

Witzel & Baker¹
Frederick DeBoom Witzel
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Pa inherited this business from his father. Witzel & Baker was established as a partnership by two distantly related German immigrants in 1881. A butter, eggs and cheese commission house was located in the old SF commission district². The initial book of accounts shows that the original investment was \$5000, a decently respectable sum for those days. These funds almost certainly were provided by Pa's grandfather, Claus Wreden, as a start in life for his daughter Annie and her newly immigrated husband, John F. Witzel.



Anna Wreden Witzel – 18 years old³



The origins, history and methods of operation and disappearance of both the Wreden Brewery and of Witzel & Baker deserve to be told separately in another tale. Their chief influence was to give Pa the sense of security in his youth that he was being provided for and could live without worry for the remainder of his days. Two events, one major commercial innovation, the other a catastrophe, shattered this concept.

¹ These notes written in July 1980, are based mainly on childhood impressions of life at home, beginning well before World War I (my father was then 29). and ending when I departed for Berkeley in 1927. The frequency of my visits home, at first weekly while in college, dropped off rapidly after taking a commission in the Navy.

² Cousin Ron contributes that the 1920 SF business listings include Witzel & Baker at 123-125 Davis. (ed.)

³ This photo was labeled by Emma, her daughter-in-law. One wonders if the original photo has been replaced as this person, and certainly the dress, look remarkably like one labeled 'Clara Wreden' (her sister) in the same large, gilt-edged photo album. (ed.)

Witzel & Baker's commercial function was to bring eggs and processed dairy products from the German and other farmers in the surrounding Bay Area counties and the Central Valley to German retail shops and restaurants in the city. In the ethnically-oriented environment of the 19th century, most American institutions and business (banks, hospitals, wholesale and retail stores organized by first generation immigrants) relied on their countrymen for cultural and economic assurance. An example was the Bank of Italy that in the 1920s was transformed into the Bank of America. Some, like the Hibernia Bank and the French Hospital, today have widened their custom but have retained their original ethnic names.

Claus Wreden, at first arrival a grocery store owner himself, filled the need for a German butter and egg wholesaler to serve the large number of German Mom & Pop retail stores in the city. Witzel & Baker began therefore with a near monopoly. According to my grand father, selling to grocer customers was quite informal and after each sale is was the custom to cross the street to the local saloon to have a quick drink for the buyer's good health.

Pa took over direction shortly after his marriage in 1907 and his father, John F. Witzel, retired from control. The business was successful and supported family trips to Europe for his father, investments in boats and memberships in yacht clubs.

As the country became more unified, particularly under the impact of World War I and as the children of immigrants took over, the emphasis on ethnic considerations receded. Moreover, economies of scale became apparent in the early 1920s in the food distribution industry. Marketing of eggs and dairy products was taken over by farmer's associations at the producer end of the pipe line and at the consumer end, the Mom & Pop stores at the consumer end were shunted aside by the development of large chains in the late 1920s. The margins in commodity buying and selling had become extremely narrow and left no opportunity for profit. Money could still be made by speculating in car load shipments to the East Coast and taking advantage of price fluctuations at the cars moved en route, but this procedure held a high risk.

Pa was faced with the prospect of making a fundamental and basic change in his business strategy. He must have agonized over this decision for several years. By 1930, even before the stock market crash and the great depression, the firm of Witzel and Baker was wound up.

Pa's sense of security was based on his ability as an entrepreneur. Several times he mentioned in the late 1920s that he could not face the prospect of working for someone else and for a salary. In the California environment after the Civil War, no self-respecting businessman worked for a living. This reduced status was reserved for educators, civil servants and professional athletes. In the 50 year period of 1870-1920 men made and lost fortunes and downtown San Francisco abounded with examples of successful speculators and entrepreneurs. No member of the Wreden, Witzel, Verns, Hazeltine or De Boom families worked for a wage until the advent of the Great Depression.

After several months of searching, Pa invested in Pacific Container co., a wholesale carton and paper products distributor and began a new career. Pa always had shrewd business sense in personal negotiations and could handle adequately the daily one to one encounters with customers, sellers and competitive merchants. His apparent failure to grasp the long-run implications of the consumer changes in middleman jobbers distribution was shared by almost every other business operator prior to the Great Depression.

This effort turned out to be moderately successful. As his partner, Arthur Sommers, took over increasing control of the organization, Pa's influence began to recede and, finally, by about 1936 Pa retired, ostensibly for reasons of health. He was then in his very early 50s.