



THE BOARD AND BATTEN

Newsletter of the Pacific Grove Heritage Society

August / September 1992

The Plapp Family In Pacific Grove



Photo courtesy of Ramona Reitz

Otto W. Plapp with his mother Friedericka in 1906

The Plapp Family In Pacific Grove

◆ by Ramona Andrea Reitz

Foreword

Surrounded by a lifelong collection of momentos spanning nearly one hundred years, two brothers, Albert and Otto Plapp, sat in the kitchen of the home they had shared since childhood, and told this writer some of their family story.

As the two youngest of six sons born to Karl and Friederika Plapp, Albert and Otto lived all their lives in Pacific Grove, California. They never married, went away to sea during World War II, and in their "golden" years had taken care of each older brother until all had passed away, enjoying less than good health, but sharing hobbies and friends together.

In a series of interviews (in 1985), where the major problem was to overcome shyness enough to talk about themselves, they talked about their parents, their brothers and their hometown. It is a warm and caring story.

In the late 1800's a young man by the name of Karl Christian Plapp, having served the required length of time in the military service of his country, Germany, made a decision to emigrate to the United States. Only those immigrants who had learned a trade were eligible to be admitted to the U.S. so Karl began apprenticeship as a baker in his birthplace, the village of Murrhardt, northeast of Stuttgart in Wurttemberg Province.

Karl's sweetheart, Friederika, of the nearby village of Oberbrieden, accepted his proposal of marriage and promised to join him in America as soon as he was able to send for her. Meanwhile, she continued her training as a cook. It was 1892 and Friederika could hardly wait for Karl to write that he had earned enough money for them to be married.

Karl had first sailed to New York where his ship was at anchor for one week while taking on new supplies and cargo before continuing on to Galveston, Texas. It was in Texas that Karl began working as a baker in an American Hotel, but soon he learned of an opportunity to work in one of San Francisco's large hotels, the St. Nicholas. Traveling to California next, he worked for a short time in San Francisco before moving on to the Del Monte Hotel in Monterey after hearing about this beautiful, original hotel and its many celebrity guests. Karl knew he had found the ideal place to live where he and his fiancée could begin their lives together. As soon as he could, he sent for her.

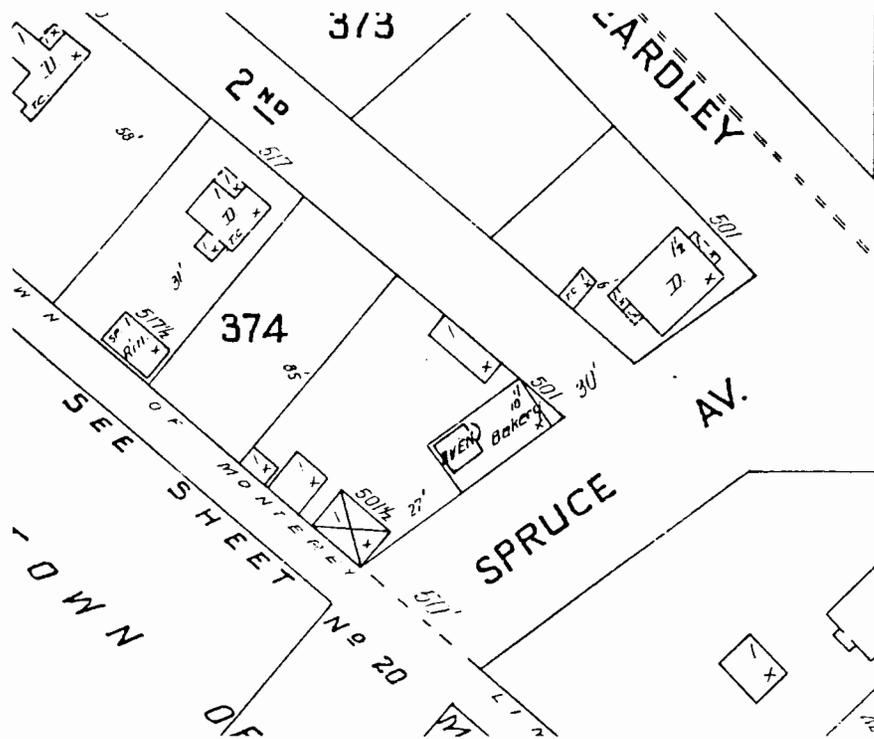
On August 9, 1893, Friederika looked out from the rail of the German ship Saale, and gazed at the Statue of Liberty, knowing that a wonderful future lay ahead for her and Karl. From Hoboken, New Jersey, she began the trip across country to join the young baker who was soon to become her husband.

