

## **Impressions of My Father**

Frederick DeBoom Witzel

1<sup>st</sup> draft, ca 1985<sup>1</sup>

I do not remember my father<sup>2</sup> when he did not have gray hair. As a small child, I thought of him as having entered life as one already middle-aged. "Gray" described his personality, his habits and his attitudes. Even the suits he wore to business and the clothing in which he relaxed on vacation were all a medium gray. Gray was his color.<sup>3</sup>

In our earliest years, before beginning school and adopting English, we called him Papa, with the accent on the second syllable, as in European usage. Later this was shorted to Pa, a name he liked and with which he was comfortable.

Pa was a good and gentle man, rarely given to shouting or loud argument, who, when he felt it necessary, generally made his point by persuasion rather than bluster. It is not conceivable that, as a boy, he ever had a fist fight with his peers.

He seemed to be a sad man who took his lot in life with an air of mild resignation; he held the somewhat cynical view that the current level of the business economy was usually bad but occasionally relieved by bright intervals. He assumed that city politics in San Francisco were agreeably and consistently corrupt, that any right thinking person would vote moderate Republican, and that one should look back and treasure the occasional events in the past that were full of jolly fun. He had a teasing wit in his early years, a throw-back to his father. This was called good-natured joshing and generally referred to a person's appearance, his weight or his personal habits.

Several unhappy factors influenced Pa's life: his health, the 1906 fire and earthquake, and the dominating relationships of his mother early on and of my mother after his marriage.

Pa was not physically active. For almost all of his life he was frequently marginally ill. The basis for this tragic situation was a continuing source of dispute and a matter of conjecture. In X-ray pictures his lungs were said to bear scars apparently of childhood tuberculosis. A strong contrary opinion was held by some that a careless nurse in his babyhood had spilled a can of talcum onto his face and that this powder had been sucked permanently into his respiratory system – a 19<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of asbestosis, or black lung. Shortly after I was born he spent several months alone in a tubercular sanitarium in the Sierra foothills; the separation was very distressing to my mother. In a later period he seemed to be the annual target of winter flu, the grippe, and endured several episodes of minor surgery. In his final years it was my private opinion that he suffered from agoraphobia, an affliction characterized by a fear of physically going outside his home, and a burden requiring almost super-human mental effort to overcome. I would guess that he did not feel up to it.

Exercise and sports were not for Pa although they were an abiding interest in many conversations with my brothers and me, and our friends. These discussions were one of his chief vicarious avocations and we all enjoyed them. Engaging in competitive sports and an emphasis on physical fitness were not considered to be

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Eleven undated pages of hand-written notes, black ink on lined tablet, with many edits, clearly his first efforts to put these thoughts on paper.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Franke Emil Witzel (6 Dec 1882 California – 12 June 1951 San Francisco). Known as "Fred."

<sup>3</sup> In my early childhood I had the curious habit of assigning colors to people, especially relatives. A favorite aunt was a cheerful creamy yellow, my mother an angry red-orange, a close friend a dark blue, my brothers blond and milk white.

fashionable until the advent of the campaign speeches made by the first Roosevelt before he took office; these notions only began to be popular during and after World War I. Pa was sent in the late 1890's to a Lutheran military academy for several years and was never engaged in any of the athletic events. It was not part of the German schooling tradition.

An interesting sidelight to Pa's physical problems was his aversion to learning to operate a car. Unlike his brother, Milton, other relatives and his business contemporaries, he never owned a car and avoided the prospect of driving. Perhaps it was a lack of confidence in his reaction time; he never explained.

Completing this picture of a sedentary life style was an almost total lack of mechanical ability. I do not recall ever seeing him with a hammer, wrench or shovel in his hand. He used his persuasive charm to get his male relatives or my brothers and me to perform the odd jobs and routine maintenance that, over the years, a lived-in household requires.

The fire and earthquake were catastrophic to both Pa and my mother. Pa's family was comfortably well off in the smug and cohesive German Lutheran community of San Francisco. Barring a business disaster, as a boy and young man, he could expect to lead a quiet existence as a benevolent *pater familias*, deserving of respect among his business and social contemporaries. In a community where one can achieve the status of "old money" in two or three generations, he could be considered to have had it made.

