

WHO WAS LOUISA?

WOMEN PIONEERS OF CITY ANSWER CALL

MRS. LOUISE JOHNSON, 85, AND MRS. M. A. COLINS, 80, CROSS THE DARK RIVER

This is a colorful title of an obituary that appeared in the Muskegon Chronicle on 27 November 1917. I'd never heard the term "cross the dark river" until I saw this obituary. This article is about one of those women who "crossed the dark river", Louisa A. (Seifert) Neumeister-Johnson.

Louisa A Seifert was born in Schleiz, Germany on 6 August 1832. She and her husband, Frederick H. Neumeister, came to Muskegon, Michigan in April of 1856. Frederick H. was born in Loberstien, Germany in June 1832. In a passport application made out by his son Frederick G., he said his father came to the United States in 1850. The 1900 Federal Census says that Louisa immigrated in 1852. Where they lived in the U.S. before appearing in Muskegon is unknown. In the 1860 Federal Census, Frederick and Louisa are living in Muskegon with his occupation listed as "brewer". He was the owner of "Neumeister Brewery", also known as the "City Brewery". It was located at Michigan Ave. and Lake St. off Western Ave. (the current location of Cole's Bakery). It wasn't a large brewery but it was a lucrative venture being the only brewery in the area for a few years. They also owned a saloon on Western Ave. where Louisa worked as the bartender.

Shortly after arriving in Muskegon in 1856, their son Gustav H. was born; in 1858, a daughter, Emma K. followed; in 1861, a son, Frederick G.; in 1862, a daughter Louisa G.; and in 1866 their daughter Minnie was born. Minnie died 11 month later. The 1900 Census lists 6 children born, 4 children living. There is a family plot in Evergreen Cemetery where Frederick H., Louisa, and four of their children are buried. Gustav H. and his family are buried in Oakwood Cemetery. The 6th child is not buried there so it may have been born and died before they came to Muskegon.

Frederick H. must have known he was very ill because on 1 November 1873 he made out his Last Will & Testament. He died two months later of dropsy (a symptom of kidney failure or congestive heart failure) on 1 January 1874. The bulk of his assets went to his wife Louisa including the brewery and saloon. By the time his Will was probated that year, Louisa A. had married a man named Henderson Johnson, a successful lumber inspector. They changed the name of the brewery to the "Louisa A. Johnson Brewery". The brewery closed down the next year. It was sold to Otto Meeske, Gustav Meeske, and Gottlieb Ninneman in 1876. It was expanded with new equipment added and renamed the "Muskegon Brewing Company". It continued operating under that name until 1919. The saloon remained in operation with Louisa A. continuing as the bartender and proprietor for some time.

The 1879 City Directory lists Louisa as “Mrs. H. W. Johnson, dealer in choice wines, liquors, cigars, 15 ball pool tables, etc.” at the corner of Western & 7th. Louisa’s husband, Henderson Johnson, died suddenly in 1889 leaving his estate to Louisa. Louisa A., her daughter Emma K., and Mr. A. D. Berry bought the Leahy Dry Goods Store in 1892 where Emma K. and Mr. Berry had been employed for 12 years. Louisa A. became the President with Emma K. as the Treasurer and Mr. Berry as Manager. An article in the Chronicle about the sale calls Louisa A. “a thorough business woman, reliable in all her dealings with people in general”. In 1903, she is listed one of the directors in the Hackley National Bank. Throughout the years we can find Louisa A. also buying and selling real estate. She died 26 March 1917 while living with her son Frederick G. on Houston Ave.

Louisa A. was definitely ahead of her time. She was not only a German immigrant and one of Muskegon’s early pioneers, she was a mother and a successful business woman at a time when women didn’t even have the right to vote. Gustav H., her eldest, was at one time the sheriff of Muskegon, an Alderman, Assessor, lumber inspector and later, partner in Neumeister & Shultz Shoe Store. Emma K. never married and eventually became the proprietor of the Leahy Dry Goods Store/Leahy Co. Frederick G. became a druggist and owned the very successful Neumeister Drug Store for 34 years on Western Ave. The youngest, Louisa G. was a bookkeeper for Western Union Telephone Co. and in 1885 married Henry C. Rood, a real estate dealer and farmer.

(Sources: Muskegon Chronicle, findagrave.com, Muskegon City Directories, Hackley Public Library, genealogybank.com, Ancestry.com, The History of Muskegon Brewing Company by Dave Meeske)