Karl excitedly made arrangements for her arrival; a travel-weary Friederika was greeted by her bridegroom and whisked off to be married in Monterey by Judge Michaels. On that August day in 1893, Karl Christian Plapp, 32 years old, and his bride, 23, moved into their first home on First Street, between Pine and Laurel, in Pacific Grove. One year later, on 13 July 1894, the first of their six sons, Karl Gottlieb, was born. Following his birth were his five brothers: Reinhold (12 November 1895), Emil—named for his Aunt Emilia who was there to attend his birth on Valentine's Day (14 February 1897), Adolf (13 July 1898), Albert Egan "Max" (19 February 1901), and Otto William "Hans" (11 September 1903).

Several years of savings from Karl's long hours of work enabled the young family to purchase two parcels of land nearby, one large enough (at 2nd and Spruce Streets) to build his own bakery, and across from the bakery a two-story house (501 Eardley Ave.) where Albert and Otto still live. Everyone worked as they could, the older boys helping take on chores in the bakery and the younger ones helping their mother in the house.

Friederika was not only a professionally trained cook, her sons remember her as a "wonderful" cook, and friends and neighbors attest to the savory aromas drifting from her kitchen and back porch over to the bakery, where Karl's fragrant baked goods took over. Some of her specialties were fondly recalled by her two youngest sons as "Gefulte Noodles," always a favorite on Maundy Thursday. There was Ham and Leek Filling on "Green Thursday", Abalone Fritters, and occasionally a goose. She made Stitsbrod with huckleberries, sugar and spices. She took great pleasure in her cooking and cleaning, and taught her sons to do both as well.

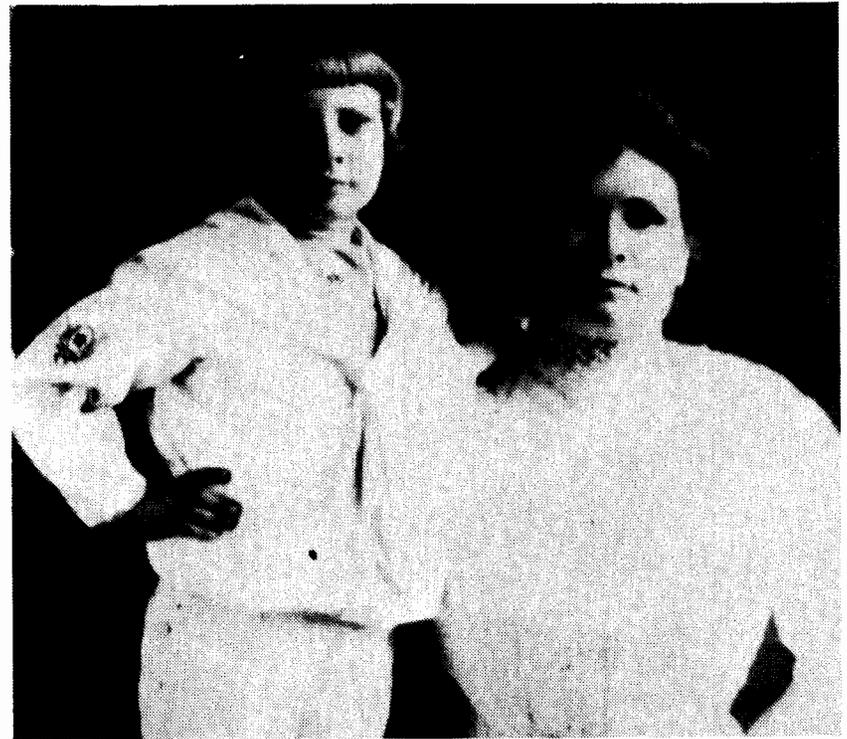
In 1913 Friederika made the first of two trips to see her family in Oberbrieden. It is also possible that with three sons in their late teens she may have wanted to check on the availability of marriageable young German girls, for she clearly disapproved of the American girls she had met. By now her eldest son, Karl, drove the delivery wagon, selling bread for five cents a loaf, along with pies, cakes, doughnuts, jelly rolls and cookies their customers enjoyed. Whether or not his mother found anyone she would approve for marriage to Karl, he never married.



