



THE LONG ISLAND FORUM

The Magazine of Long Island's History and Heritage



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Young Farmers' Light Guard in front of Herman's Hotel, early 1900's. Henry Karkbeck, Captain. Carol Hintze.

Fosters Meadow

Herman's Hotel and the Young Farmers' Light Guard

by Paul W. Hoffman

July 11, 1892. I was born in Elmont – Fosters Meadow Road & Central Ave., at the present time Elmont Road & Linden Blvd. Dad had a saloon or tavern, which they call it today, it was an old established place called Herman's in later years. The building was demolished 1960. It must have been almost 100 years old.¹

*T*hese opening lines in a journal prepared by Edward Gunther (1892-1964) late in his lifetime are a succinct history of a landmark in a German-American community on the border of Queens and Nassau Counties. Fosters Meadow encompassed present day Elmont, Rosedale, Laurelton and North Valley Stream. The area received its first German families in the 1850's who came to the area to operate truck farms to provide fresh produce for the markets in Brooklyn and New York. By the turn of the twentieth century, it was the center of a vibrant German-American farm community that grew to include Franklin Square, New Hyde Park, Valley Stream and other nearby locales.²

In 1859, John Herman bought a small farm of five acres that included a narrow strip of land that fronted on Fosters Meadow Road.⁵ His land was next to the newly built St. Boniface Church which had been established in 1854 by the German farmers, who were predominantly Roman Catholic. St. Boniface served as the primary social focus of the community and became a magnet for additional German immigrants to the area. Unlike their Dutch and English neighbors whose families had farmed in Fosters Meadow for generations, the German farmers did not keep a staid and serene Sabbath. While attendance at church services was an integral part of their Sunday, so was music and socializing with neighbors and friends. So it was most likely in the late 1860's that John Herman's oldest son, John J., opened the Central Avenue Hotel next door to the original St. Boniface Church soon after his marriage to Maria Speiser. The first record we find of the hotel is in a business listing in an 1873 atlas of Long Island.⁴

The location of the hotel next to a church is common in small rural farm villages of southern Germany. Farm families would come into town on Sunday for church services and then partake of the food and drink offered at an establishment nearby. Although there were small rooms over the bar area at the Central Avenue Hotel for John J.'s family and for transient guests, it is unlikely that the guest rooms were occupied very often due to the hotel's location. Central Avenue was a winding dirt road that ran from Merrick Road in Valley Stream to Jamaica. By the time the hotel opened, both Merrick Road to the south and what is known today as Hempstead Turnpike to the north were both plank roads. It is likely that farmers from further east would welcome the smoother surfaces and faster trips to market that

the plank roads afforded and stop at hotels that were built along that route. When John J. gave his occupation in the 1880 census, he identified himself as a saloon keeper since that was how he earned his money.⁵

John J. and Maria raised their family in the hotel and had five children between 1869 and 1879. At the end of the decade of the 1870's a double tragedy struck the family. On January 26, 1879 Maria Herman died,⁶ one week after giving birth to her last

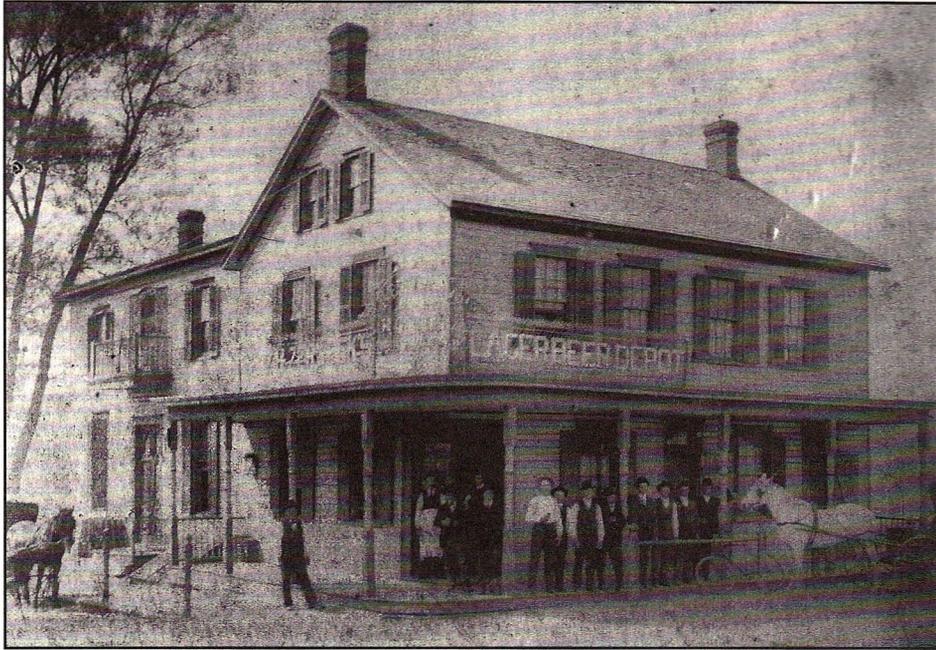


Loaded with cabbage and name spelled out in onions. Probably 1890's. Wonder when they discovered the extra "r" didn't belong in Fosters? Joan Schmitt.

