

Neuberger Family In Business in Baker City, Oregon, 1874-2004

by Gary Dielman

With the retirement of Gert and Erna Neuberger in 2002, after the death of Gert's brother Bert Neuberger in 2001, and the final disposal of residual furniture stock by their daughters/nieces, Patricia and Roselyn Neuberger, in 2004, four generations and 130 years of business activity of the Neuberger family in Baker City came to an end.

The story begins with the marriage of twenty-year-old German emigrant Clara Neuberger to forty-year-old Sigmund Heilner in Portland in 1874. That same year the newlyweds moved to Baker City, where Sigmund and his older half-brother Seligmann Heilner, who went by the name E. D. Cohen, erected a one-story building on a prime corner of the city's Main Street from which they conducted a retail and wholesale business dealing in a wide variety of merchandise ranging from groceries and crockery to wool and hides.

Emma Neuberger soon joined her sister Clara in Baker City. On December 26, 1875, in a double wedding ceremony, Emma married S.M. Frank and friend Jennie Fox married Isaac Bloch. Both Frank and Bloch were successful Jewish businessmen in Baker City.



Heilner House on SW Corner of 2nd & Court streets

In 1883 the Heilners constructed a building next door to their Main Street store to house the First National Bank. In the late 1880's the Heilners expanded their store skyward with a three-story structure crowned with a cupola, which made it stand out impressively from all the other buildings on the west side of Main Street.

Three years earlier, Sigmund and Clara had built an impressive home in the Second Empire style on the southwest corner of Court and Second streets just two blocks west of their store. With no synagogue in Baker City, the Heilner home was frequently the site of High Holiday celebrations. The house also became home to the second generation of Neuberger in Baker City, Clara's nephews Berthold and Gerson Neuberger, sons of her brother Jacob. The nephews came to the United States from Germany around 1900 to join the business as young clerks.

With the deaths of Clara in 1915 and Sigmund in 1917, the business became a partnership between Berthold, Gerson, and Sanford Heilner, the youngest child of Sigmund and Clara, operated under the business name Neuberger-Heilner and specializing in clothing. Berthold and Gerson, who remained unmarried, worked in the Neuberger-Heilner business and lived in the Heilner home until their deaths in the 1960's.



*Heilner Store, ca. 1890
(Northwest corner of Main & Court streets)*

After Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, many Jews began leaving the country. In 1934 the Heilner home welcomed a third generation of Neuberger to Baker City, when Gerson "Gert" Neuberger and cousin Hermann David jumped at an opportunity to forsake Germany for employment in the U. S. The cousins, ages 20 and 19 respectively, spent six months in New York City learning English while living with their aunt Emma Fischel. Then they traveled to Baker City, where they became clerks in the Neuberger-Heilner clothing store working along side of their uncles Gerson and Berthold (brothers of Hermann's mother, Johanna) and living with them in the Heilner house on Second Street. Hermann would eventually become a partner in the Neuberger-Heilner store. With his death as the last surviving partner, the store went out of business in 1989.

Gert Neuberger was born on September 27, 1914, in Heinstadt near Buchen, about 40 miles east of Heidelberg, Germany. Growing up, Gert worked in the family's hayfield, a necessary part of his father's business as a cattle broker, an occupation that went back several generations in the Neuberger family. But rather than joining his father in the cattle brokerage business, Gert, after getting out of school at age 18, became an apprentice in the employ of the Jewish owners of a ladies' shop in the nearby town of Mosbach, where he lived in the home of an aunt and uncle.



*Gert Neuberger and Erna Silberman were married
in a London Synagogue, January 16, 1944*

After their arrival in Baker City, Gert and Hermann received tutoring in English in the home of retired educator, Helen M. Stack, who also helped them prepare for their U. S. citizenship exams, which they successfully passed in 1940 after meeting the minimum five-year residency requirement. Gert said of Miss Stack, "She was a terrific teacher." Vouching for Gert's character on his citizenship application were Baker City businessmen E. P. Davis and Sanford Adler, who became Baker City postmaster. Sanford was the son of Carl Adler, a successful early Jewish merchant of Baker City.