1914 Sanborn map showing the Plapp house at 501 Eardley and the bakery behind it on the corner of Spruce and Second.

The Plapp brothers grew to manhood having learned their parents' values—honesty, decency and hard work, lots of it. They knew how to save their money, but it was hard to come by when they worked for their father. Still, they remember that it was their father who was the kindhearted one; he gave away cookies to the little neighbor children and he good naturedly took their making fun of the way he said "dog-nuts" for "doughnuts" in his heavy German accent. And he didn't get too mad at some of the kids, especially the Bushnells, who would carry out the end of the string from the big spool under the counter, running up David Street towards the Withers Addition where they lived.

Their mother was the disciplinarian of the family. Otto recalls one especially bad scene that happened when he was little. He and his brothers were close friends of the Lange family—there were Herb, Tillie, Minnie, Louis ("Lou") and Rudolf ("Flick"). Otto had long blonde curls which his mother refused to have cut; she had not wanted a sixth son and Otto believes she probably wanted a girl instead of him. When his hair grew in such beautiful shiny curls, she brushed it out to his shoulders and dressed him in cute little boy sailor suits she tailored for him.



Albert Plapp with his mother Friederika in 1906.

Photo courtesy of Ramona Reitz

One day "Flick" cut off Otto's curls and when she saw him she exploded with fury, chasing Otto around the kitchen and under the table where he was afraid to come out. "Flick" was so embarrassed he was unable to talk to Mrs. Plapp for years.

The early years for the boys were sometimes difficult, particularly in school, because they spoke only German at home. Emil, who had suffered serious injury in a fall from an upper window when he was a baby, was deaf and somewhat fragile; he was always taken care of by other members of the family. There was a great deal of love and sharing in the home and the Plapp boys were known as good friends to many, including the Bushnells: the father Jessie, and mother, Ramona, and their seven children, Florence, Ruth and Ruby (twins), Tessie, Eddie, Thelma and Chester. One December day in 1915, "Flick" Lange came with the tragic news that while he was hunting with Jessie Bushnell at the Seaside lakes Jessie had accidentally stumbled and his shotgun went off, killing him. The Plapps grieved for their friends; today, seventy years later they still visit one another, Otto and Albert, with Florence, Ruth, Thelma and Tessie, the four remaining Bushnell girls living.

When young American boys went off to fight the Germans in World War I, the four oldest Plapp sons were among the first to volunteer. Emil received an Honorable Discharge for his medical disabilities and returned home to help his parents and two teenage brothers, Otto and Albert. But a different kind of war was going on at home for the Plapps; American families were very suspicious of the few German folks who lived in the area and the bakery business felt the change almost immediately. Mrs. Plapp had worked routinely for some time as a cook in the hotel on Lighthouse Avenue (now the Gosby Inn), and also earned an extra income as a mid-wife for many of the families she had known during her 25 years in Pacific Grove. The family found that even with three of them serving in the United States military and another with an Honorable Discharge, many people were openly hostile, both during and after the war. The "Folks Bakery" finally had to be closed.