child, Jacob.⁷ John J. must have struggled to keep his young family together, but on October 29, 1880, he died leaving five young orphans.⁸ According to Herman family legend, Jacob was raised in the family of his uncle, Peter Herman, while the oldest child, John M. Herman, went to live in the rectory of St. Boniface Parish, to be raised by the priest. The three middle children, Peter, Henry and Mary Ann went to live with three local farm families so that the five siblings never lived together again as a family unit. Herman family stories go on to tell how after a few years at the rectory, John M. went to live and work with a local farm family. He found that experience

unpleasant, so as a young teenager walked to the Plainfield railroad station in present day Floral Park. He showed the conductor his entire life savings and asked how far away he could get. He ended up in Poughkeepsie where he met his future wife.⁹

of the Saloon. Dad had a platform built with a tank which held about 200 gallons. [H]e made a water wheel and put it in the stream and he hooked up a small pump which discharged a pint for each turn of the wheel; he would start the pump in the evening and in the morning the tank would be full. [T]hat solved the water situation. Dad had one wagon and supplied the Farmers in the nearby community. [I]n the fall of the year Dad had trouble getting back his beer bottles; there was no deposit at the time. [T]hey would use the bottles for catsup. [T]he bottles had a patent stopper with a rubber washer. [I]t made a perfect bottle for this use.¹¹



Herman's Hotel, circa 1900. Carol Hintze.

While the Herman family unit disintegrated, the Central Avenue Hotel continued to operate and there is no indication that ownership of the hotel ever left the family. George Barb, the son of a local farmer, was the next proprietor of the establishment. In 1882, he paid thirty dollars for a license from the Hempstead Town Board of Excise Commissioners "for selling strong and spirituous liquors and wines."¹⁰ This was the beginning of a long career for Barb in running a drinking establishment. He operated the Central Avenue Hotel until 1892 and went on to host a well known tavern in Queens Village. He was followed by Joseph Gunther, who operated it for five years. Edward Gunther recounted family stories of life in the hotel in his journal.

Dad bottled beer from kegs supplied by Welz & Zerweck from Ridgewood, NY. [T]o wash the bottles required a lot of water and there was no running water those days. [T]here was a live stream in back

Two examples of this bottle are known to exist. One was found in a renovation of a farm house once owned by one of the German families in the area,¹² and one found in the excavation of the site where the hotel once stood. Both are embossed "Gunther's/Central Avenue/Fosters Meadow."

In 1897, Joseph Gunther had a hotel of his own built on Merrick Road.¹³ John M. Herman, his wife Elizabeth Caire of Poughkeepsie and three young children, returned to run the Central Avenue Hotel. Seventeen years after the death of his father, the saloon would once again be known to those in the community as Herman's. John M. and Elizabeth would have seven more children all raised in the small rooms over the bar. Some of them would follow the family tradition and work in the bar, while others started their own businesses or went to work for others. One even became the Nassau County Executive.

Whether the Central Avenue Hotel was operated by the Herman's, George Barb or Joseph Gunther, it always faced competition from nearby establishments. The Kalb, Schroeder and Hoeffner hotels on

Hempstead Turnpike and various places on Merrick Road at Rockaway Avenue in Valley Stream (which was known as Rum Junction)¹⁴ all vied for the same clientele. Carl Goeller even opened a hotel across from the new St. Boniface Church further north on Fosters Meadow Road. All of the saloons served hearty food at reasonable prices to attract customers. Gunther reported on a typical early 20th century bar menu for the main midday meal.

