

Wreden Story Notes
Frederick DeBoom Witzel
1st draft, ca 1985¹

There is not much of a written record of the early Wreden and Witzel story, nor were our ancestors very informative in discussing their past. It seemed as if we were talked at, rather than with, and that at birth, on day one, we were supposed already to be familiar with the names and places and past history and culture of the German section of the city.

An extremely important consideration in the formation of the San Franciscan version of the so-called "melting pot" was not only the diversity but the very sharp divisiveness of the ethnic groups and the rigid pecking-order that was enforced among them. For people born after the Great Depression, it is difficult to understand the levels of prejudice and arrogance that existed in the ordinary conversation and the decisions and their influence on daily lives.

Since World War II these aspects of society have become very much less powerful and it is obvious that for the young they have largely dissipated. But in my grandfather's day these influences pervaded business clubs, churches, and particularly politics. The WASP² order was then in full flower, and in the German groups, although they considered themselves second only to the Anglos – Episcopalians on Nob Hill - they were an island of smug satisfaction. Until the ship-building boom of 1941-1945, Blacks were extremely rare; Orientals lived in two ghettos (Japanese & Chinese) and did most of the mean, unhealthy work. The Irish dominated the police, firefighters and street repair and were relegated to the lower rungs scarcely higher than the labor union steward, walking bosses, and other agitators.

We do not know what Clause Wreden labored at when he arrived in 1853 shortly after the Gold Rush. His name does not appear in the City Directory until 1857 when, according to Emma's history, he had attained some standing in the community by setting up a grocery store at Sansome and Market Streets.

Untitled Fragment³

As documented elsewhere, Pa's grandparents arrived in San Francisco in the early 1850s from Hesse in Germany and immediately set up a retail grocery store at Sansome and Market Street. As told by Pa, Claus Wreden and his wife first lived in a small house surrounded by a white picket fence at 6th and Market. Later they moved to a house at O'Farell and Stockton Streets where their daughter, Anna, Pa's mother, was born.

The city, during the years following the Gold Rush, was knit socially, commercially and religiously according to strong ethnic boundaries based on the country of immigration of each group of inhabitants. One of the better organized groups were the Germans and their important sub-set, the German Jews. This later group had a major impact on the artistic life of the City – the opera, the symphony, the theatre and the ballet. These entities were influenced by language, customer and...

¹ Source: Two and a quarter pages of hand-written notes, black ink on lined tablet, with many edits, clearly his first efforts to put these thoughts on paper.

² White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant

³ Single page of handwritten notes on notepad, found in his briefcase.



⁴ These photos, labeled by Emma Witzel, are copied from her large, gold-edged photo album. Elizabeth (top left) is also labeled 'Grandma Wreden,' Claus Wreden is 'Grandpa Wreden,' and in the lower right they are together as 'Grandma, Grandpa Wreden.' They were the parents of Anna Wreden Witzel, Dad's grandmother.