The third generation of Neuberger in Baker City was augmented in 1937 by the arrival of Gert's two-year-younger brother, Bert, a nickname for Berthold, who had been working at a bank in Frankfurt. Bert joined Gert and cousin Hermann as clerks in the Neuberger-Heilner store.

In 1940, Gert and Bert left the employ of Neuberger-Heilner to start a furniture business. Initially their business, Baker Furniture Co., was housed in cramped quarters (18 ft. by 60 ft.) at 2019 First Street. A year or so later they moved the business to better quarters at 2016 Main Street.

The year 1940 was memorable for another reason. On Christmas Day, Gert's and Bert's parents, Josef and Henrietta "Jette" (*née* Baum) Neuberger, and their sixteen-year-old brother, Hans, arrived in Baker City from Germany, escaping the ravages of war-torn Europe and the coming Holocaust. The five Neuberger family members moved into a house acquired from the Heilner family at 1397 Second Street. Josef Neuberger, the former cattle broker, helped out in his sons' new furniture business. Hans attended St. Francis Academy in Baker City for a while and then, before graduating, went to work in the Neuberger-Heilner store. Gert would eventually marry and leave the house at 1397 Second. But the elder Neuberger family members resided there with sons Bert and Hans until their deaths, Josef in 1961 at age 81 and Jette in 1965 at age 77. Bert and Hans, likewise, would live out their years in the same house.

Entry of the United States into WWII after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 soon interrupted the new furniture business of brothers Gert and Bert. Gert, age 25, along with sixteen other Baker County men, received his draft notice in early 1942. Gert remembers very fondly these men, who stayed together through induction at Fort Lewis, Washington, basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and shipment overseas to England: Charlie Moeller, George Hansen, Bill Leggett, Harvey Queen, Glen Hall, Paul Hill, Leslie Davis, George Wize, Eugene Ego, Darrell Hunt, Ralph McCullough, Romine of Halfway, Gomez and the Garrison brothers of Huntington, and the Morrison brothers of Baker City.

After arrival in England, the men were eventually split up with Gert and Wize being assigned to an aviation engineering unit trained to build emergency runways using wire mesh for use by aircraft that could not make it back to an established airfield.

Although Gert's group of Baker County draftees all made it safely home from the war, tragically Gomez drowned in Snake River shortly after his discharge from the army. Besides Gert, the only others still alive today are Leggett and Davis, who still live in Baker County.

When Bert's draft notice arrived later in 1942, he sold the furniture business to Sam Emrich of Weiser, Idaho, a Jewish businessman, who, in the early 1900's, had come to Weiser from Columbus, Georgia, and for whom Bert had worked from 1937 to 1938. Emrich soon moved the business to the southeast corner of Main and Broadway. When the draft took too many Neuberger-Heilner employees, including partner Hermann David, management decided to suspend operations until after the end of the war. Seizing the opportunity, Emrich leased the now-empty Neuberger-Heilner store and moved his business into the much larger building. In 1950 Neuberger-Heilner terminated the lease to Emrich and started up its clothing business again. Emrich moved his furniture business into a new building he constructed at 2090 Court Street across from the Elks Club

under management of Jewish merchant Julian Sommer, whose wife, Elsie, was Emrich's sister.

Upon reporting for service, Bert was declared physically unqualified to serve in the army. So he returned to Baker City and attempted unsuccessfully to buy back the furniture business from Emrich. So he set up a new business at the old location at 2016 Main and waited for brother Gert to return from the war.

In England, Gert and the American forces stationed there were biding their time waiting to take part in the up-coming invasion of Europe. Gert made good use of his time by marrying Austrian native Erna Silbermann. In 1943 Gert's cousin Margot Silbermann, who was married to Erna's brother, Otto Silbermann, introduced Gert to Erna. A few months later, on January 16, 1944, Gert and Erna were married in a synagogue in the London suburb called In St. John's Wood.

