



**City of San Bernardino
Historical and Pioneer Society
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By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

**JULIUS OEHL AND SAN BERNARDINO'S
OEHL MEAT PACKING COMPANY**

By Neil Gilbert Oehl

The family name of Oehl became an integral part of San Bernardino in 1886, but there are some interesting facts about the Oehls which precede that date. My paternal grandfather, Julius Oehl, was born January 6, 1855, in Nestve (Næstved) on the large island of Sjælland, in what is now Denmark. His wife, Catherine Claussen, was born on February 3, 1858, in Gelting, a town near the northeast coast of the Schleswig-Holstein province, just south of what is now the border between Germany and Denmark. This border was always in contention and flux between those two countries.

My great-grandparents, Julius and Louise (Lychosen) Oehl, sent their seventeen-year-old son to America to avoid his being conscripted into the Prussian Army. Great-grandfather Oehl was both a civil servant and military man, and at the time of sending Grandfather Julius Oehl out of his native land, was a holder of the Iron Cross and the head of a prison in Nestve, thus he had seen the ramifications of war and such, and did not want his son to be subjected to perhaps a very short life while in the military.



**Julius Oehl, Paternal
Grandfather**

When I was in Hamburg, Germany, in 1993, I checked the shipping records for that port to find that Julius Oehl the younger had shipped out from there aboard the *Westphalia* on 16 November 1872, headed for New York City, where he arrived as a stranger in a foreign land. From New York, he headed westward to Kansas City to obtain employment in the meat packing houses of that terminal city. It was in Kansas City that he met Henry Eckhardt, and the two men continued to respond to the call of the West, immediately traveling to Montana, where they began work in the meat butchering trade. Julius and Henry rode horseback to the Yellowstone River area, where they killed and skinned buffalo, prepared the hides and floated them down the Missouri River to the market city of St. Louis. When their hides were all sold, they would ride back up to the Montana area and continue their hunting and skinning of buffalo.

It was perhaps those same hides gleaned from hunting for military meat supplies that were sent down river to St. Louis, for Julius hunted and supplied meat for Colonel George Armstrong Custer and his military men in that area of Montana. He also worked under contract with William R. "Buffalo Bill" Cody to supply meat for construction crews, in particular for the Kansas Pacific Railroad line. It is known that after Custer's Last Stand at the Little Bighorn in June 1876, Julius left that area and moved eastward to the Black Hills of South Dakota and the mining camps located there. From South Dakota, he made his way down through the mining camps of Colorado and worked again supplying meat for the small railroads being built through that area and into New Mexico.



Julius and Louise Oehl, Great-grandparents

By the time Julius turned thirty in 1885, he had gained at least twelve years' experience in the meat butchering business. He planned his new future by making his way back to New York City and then sending for his sweetheart, Catherine Claussen, who left from Hamburg and arrived in New York in June of 1885, where they were married immediately.

The newlyweds went back west to Kansas City, as Julius was hired as foreman for the Jacob Dole Packing Company. His experience eventually took him and his new bride from Kansas City to Socorro, New Mexico, on the invitation of his old friend, Henry Eckhardt, to open a meat packing house and retail meat store. It was there in Socorro, in 1886, that the pair welcomed their first child, a son named Ernest.

Later, when trade in the New Mexico area hit a slump, Eckhardt left Socorro and moved farther west to California and into San Bernardino. He kept encouraging his old friend, Julius, and his new family to leave Socorro and move to San Bernardino, and eventually he once again convinced them to follow his bidding. The family traveled the southern route that was open to them through Arizona and into Southern California via San Diego. Moving northward, they arrived in San Bernardino in October of 1886. Henry Eckhardt was then working as a butcher for the Burcham family on D Street. Julius first went to work for Tom Carter in a shop on E Street near Third Street, and later acquired the Carter business, turning it into Oehl's Meat Market. This was on a site immediately south of the future Masonic Building on E Street. A second meat shop was opened on Third Street in the old Commercial Hotel Building.



Julius and Catherine Oehl. Grandparents

Julius purchased his cattle from R. F. Garner, Sr., an early-day cattleman, and opened his first slaughterhouse on East Ninth Street along Warm Creek in 1900. (Interestingly, in 1952, my parents, Herbert and Bonnie [Holmes] Oehl, having to make way for the civic center area, left their old home at 462 Mountain View Avenue and built a new home near the slaughterhouse site, just west of Warm Creek on East Ninth Street.)

Julius later moved his slaughterhouse from the East Ninth Street location to a spot on South E Street, near the Santa Ana River, and almost to old Colton Avenue. Here they had large acreage for feeding cattle, sheep and hogs, and a more modern Oehl Meat Packing Company was begun. When the new Masonic Building was opened in 1904, Julius leased the entire ground floor as a location for San Bernardino's largest meat market and grocery store.



Oehl's Meat Market – 1902

The family grew as Julius and Catherine Oehl gave birth to Richard (1889); Julius (1892); Freda (1896); and fraternal twins Herbert Conrad (my father) and Conrad Herbert (1898). When Julius died in April 1909, Catherine took over the running of the businesses. Each one of the sons eventually entered into some facet of the meat business. My father, Herbert, and his twin, Conrad, were at that time attending the Harvard Military Academy in Los Angeles, and were brought back home to San Bernardino upon their father's death. They then attended school in San Bernardino, and I know that my father also attended Skadron College of Business in town.