[S]oup was always free, the lunch was 15c. [A] different menu each day, pot roast, pork chops, beef stew, tenderloin, and on Friday fish and two vegetables; on each table was a big plate of rye bread and a bottle of catsup. [A] big glass of beer 12 oz. for 5c. [W]e were busy from 12 to 1. [O]ne thing we didn't give the boys was napkins. [I]t is a wonder we didn't go broke with these lunches.¹⁴

According to newspaper accounts of the period, the saloons all used similar promotions to stimulate business. Some brought in vaudeville acts from as far away as the big city of Brooklyn. Others sponsored target shooting contests out behind the establishment; live pigeons were substituted on occasion. Boxing matches among the local sports were sponsored, with the possibility of side bets within the crowd. Since this was a rural area, hog guessing contests were an annual affair. Participants paid twenty-five or fifty cents for the opportunity of guessing the weight of a hog raised by a local farmer with the closest guess taking the prize money. In 1897, the PastTime Social Club was organized with its headquarters at Herman's Hotel.¹⁶ The club sponsored dances and balls to be held at the hotel which were open to all local residents. But, the organization most closely identified with Herman's was a German-American militia group called the Young Farmers' Light Guard.



Captain Albert Schmitt of the Young Farmers' Light Guard with his officers. Probably 1890's. Joan Schmitt.



Awaiting the start of the Turnout across from Herman's Hotel. 1913. Carol Hintze.

Prior to the Civil War, it was fashionable to form militia groups or *Schuetzenvereine* (shooting clubs) in German sections of large cities in the North. There the recent immigrants could wear colorful uniforms and practice military drills while speaking their native language. Yet the organizations tended to be more social than military. After the War, the popularity of these groups spread to the suburbs and then to more rural areas.¹⁷ In 1869, the Young Farmers' Light Guard was organized in Fosters Meadow, with its name describing its members. Officers of the Guard were elected annually with the positions consisting of captain, 1st lieutenant, 2nd lieutenant, Orderly sergeant, treasurer and secretary. The guard probably had its original headquarters at the Central Avenue Hotel, but there appears to have been a falling out during the proprietorship of George Barb and it met at neighboring hotels. When Joseph Gunther, a former captain of the Guard took over operation of the

hotel in 1892, the Guard moved back and would remain there for the remainder of its existence.

Members of the Guard were mostly in their late teens to mid-twenties, although a few participated into their late thirties. They met on a regular basis at the hotel to drill and practice target shooting. Fortunately, beer was always available for purchase at their headquarters. They would make an appearance as a unit at weddings and funerals and they sponsored two major events during the year. Each winter, which could be long and quiet in a rural farm community, they sponsored a masquerade ball open to the public at their headquarters. It was in October, at the height of harvest, that the Young Farmers' Light Guard had its annual Turnout. Its description in a booklet issued for the 50th anniversary of the incorporation of Valley Stream makes the event seem rather serene.

The Farmers' Turnout was the way the farmers displayed their harvest. Fruits and vegetables were neatly loaded on wagons and paraded through the Village. The parade started at Herman's Hotel on Elmont Road, circled through the village, and ended at the same place. The Turnout ended with a Turkey shoot, and prizes were awarded for the best decorated wagon.²³

However, our memorialist Edward Gunther, who worked as a bartender at his father's Jamaica tavern from 1909 to 1917, painted a more robust picture.

There was a large dance hall in the rear of the saloon [Herman's]. [T]his was headquarters for the Young Farmers' Light Guard. [E]very fall of the year the boys had a turnout – they used three market wagons each drawn by a team of horses. [O]ne was used for the fruit & vegetables. [T]here were big racks on the side of the wagon about five feet high. [T]he fruit and vegetables were fastened to these racks—the name

Farmers' Light Guard was spelled out with white onions. [T]he boys spent several days getting this wagon in shape, it was also covered with flags and streamers. [A]nother farm wagon was used to carry the six or eight piece band..., the third wagon was used for prizes. [T]here were about thirty of the boys who rode horseback—the horses were decorated with streamers and flags. [T]here was a captain appointed every year. [T]hey would leave Dad's place about nine o'clock in the morning stop at all the merchants these boys done business with, and they would get a prize; the captain would shout present and the band would play a tune and then to the next merchant. [T]he parade would leave the saloon, up Elmont Road to Hempstead Turnpike west to Queens Village, Hollis, Jamaica – at John Hatters in Richmond Hill which is also a saloon the boys had lunch. [T]hen they would start to return. I remember seeing them stop in later years when we had the saloon at South Street and Merrick Road Jamaica. [T]hen to Springfield,



Turnout, 1913. Display indicates the founding date of the Guard as 1869. Carol Hintze.