Erna was born September 15, 1917, in Vienna, Austria. Erna's mother, Giselle Wolf Silbermann, died in 1922, when Erna was 5 years old. Erna attended school in Vienna and then became a dressmaker working for a high-fashion shop that catered to the likes of Marlene Dietrich, who had her suits made there.

With Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938, Austria was becoming an increasingly dangerous place for Jews. So, a cousin of Erna in England got Erna a permit to live there. On Erna's train ride through Germany in the fall of 1938, there was an apprehensive time at Aachen on the country's western border, when the train was unaccountably held up for 24 hours. As Erna was leaving Europe, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was in Munich negotiating with Hitler the so-called "appeasement" agreement, which left Germany free to accelerate its rearmament and a few months later occupy Czechoslovakia.

Another of Erna's cousins in England assisted Erna's brother, Otto, to emigrate to Wales before Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939. Erna's father, Hermann Silbermann, a clothing store owner in Vienna, refused to leave his native Austria. Although Erna kept in touch via a cousin in Switzerland, who forwarded letters and money to her father, she eventually lost contact with him and presumes that he died a victim of the Holocaust. The last time Erna saw her father was on the platform of the train station in Vienna, when she boarded the train for England.

On June 6, 1944 (D-Day), Gert and fellow Bakerite George Wize were waiting at an English dock to board a landing craft for the trip across the English Channel to storm the beaches of France, but their boat didn't show up, apparently having been sunk or disabled. Six days later they finally went ashore in Normandy under fire from German defenders. From the beach they made their way up a long, steep slope to a plateau, and moved inland in the area of Ste. Mère Eglise and St. Lo, France. The many trees and hedgerows of that area provided

welcome cover from German snipers. Although Gert's engineering unit followed behind the infantry, they were close enough to see and hear the fighting, including seeing General Patton's tanks silence German guns trying to destroy a strategic bridge.

Gert's duty in France was interrupted when his back gave out. He was hospitalized and eventually returned to England for treatment. After his back improved and since he was a native speaker of German, Gert was reassigned to a unit that sorted enemy mail, stationed first in Stuttgart and then in Darmstadt. Although both towns were within an hour's drive of his home town, he never had an opportunity to visit. In October 1945, six months after the end of the war in Europe, Gert was discharged from the army.

A few months after Gert's return home, Erna followed him from England. Temporarily they rented an apartment in the large apartment house at 1415 Dewey that had once been the residence of Baker City attorney Charles Butcher. Soon they moved into a house at 1424 Broadway. Gert rejoined brother Bert in their Baker Furniture Co. business at 2016 Main Street, eventually moving to 1916 Main Street next to the Geiser Grand Hotel.



Erna and Gert in their home at 2790 7th Street

In 1960 the brothers decided to split up the business with Bert handling more moderately priced furniture and Gert dealing in higher-end furniture lines, thereby avoiding fraternal competition in business. In March of that year Gert and Erna set up their furniture store, Gert Neuberger Furniture, in the Langrell Building at 2120 Broadway. Twenty years later in 1980, they moved to the Montgomery-Ward Building at 1924 Broadway, which as lessees they continued to occupy for twenty-two years, until finally retiring in 2002. Gert and Erna had worked together in their furniture business for forty-two years and Gert earlier another twenty years minus three years in the military.

With the assistance of brother Hans, who died January 1, 1997, at age 75, Bert Neuberger remained in business at his Baker Furniture Co. store until his death in 2001, a total of sixty-one years selling furniture, handling the business alone those last four years after Hans' death. Bert and Hans never married.

When Bert died March 19, 2001 (born 9-3-1916), he left everything to Gert and Erna's children, Patricia, Rosalyn, and Robert Neuberger. To Pat and Roz fell the task of liquidating both their father's and their uncles' business inventories, which they accomplished over a period of three years after many trips from their homes in the Portland area. With the sale of the Baker Furniture Co. building in 2004, the four-generation, 130-year span of Neuberger family businesses in Baker City came to an end.

(Much of the information for this article was obtained in two interviews: Gert and Erna Neuberger on October 13, 2004, and Gert Neuberger on March 8, 2005.)

© May 2005, Gary Dielman, Baker City, Oregon
Revised October 28, 2008