in Lavaca

and other counties who grieve with the bereaved relatives."

I learned that state mental hospital meant that he was committed by court action via this short article in the January 13, 1911, Hallettsville Herald newspaper:

"James J. Haeusler, who for many years resided at Breslau and conducted the gin there, was adjudged of unsound mind Friday by the county court and ordered sent to the asylum. Sheriff Houchins escorted him to San Antonio Tuesday."

As I continued to dig to fill in the blanks about this story, I learned a lot about Jim Haeusler and his family's life in Breslau via the digitized newspapers available to the public at the Portal to Texas History. It is mainly through perusing through three decades of newspapers that I have been able to get to know Jim Haeusler as a colorful, industrious, community-minded man.

Jim Haeusler was described as a gin-ner, miller, and a well-borer. He initially worked for the Henkel gin in Breslau but later purchased the gin and the surrounding 10 acres of land. He bought another gin that he transported to his property to expand his gin, making it one of the most substantial gins in the county. The family home and an enormous barn were on the same property.

The Hallettsville newspapers from that time reported on every little thing. I learned about measles that struck Jim and three of the children, a huge barbecue with 300 guests, a parade of 31 decorated mule-driven wagons with cotton seed from the Haeusler gin that paraded through downtown Hallettsville and then on to the cotton seed press in Shiner. I learned that Jim was instrumental in improving the Breslau School, serving as the President of the Breslau Board of Education in the mid-1890s, that he was a candidate for Lavaca County Sheriff and served as the chair of the Breslau Election Commission.

Perhaps most interesting to me were the articles about Jim as a well-driller. In 1897, the City of Hallettsville awarded him a contract to construct a new arte-

## 2024 PAGEL FAMILY REUNION

Saturday, July 13th from 1 to 5 p.m.

at the Fayette Public Library, Museum & Archives Meeting Room

855 South Jefferson Street, La Grange, TX 78945

Come join us for coffee, snacks and dessert in the library's meeting room. Our family history info will be displayed upstairs in the museum space, which is accessible by an elevator. There will also be a kid-friendly video game running upstairs.

The library will be closing at 1 p.m., so use the after-hours entrance to the meeting room on the southeast corner of the building. The closest parking spaces are on Vail and Franklin Streets. Let's plan for a brief business meeting downstairs at 1:30 p.m.

Be thinking about who is able to help with next year's reunion and we may get back on track to the full catered meal, etc. we used to enjoy in Hallettsville.

If you have questions, please email Rox Ann at roxannjohnson@me.com or call 512-925-4804. It would also be nice to hear about address and email changes, as well as recent births, deaths, and marriages.



James Haeusler, October 4, 1861 - May 25, 1918, with daughters, Christine and Lydia

sian water well that would supply all city residents with water. He was paid \$750.00 to drill a well producing 30,000 gallons of water daily. This must have been a big deal, as the Houston newspapers reported on this contract. After some mishaps along the way, he finished the well and was awarded another contract to restore the original well to good operation. I assume that cotton ginning was seasonal and that well-drilling provided income

## IN REMEMBRANCE

This issue of *The Pagel Family Times* is dedicated to the memory of those who have passed away since the last newsletter, plus a few others who were inadvertently missed last summer.

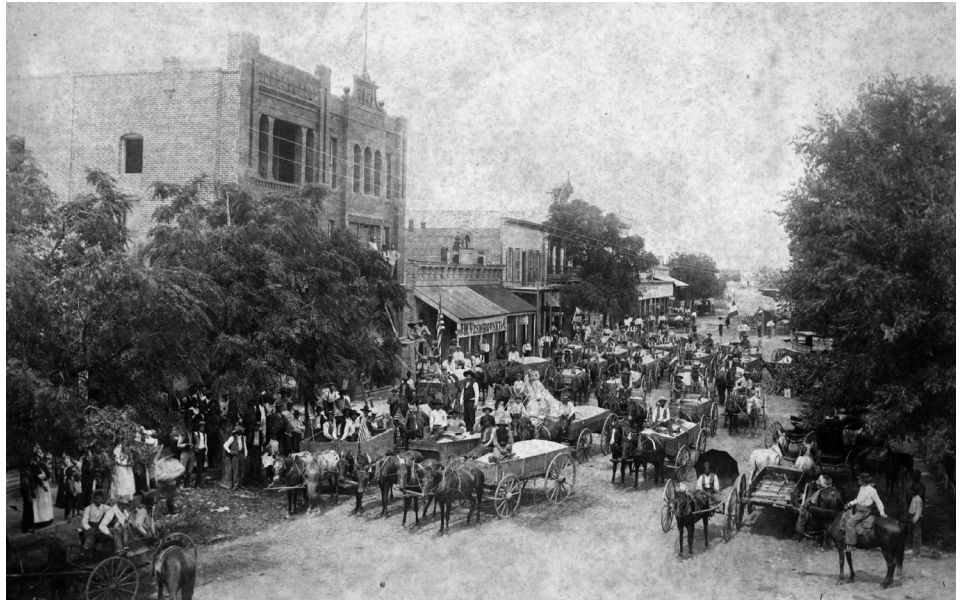
Margarete (Sprenger) Appelt  
Carol (Kubena) Davis  
Henry James Ladewig, Jr.  
Lois McKeown  
Darrell Ray Pagel  
David Joseph Pagel  
Joyce (Keng) Pagel  
Sandra (Griffies) Poole  
Janice (Sauer) Robinson  
Van Buren Shuler, Jr.  
Barbara (Touchtone) Zumwalt