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Rosedale, Valley Stream and back to Dad's place. Most of the merchants gave money. [T]here was a group of judges appointed by the boys to set up prizes. Dad had a shooting gallery set up in the yard. [T]hey would shoot at targets the one got the highest score got first prize, which was a nice lot of money. [E]ven the low score didn't do bad. Mother and several women worked all day preparing for two big meals - one for the judges in the late afternoon and the big supper at Midnight. [T]he dance would start about eight o'clock in the evening and would finish about five o'clock in the morning. [S]ome of the farmer boys had big heads the next day.¹⁹

It is amazing to think that any of the boys could have hit the broad side of a barn much less a small target after visiting so many saloons, but maybe the real sharpshooters abstained. The first place prize was not always as generous as Gunther reported. In 1893, it consisted of \$5 and a ton of fertilizer.²⁰

The YFLG was not the only German-American militia organization in that vicinity. Newspaper accounts mention the Hempstead Farmers' Light Guard in Franklin Square, the Old Farmers Light Guard and the Original Old Farmers' Light Guard that met in Queens Village. However, Herman's Hotel and the Young Farmers' Light Guard seemed to have a mutually beneficial relationship that lasted well into the second decade of the Twentieth century. Two calamitous events occurred within three years of each other that had a disastrous impact on that relationship. On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. Suddenly, it was no longer socially acceptable for a group of young German-Americans to parade around in uniform carrying rifles. The last known reference to the organization is a newspaper item promoting their Masquerade Ball scheduled for February 17 1917.²¹ There is no report that it was ever held. Herman's had to sustain the loss of one of its oldest organizations to call the hotel its headquarters. But, things soon got worse. On January 29, 1920 the Volstead Act became law. The United States entered the era of Prohibition.



Herman's Bar & Grill, 1940's. Steve Herman.

Prohibition was not kind to the German-American hotels and taverns that had previously flourished throughout on Long Island. Most did not survive that government enforced curtailment of business. Many of the wood framed buildings fell victim to fires during that period and were never able to reopen. Some of their owners found it difficult to adjust to new occupations after following in their father's footsteps as a provider of fine spirits. John M. Herman found a job in a related field. The 1920 Federal Census lists his occupation as a "Revenue inspector".²² And who would be better suited to help the government enforce the ban on alcohol than someone who understood the business? Luckily for Herman's, John M. must not have brought the pressures of his job home with him, since he continued to live in the hotel until 1926. Florence Krummenacker Tauber (born 1906) grew up on a nearby farm and was a friend of John

M.'s daughter. When asked about the effect of Prohibition on Herman's, she stated that nothing ever changed, at least on the inside. They had to take the signs off the outside of the building, but while "Mr. Herman worked for the Government, his sons tended bar at the tavern." Food and drink was served all the way up to the end of Prohibition.²³ Not surprisingly, Herman's was able to reopen in 1933 with the repeal of Prohibition without seeming to miss a beat.

Herman's operated as a neighborhood bar and grill into the 1950's. It had its regular bar crowd, but also attracted others in the area with its reputation for very good hamburgers. I have been told that the secret was that they ground the beef themselves, fresh every day. Sometime in the late 1950's, after the death of John M. Herman in 1955, Herman's bar and grill closed its doors.

In 1960, Raymond Hoeffner, who owned his own construction firm in East Meadow, was hired to demolish Herman's Hotel to make room for a gas station. He had never set foot in the place before that day, but the ghosts must have been friendly. Both his father, Andrew Hoeffner, and his grandfather, Nicholas Hoeffner had been active members of the Young Farmers Light Guard.²⁴

ENDNOTES

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3. Deeds, Queens County, NY, Liber 166 13.
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5. *Tenth Census of the United States*, Population Schedules, Town of Hempstead NY, e.d. 274, 25.
6. *Queens County Sentinel*, Hempstead, NY (January 30, 1879).
7. St Boniface Roman Catholic Church, baptismal records, Book II, 48.
8. Robert Sappelt's diaries, privately owned by his family.
9. Carol Herman Hintze and Raymond Herman, interviews with the author, December 10, 2001 and January 9, 2002, respectively. They are first cousins and are also grandchildren of John M. Herman.
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12. *Long Island Press*, "Farmhouse restoration yields treasures" (November 1, 1976), 8.
13. Sappelt, entry of January 20, 1897.
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16. *Queens County Sentinel*, Hempstead, NY (September 30, 1897).
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18. Ruehl, p. 25.
19. Gunther, pp. 2-5.
20. Sappelt, entry of October 2, 1893.
21. *Hempstead Sentinel*, Hempstead, NY, (January 26, 1917).
22. *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Population Schedules, Town of Hempstead NY, e.d. 35, 13A.
23. Florence Krummenacker Tauber, interview with the author, February 2, 2002.
24. Raymond Hoeffner, interview with the author, January 23, 2002.

Paul Hoffman lives in Jamesport with his wife Patricia. His interest in Fosters Meadow grew out of his discovery that eight of his great-great-grandparents were among its original German settlers in the 1850's.

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