Oehl family at 330 Seventh Street in San Bernardino – 1901.

Back (top step), L to R: Grandfather Julius; Great-uncle Conrad. Middle, L to R: Grandmother Catherine; twins Conrad Herbert (uncle) and Herbert Conrad (father); Uncle Ernest; Great-aunt Dora (wife of Great-uncle Conrad). Front, L to R: Uncle Julius; Aunt Frieda; Uncle Richard.

The market in the Masonic Building was modernized. The meat department was equipped with glass showcases and meat cutting blocks, and the slabs of beef, lamb and pork were no longer on hooks outside, but instead were kept in coolers. Later, corral-fed cattle, purchased from as far away as Utah and Idaho, were shipped in by railroad cars. The business began distributing meat products to outlying areas such as Indio, Barstow and Daggett. The retail market was later relocated on the south side of Fourth Street, just west of E Street. (My mother saved one of the old marble meat counters [2' x 5.5' x 1.5'] for years and used it as a raised fireplace hearth in their new home. I subsequently saved the marble slab from my parents' house when I sold it in 1986, and am now using the marble as a desktop in my home here in San Diego.)



Oehl Meat Packing Company. Julius Oehl (center) and various meat butchers – 1905.

Some of my fondest memories are of accompanying my father to the South E Street packing house, where I would watch the old German sausage makers grind their recipes for different sausages and cold cut sandwich meats, made in large loaves. They had huge vats with mixers, and the sausage makers would throw in their different seasonings and different ingredients to make the many flavors and styles of manufactured and cooked meats that became so popular. It was interesting to see the sausage makers attach the wiener casings to the machine, shoot the mixture into the long casings, and then watch the men twist the width of their hands to make the wieners, hang them on poles and wheel the carts into the cooking ovens. The carts were later wheeled out of the ovens, cooled, and put into the huge refrigerators. On Saturdays, I was given the job of skinning wieners from their casings and packing them into twenty-pound boxes, which were then shipped to markets and stores throughout the area. I earned the sum of five cents per box on my first paying job!

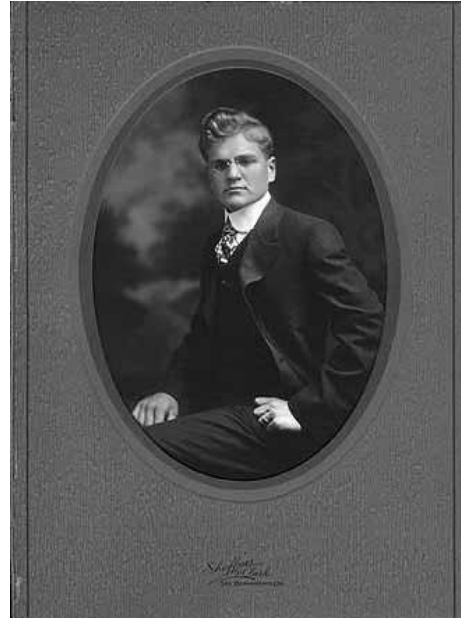
Another memory is of getting up at three a.m., driving down to the plant with my father and loading a truck of meat supplies for a “run up the hill” to the Arrowhead Springs Hotel—or sometimes, even farther up to Crestline or Lake Arrowhead and the lodge there—in order to deliver provisions needed in a hurry for their guests. Dad became, more or less, the outside sales manager for the meat packing

business, and he had a regular solicitor's route to many of the outlying area markets, which were plenty, because the supermarket industry was still just developing at that time. My father, Herbert, was the original innovator and provider for the meat department of Sage's Market, on the northwest corner of Baseline and E Streets, which was one of the first superstores in San Bernardino.

Due to the advent of World War II, the strong development of labor unions in America, and the changing economy and merchandising, the Oehls' small-town business could no longer compete against the likes of the giant Wilson, Rath's, Swift and Armour meat companies throughout the United States. The Oehl Meat Packing Company closed their doors for good in 1942.



**Julius Oehl and Ernest Ruiz
at Meat Packing House**



**Herbert C. Oehl, Father,
at age twenty – 1918**



Oehl family reunion in New York – 1888.

Back row, L to R: Great-uncles Fred Laurensen and Fredrick Oehl; Grandfather Julius Oehl; Great-uncles Conrad Oehl, Conrad Christelman and ?___Willer. Front row, L to R: Great-aunt Lucy Oehl Laurensen (twin of Louise); Grandmother Catherine Claussen Oehl (with son Ernest); Great- aunts Louise Oehl Christelman (twin of Lucy/with son Fred) and Marie Oehl Willer.



Oehl Meat Packing Company was an entrant in the San Bernardino Valley Centennial Parade – May 1910. Shown in this photograph is just part of the Oehl company's parade entry, which consisted of fifteen wagons, one float and horseback riders. Note that all the men aboard the large wagon and those on horseback are sporting the traditional meat cutter's white cap, which many real butchers in markets still wear.

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