

Itinerant Peddler to Merchandising Magnate: The Story of Aaron Meier

BY LOYCE MARTINAZZI

Back in the day if you said “meet me under the clock” everybody knew that meant the clock in the middle of the main floor at Meier and Frank in downtown Portland.

Aaron Frank was born in Bavaria in 1831 and immigrated first to California, where he purchased wholesale goods, then up to Oregon where he secured one of the last Donation Land Claims. He was most certainly not a farmer, but hey, 160 acres of free land was good. His DLC, poor rocky ground, was located in the area now known as Tonquin. He immediately started walking up and down the valley with a pack on his back holding goods that he peddled to local farmers. According to family history, Meier stopped to visit William Whitney and his family near Butteville. Meier asked Whitney if he could sleep in the yard overnight. Whitney said “I will give you a bed in the house. We are having our evening meal and you are welcome to eat with us.” Thereafter he always stayed with the Whitneys on his trips. He said that Portland could become a much larger and better city than Oregon City, as the Willamette and Columbia Rivers could accommodate large vessels. He wanted to start a store in Portland, but lacked enough funds. Whitney lent Meier \$3,000 in 1857 to build a store on Front Street in Portland. Although he always paid the interest, he made no payment of the principal, and after he died, the family



contacted the family, who paid the debt in gold coin. Tualatin Historical Society member Edie Crissell Torgeson is William Whitney's great granddaughter. She told me about the loan made to Aaron Meier. (Edie is 94 years old, and according to her daughter, she is thrilled that I remembered the story and am writing about it. Somewhere in her boxes of papers she has the note marked paid.)

Meier was an astute business man. When crossing Taylor's ferry across the Tualatin river, he always held out a \$20 gold coin for payment. Ferrymen would usually wave him across, as they didn't have enough

change. But Sarah Taylor, who often ran the ferry when her menfolk were away, saved up enough change and took his coin, saving it for years.

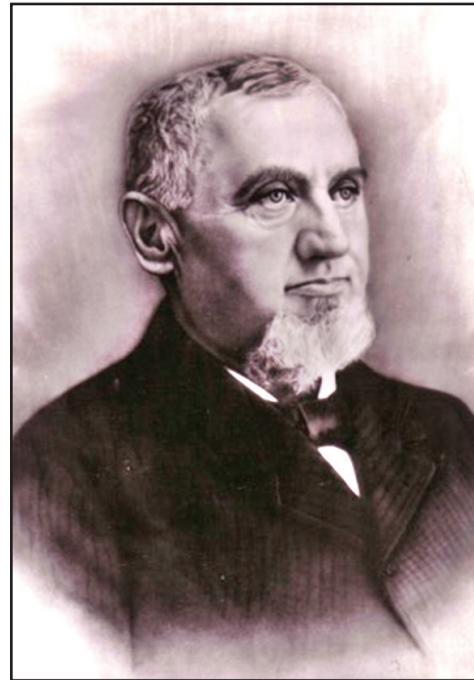
Meier returned to Germany in 1864 when his father died, and received his inheritance. He married Jeanette Hirsch, and brought her back to his business in Portland. In 1873, Emil Frank became a partner and the store was then given the famous name, Meier & Frank. A Meier daughter married a Frank son.

Julius Meier, Aaron and Jeanette's son, became the only Independent candidate to serve as Oregon's governor from 1931 to 1935. He founded the Oregon State Police and the Oregon Liquor Commission after prohibition.

The famous store changed locations several times, but in 1915, the new store opened with 15 floors and 11 acres of selling space. That's where the clock stood as a meeting place, and where shoppers rushed to be first in line to go down into the basement for “Friday Surprise” sales. The “Georgian” tea room was lavishly furnished, and elevators were handy for shopping every floor. Both Frances (Perry) and Helen (Koch) Wager, Tualatin girls, worked as elevator operators at M&F. Frances told me recently that the elevator girls would go up to the roof on their breaks, and one day she saw Aaron Frank, president at the time, standing on the very rim of the roof, looking at a fire several blocks away. Aaron's son Gerry Frank now writes travel items for the Oregonian newspaper.

During the Great Depression, Aaron Frank, manager, ran a one page article in the Oregonian with the word “Confidence”. Over 100 people brought their savings to the store for safe keeping.

During World War II, M&F supported the allied forces, conducting the largest sale of war bonds in the country-\$32 million worth.



Aaron Meier co-founder of the famous Meier and Frank store in downtown Portland.



Julius Meier, son of Aaron and Jeanette Meier, served as governor of Oregon from 1931 to 1935.



Mono-rail at Meier & Frank's Santaland.

Jeanette's family established the White Stag business, and until recently, the White Stag sign lit up every evening, and at holiday time sported a red nose, just like Rudolph.

“Style and Tradition” and Money Back Guarantees were slogans for M&F. By 1966 the store, as well as branch stores in several locations, was acquired by the May company, who kept the name. In 2006 the business was acquired by Macy's and in 2006 the name Meier and Frank was discontinued.

During the 40s after the chores were finished, lots of we local kids walked down to the white store in Tualatin on the corner of Seneca, (now gone) and caught the bus to downtown Portland, where

we would visit Meier & Frank and ooh and ah at the lovely merchandise, then walk a block or so further and spend our berry picking money at the dime stores, Woolworth's, Newberry's and Kress.

So the itinerant peddler who acquired a donation land claim right here in our area, went on to become a most successful merchandiser. And some of us will not soon forget Meier & Frank.



Loyce Martinazzi was born and raised in Tualatin and is passionate about Tualatin History. She is currently Lecturer of the Winona Grange, Co-Founder of the Tualatin Historical Society and Co-Author of *Tualatin... From the Beginning*.



The Meier & Frank department store, in downtown Portland, covered an entire block, 5th and 6th Avenue, and Morrison and Alder streets. Completed in 1915, the store offered fifteen floors of quality goods.