This comfortable world was blasted, for both Pa and my mother, by the severe losses that their parents endured. His grandfather's brewery then occupied the triangle of Columbus Ave., Jones and Filbert streets and was well within the area reduced to rubble and burn-out. [It is today the location of the Bimbo's 365 Club.] Not only was this event, and their consequent abandonment by their insurance guarantors, a severe physical and financial loss to their families, it appears to have been a heavy psychological blow as well. For the balance of their lives, it was an excuse for frequent lamentation and complaint and a justification for diffidence in action.

These attitudes are noteworthy because, after the short-lived 1907 financial panic, the city went into a long term prosperous boom. Within ten years the city was re-built and a world-class national exposition was held (the Panama-Pacific). Almost all traces of the disaster were obliterated. The Bay Area became a magnet for West Coast financial operations and a shipping and manufacturing location of prime importance.

An observant outsider would conclude that two women, his mother and his wife, made almost all of his day-to-day routine decisions outside his business and dominated the form, flavor and style of his life. In doing so, they provided him with an opportunity to avoid the responsibility for minor decision-making and to relax with good grace in an atmosphere of unhappy, passive and silent acceptance. Two examples come to mind.



Above left: Pa & Emma with Frederick and Claude in March 1914 (from Emma's snapshot album named "Yacht Views." Above right: Pa, Everett, Claude, Frederick and Emma around 1924. Below: Claude, Everett, Emma, Frederick, Virgilia, Pa (standing); Claire, Jane holding Kenneth (kneeling); Joanna, Terry, Ron (front row) in 1946.



Emma<sup>4</sup> told me a typical story. When they were first married and were invited out to evening parties, Pa expected her to lay out for him his evening clothes – starched shirt, buttons, and studs all in proper order and place – as his mother so carefully and meticulously had done for him. This tale always ended by her cryptic remark that she flatly refused to provide this valet service.



A second, not so trivial, example was what I feel sure was her decision to move into her mother's fairly large Victorian house on Page Street<sup>5</sup> when Claude and I were three and five. These accommodations became less than tolerable in a few years. She found, and she bought out of her own inheritance, the home on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue<sup>6</sup> in which they lived for almost fifty years. On the mantle in the living room of this house, next to the Swiss glass-enclosed pendulum clock, was a picture of her father. This photograph often was a conversational point of reference to the provider of the roof and shelter for the household. It probably was galling to Pa, but he never mentioned it. It was, however, a perfect symbolic gesture.

My mother and Pa were otherwise very close and, I felt, had a high degree of affection and love for each other. Largely trained by custom and upbringing, they both were completely loyal to each other and to their bickering relationship. They were very proud of their offspring, although they rarely admitted it. She was an inveterate telephone gossip and spent interminable hours discussing with her friends, among other things, the exploits of her "boys," quite often to their discomfort.

Curiously, Pa and my mother rarely showed any overt affection for each other. I do not recall ever seeing Pa put his arm around her, kiss her, or pat or stroke her in a friendly way. Nor did she ever look suggestively, or flirt or encourage him to show affection. It was as if those displays were reserved for a more private setting, and away from the children.

Emma also had the heart of a Prohibitionist, although she did not completely restrict liquor in the house. Pa always had a bottle or two in a dining room cupboard available for occasional visitors, plumbers and repair men who gave satisfactory service. The choice was limited, generally a one-ounce liqueur glass of brandy or whiskey. This was called 'schnapps' and was always drunk, head thrown back, in a single gulp with much smacking of lips and patting of belly and followed by a sip of water. No one, as far as I know, ever drank to excess in my mother's house. A bottle generally lasted several years.

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<sup>4</sup> As adults, her three sons all called their mother 'Emma,' as did her grandchildren. (ed.)

<sup>5</sup> 1777 Page Street, San Francisco. This building is frequently included in books on SF Victorian homes because of its handsome architecture. (ed.)

<sup>6</sup> 567 17<sup>th</sup> Ave, San Francisco (ed.)