during the gin's off-season.

From newspaper accounts, it seems that the 1890s were Jim Haeusler's heyday, with a downturn occurring in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was in those years that his eldest daughter Rosa died in college at Belton, with the newspapers describing the family as inconsolable. Jim gave his gin business to his oldest son Theodore shortly after and went to Houston looking for work. He traveled to West Texas for work, renovating old gins. He lived for a while in Skidmore, a little town about 140 miles south of Breslau, presumably working on a well there. He traveled to Port Arthur to visit Granny, his daughter, the year after she and my grandfather married. The picture I see from those years is of someone searching, drifting, somewhat unmoored.

Newspaper reports began to mention him as "formerly of Breslau" during those years. And then came the report that he was found of unsound mind and committed to the Southwestern Insane Asylum.

My research finally took me to the committal proceedings. Brenda Fisseler, at that time head librarian at the Friench Simpson Memorial Library in Hallettsville, helped me locate the court records for this proceeding. The records include testimony from five witnesses, including Jim's brother-in-law, Charles G. "Gus" Pagel, the sheriff, marshal, a shopkeeper, and a former employer. All stated how long they had known Jim and that his mind was weak (bad, affected, unbalanced) and worsening. The shopkeeper said that he doubted James would steal if he were in his right mind but that he had caught him with two boxes of cigars under his arm. The former employer said that James claimed he had lost some tools and kept coming to him to look for them. Several say that James talked about losing his manhood (scandalous!)—with one saying that he blamed that condition on drinking soda water. The sheriff mentioned that he had been separated from his wife for two years. Several noted that he is Ger-



*James Haeusler's cotton wagon parade through Hallettsville.*

man and that there is no known insanity in his family. All concluded that he should be restrained for the welfare of himself and others.

Wow. That's all it took in those days for a declaration of lunacy and a commitment for life to a mental institution. Jim Haeusler died there seven years later at the age of 56. His death certificate lists the cause of death as chronic nephritis, with epilepsy as the underlying condition. Our county historian, Doug Kubicek, suggested that he may have been a victim of the Spanish influenza, which was sweeping through the area at the time, with death certificates rarely stating this as the cause of death because so little was known about the disease.

A mystery has been solved, yet so many questions remain. Jim Haeusler was a hard-working, civic-minded man who led a colorful life. I wonder what contributed to his separation from his wife in 1909 when they sold their Breslau property. Was it grief from the tragic loss of his daughter? At age 47, was he beginning to show signs of mental illness, or was this when epilepsy appeared? Was epilepsy viewed as evidence of a weak mind? I was surprised to learn that until 1956, people

in the United States with epilepsy were forbidden to marry in 17 states and that the first effective drug therapy for epilepsy (phenobarbital) was not discovered until 1912. James, if he indeed did have epilepsy as his death certificate suggests, obviously had the wrong disease at the wrong time.

My Mom told me I would have been named James if I had been born a boy. Before I knew that James was her grandfather's name, I assumed that James was another "J" name that would go well with my maiden name, Johnston. But now I like to think that I would have been named after James Haeusler, a man who had a tragic ending to an otherwise well-lived life. I will think of James as the leader of a train of 31 wagons, the congenial host of 300 guests at his Breslau home for a big barbecue, a visionary who helped bring a school to Breslau and water to the citizens of Hallettsville, and the loving father to my Granny and her sisters and brothers. Here's to you, Jim, my great-grandfather Haeusler!

*Note: James Haeusler is buried in the Carl & Johanna Pagel Family Cemetery in Lavaca County.*

This issue of The Pagel Family Times was edited by Rox Ann Johnson, Pagel Family Reunion historian, who takes full responsibility for its content. You may contact her at (512) 925-4804 or roxannjohnson@me.com.

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Check out our 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. Thank you, Clay!