In 1920 there was also sad news when Jessie Bushnell's widow, Ramona, died, leaving her seven children to be sent away from the area to live with non-relative families or in outside agencies, except for Eddie, who stayed with his grandparents in Monterey. Ramona and Friederika had both worked at the Gosby Inn and for a time the Bushnells had lived close to the bakery after Jessie's death.

Friederika urged her husband to work at the golf course, where they needed someone to do occasional heavy labor. Karl Plapp was a man of small stature, still handsome at sixty years of age when he began this new type of work. On a midsummer day in 1925 he was at the Country Club Golf Course trying to help free a wagon that got stuck while pulling stumps; he crawled underneath the boom and a wire cable snapped, killing him instantly. The first of the Plapp family was buried in Pacific Grove cemetery.

During the following fifteen years the six sons remained at home with their mother, working, turning over their paychecks to her as was their custom. Friederika also worked, delivering many babies, including some of those born to Florence Bushnell and her husband, Herb Bispo, a Monterey fireman. At times, Friederika worked at Hovden's Cannery; Adolf worked in the canneries and Reinhold was a volunteer fireman. Emil worked at home. The bakery was torn down, and also the barn behind it where the horses had been kept. Friederika subdivided the lot on which the family home stood and had a smaller house built (507 Eardley), which was to be rented with the proceeds used as an income for Emil for as long as he lived.



Reinhold Plapp (second from right) on the fire truck in 1915. He was a member of Hose Co. No. 2.

In April of 1942, with Otto and her sister at her side, Friederika died of a heart attack. Five months earlier the United States entered the war after the attack at Pearl Harbor. Both Otto and Albert, 39 and 41 years old, went to sea. Also in 1942, Adolf was married and rented the smaller house for himself and his wife, Agnes.

Albert had joined the Merchant Marine and Otto went into the Navy where he was assigned to the CL104 Cruiser, U.S.S. Atlanta, as Coxswain (later as Boatswain's Mate). Although reluctant to talk about themselves and their World War II service, Albert admits that his ship was hit broadside by a German submarine. And Otto was aboard the Atlanta when she was sent to Japan in August 1945 to observe the results of a U.S. bombing mission over Hiroshima. (On that occasion all personnel were told to stay below decks, but Otto had sneaked back up topside and could see the blinding light of the bomb's mushroom cloud—even with his eyes closed.) The U.S.S. Atlanta was later used in atomic bomb tests and was blown up.

Prior to the Hiroshima bombing which helped bring the war to an end, Otto's ship was part of a naval convoy in the Pacific when on the night of March 26, 1945, Otto awoke from a disturbing dream in which he saw a little girl walking through their house. She had a white light on one shoulder and purple light on the other shoulder. It was such a vivid dream he made a note of it and later learned it had occurred at the same moment that his brother, Reinhold, died. Reinhold had been a heavy smoker and suffered a heart attack at home. In 1946, Otto and Albert returned to Pacific Grove to live with Karl and Emil in the family home. Adolf lived next door.

Otto was a surveyor for Monterey County and Albert worked in various building trades. Neither one ever married. Otto had made a promise to his father before Karl Plapp was killed that he would always take care of his brother, Emil. There had been opportunities to marry, both before and after his mother died. In fact, Otto rather favored a couple of the Bushnell girls, all of whom were known for their striking good looks—large blue eyes and dark wavy hair. But whether it was shyness, or the promise to be responsible for Emil, Otto and Albert remained at home with their brother. The eldest brother, Karl, died in February 1955. Adolf died as a result of surgery in June 1976, and Emil passed away two years later.

