

PETER LANSIFF

It Just Kept Getting Better and Better

By Frances Harrington



As a young man in Brauschan, Germany, the home of his birth, Peter Lansiff got a job driving a stage coach. He was 16 years old when he started. He saved what money he could and in 1847, by himself, at the age of 25, he made the 64-day journey on a sailing vessel that landed at New York. You see, back in Germany, Peter had met and fell in love with Fredericka “Rika” Bronholz and wanted a better life for the two of them and their baby daughter, Mary, than what he thought they would have in Germany.

After his arrival, he worked for four months in Boston, then went on to Chicago for two months, and finally, arrived in Muskegon on November 6, 1847. He had very little money at the time, so he helped load the vessel “Muskegon” (the ship that would bring him here), to cover the cost of his passage from Chicago to Muskegon. When he got here, it was nothing but a wilderness. There were no streets, just swamps and timber. Back then, it was a village, part of Ottawa County. There were only a few lumber mills when Peter got here. He first worked for E. Merrill in the woods at Sand Creek, and then at Ruddiman’s lumber mill, unloading lumber rafts. In the early 1850s he sent for his wife, daughter, mother and sister. Upon their arrival, he met them in Chicago, where he and Rika were married by the Justice of the Peace. That same year, he bought property on Pine Street, and operated a boarding house where many of Muskegon’s prominent pioneers, mill hands, and even mill owners, had stayed at one time or another. It would later become a saloon. At the same time, he started a logging business that he continued to do for many years, and was quite successful in that endeavor. He hauled logs for many of the lumberman. He also cut and sold slabs of wood to the Goodrich Steam Ship Lines. These slabs were loaded on boats, and shipped to Chicago in the summers. Throughout the winter he supplied slabs to the entire village of Muskegon. That is where he got the nick-name the “Slab King”. He had three teams of horses. He used them to haul the wood to the boats, or to local residents and builders, to be used for schools, homes, or businesses.

Not long after starting his boarding house on Pine Street, there was a fire that burned it down. He rebuilt it soon after. In 1874, while living on Spring Street, his residence burned down during Muskegon’s first big fire. By 1891, the Lansiff family had moved to the corner of Pine and Hartford. This didn’t prove to be such a good move either, because that was the year of the “great Pine Street fire”. The loss of their property was estimated at \$9,000 (around \$286,000 in 2022). He was only insured for two-thirds of it. The family then moved to Clay Avenue where they stayed until his death.

Fire wasn’t the only tragedy that struck the Lansiff family. In 1854, Rika gave birth to their second child, a baby boy. They named him Charles. Charles attended Muskegon schools and went on to college in Grand Rapids. He returned to Muskegon and worked at the Muskegon Bank. He started feeling ill on a Friday night in 1873, and by Monday, he was dead. He was 19 years old. In 1856, Rika gave birth to a daughter named Helena who only lived less than one year. Their 4th child, Peter, was born in 1858 and died in 1862. Their last

child, Fredericka, only lived 15 months. Mary, their firstborn, was the only child to live a full life. She married Zeph Jeffers, had two children, and died at the age of 72 in 1918.

Peter was the first man to be elected as Street Commissioner. He also served as City Treasurer in 1873 and paid his clerk out of his own pocket. He served two years as Alderman under Mayor O.P. Pillsbury and later, served as Alderman again, under Mayor Francis Jiroch. Under Mayor Jiroch, he served on many committees including those on the streets, water, and the poor. He liked to take visitors through Muskegon on carriage rides to show them the city...maybe, it reminded him of his stagecoach days. He also served as Chairman of the City Hall Building Committee that was organized when they decided to build the first City Hall. His name was one of them that was engraved on the corner stone of that building. When he was first an Alderman, they used to get \$50 a year for their service but in 1881, Peter introduced a resolution to raise the pay to \$100 a year, and it passed.

In 1892, Peter and Rika took a return visit to Germany for 2 months to visit family and friends. He hadn't been back there in 45 years.

Peter was very active in the organization known as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. He was a member of the Davis Encampment, No. 47 and served as its Treasurer for twenty years. He joined the Germania Lodge and was its Treasurer for several years also. He was part of the Muskegon Pioneer and Historical Society whose President was Henry H. Holt. In 1896, he was recognized as one of the oldest living Muskegon Pioneers.



Peter was 85 when he died in 1905. He had lived in Muskegon for 58 years, and had been married to Rika for 55 of those. She died a little over a year later in 1906. Peter and Rika are buried in Evergreen Cemetery along with 4 of their 5 children. Their daughter, Mary, is buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

When asked why he continued to stay in Muskegon all those years, he replied, "because it just kept getting better and better".

Sources: Ancestry.com, findagrave.com, The Muskegon Chronicle (Genealogybank.com), History of Muskegon with Illustrations & Biographical Sketches (H.R. Page & Co.), Advantages & Surroundings of Muskegon 1892 (Muskegon Board of Trade).

Rev 1/18/2023