Asked if they were seeking "adventure," or was it a love of the sea that had taken Otto and Albert on their course aboard ships in WW II, both men chuckled at the thought and then explained it was due partly because of the uniforms—they knew they wouldn't have to wear a necktie! But of course, they both acknowledge a love of ships and the sea, and one only needs to step inside the door of their home to see photographs and paintings of ships, every kind, some shipwrecked, some of fleet maneuvers, tall sailing ships to sleek, modern vessels. A ship's clock rings out the appropriate number of bells on the quarter hours and hour. Amid the photos of young "gobs" in blue bell-bottoms and round white hats are Otto's citations for battle stars. There are large bottles and small bottles, each with a ship's model painstakingly built inside, which are Albert's special hobby, along with the encyclopedia of maritime history he carries about in his head. Many historians are eager to research the photographs of ships and shipwrecks, and Albert has displayed many at the Maritime Museum.

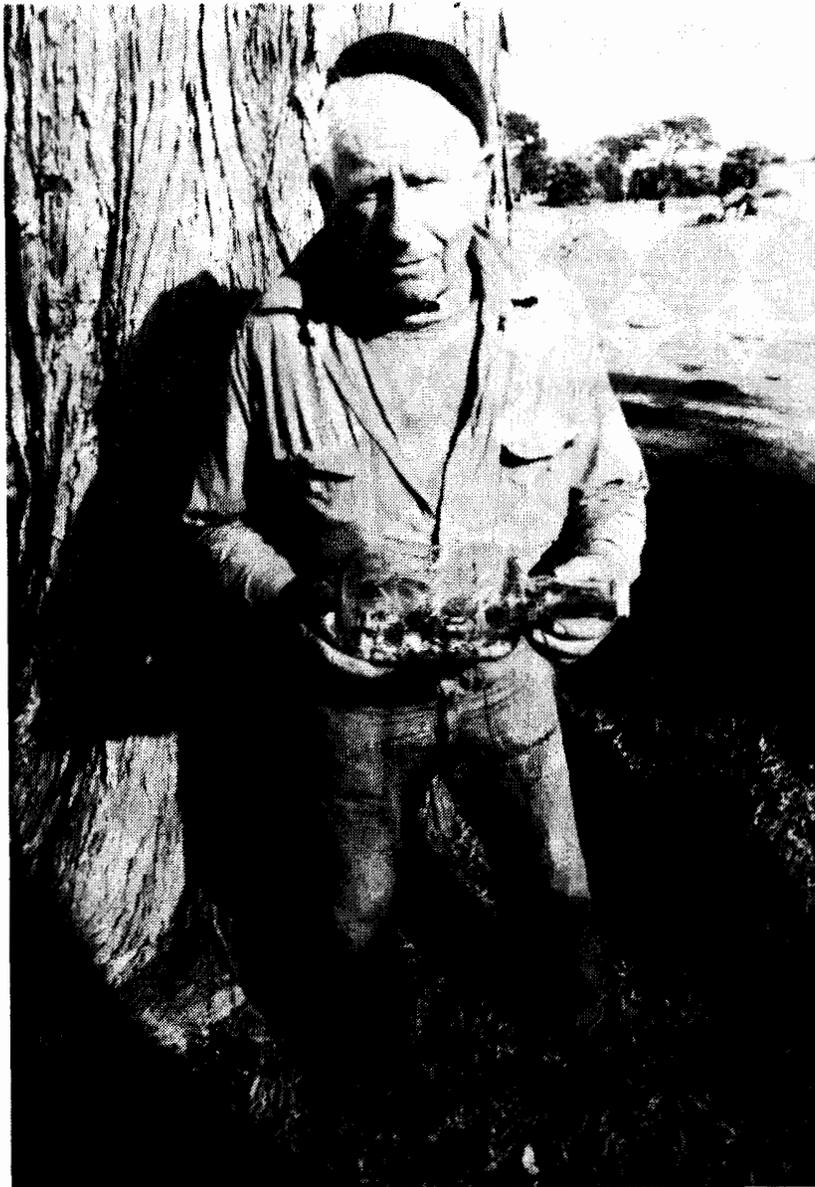
Otto's continuing interests and hobbies have included volunteering time at the Point Pinos Lighthouse in Pacific Grove, along with his good friend and docent, Captain John Anderson.

In the Plapp family name, a rare Coast Guard Lighthouse bedspread was donated to the Lighthouse Museum. The antique woven spread, with the emblem of the United States Coast Guard Lighthouse Station shown in blue and white was in the family for many years and is now on display when the Lighthouse is open to the public. Otto's special project, security flags for all local deceased veterans, to be displayed at their graves on Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and on Veterans' Day, each year, is one that he takes pride in having started with his brother, Adolf, when there were only 13 flags in the Flag Detail. There are now approximately 400 flags flown on each of the holidays, weather permitting.

Now in their eighties, Otto and Albert look back upon a lifetime of friends and their family memories—their early Christmas celebrations, always with a fresh green tree and fragrant oranges hung on the branches strung with popcorn. They can still recall how nice the house smelled of oranges. And they will tell you about the wonderful pies their father baked every day, using fresh fruit from the trees planted around the bakery—apple, apricot and peaches. They boys also gathered large buckets full of huckleberries for the bakery and for their mother. Their thoughts go back to the big, round sugar cookies and the breakfast rolls, or "snails," curled about with raisins and spices.

At times, their talk returns to the sea. Otto's favorite port was Trinidad; he says it was the most beautiful place he had ever seen. Albert just loved the open sea, particularly the Pacific Ocean. They have enjoyed visits with their cousins from Germany, although they do not discuss any desire to see their parents' homeland. Their mother had made a second voyage home to see her family before Hitler's rise to power there; her sons, fighting in each of the wars with Germany, didn't seem to feel it was important to go there. Along the walls of their home are clocks that were sent to them as gifts from Germany over the years—cuckoos with birds, or bouncing children in swings—a miniature museum of ticking history.

To honor their parents' memory, it seems Otto and Albert have kept the values instilled in them—to be good men, gentle men. They served their country well, loved their community and their fellow man. They have stayed vital and interested in the world about them, reading, keeping current on politics and their hobbies. A favored guest will be allowed to look at the photographs and the ships inside the bottles. They might also see the old box with a swath of long golden curls twined together lying inside. And they may treasure a moment suspended in time.



Pat Hathaway photo

Albert "Max" Plapp in 1980.

Editor's Note: Since the interviews in 1985, Otto William Plapp passed away on July 3, 1987 and his brother Albert Eugene Max Plapp passed away on April 12, 1988. They were both buried with military honors at El Carmelo Cemetery in Pacific Grove. Albert Plapp, known as Max, was a familiar sight in his neighborhood on Pine Avenue, taking daily walks dressed in sailor's watch cap, dungarees and blue work shirt. The Heritage Society thanks Ramona Reitz for sharing her story with us and allowing us to publish it here.

Down The Piney Path

*News about old Pacific Grove from the Monterey WEEKLY CYPRESS
(July—August 1889)*

♦ by E. C. Davis

- ❑ The *REVIEW* says there are 4,000 people at the Grove and still they come.
- ❑ The Grove boarding houses have been like the Metropolitan street car during a busy day—standing room only.
- ❑ Arrival of the first through passenger train. The plaza opposite the Carmelo was illuminated and when the iron horse arrived it was greeted with cheers and other gleeful demonstrations.
- ❑ The trains running through to the Grove do not seem to diminish the demand for other conveyances. All the hackmen keep busy.
- ❑ The 4th Annual Excursion of the YMCA (from San Francisco) with about 300 was a grand success.
- ❑ The Chautauqua parade and graduating class exercises were grand.
- ❑ The University of the Pacific will build a school here.

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