

Arts and Culture in La Crosse

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

When I was a child, I first learned to play the violin from Mr. Leigh Elder, the conductor of the La Crosse Symphony who also taught beginner violin at various public schools. At first, when our Emerson School second grade teacher sent home the notice of the program, I was not interested and do not believe I even gave it to my mother. She found the notice later, however, and signed me up right away. This was not a Suzuki style of string training because we were taught to read music right from the start, but we all took lessons in a group. My first recital piece was the "Little A & B Waltz".

I continued to take violin lessons through the 4th grade after I transferred to Blessed Sacrament School. These were private lessons from one of the nuns who taught music at the school. One day, however, as I was coming up the stairs from one of those school-basement lessons, my violin case came open and the violin fell out onto the terrazzo steps and clattered down one entire flight of stairs. Apparently, I had not carefully closed and locked the case and the violin ended up at the bottom of the stairs with the neck broken away from the body. I was horrified and very ashamed that I had not been more careful when I put my violin away. Luckily, we were able to get it repaired but I learned a good lesson from that experience.

When I was in fifth grade, the Aquinas High School band director organized band lessons in the various Catholic grade schools, and I started trombone lessons. I think I continued to take violin lessons as well because I can remember attending city-wide orchestra rehearsals, to which I rode my bike with my violin strapped over my back. But after a while, I decided that my future as a violinist was not great, and I concentrated (if that is the right word since I still did not practice as much as I should) on the trombone. I played the trombone through high school and college.

I was even asked by the Aquinas High School nuns to play in the marching band at the halftime of our high school football games, even though I was also on the football team. Apparently, my position on the bench did not impress them.



Jackie Jimmie Janice Jay

My brother, Jim, played the clarinet and sister Janice played the piano. My mother also played the piano as well as accordion, and my father played the trumpet and drums. Some years we posed for our Christmas card picture playing our instruments together.

During my later years in grade school and all through high school my father was the President of the La Crosse Symphony. He also played in the trumpet section of the orchestra. Leigh Elder, my former violin teacher, was the conductor. To assure a high-quality concert experience for the audience,

my father would always hire professionals from Minneapolis and Rochester to play first chair positions in the Symphony.

The Symphony would frequently engage internationally famous musicians and singers to perform concertos and other solo roles. My parents would often entertain the visiting soloist and major Symphony donors at post-concert parties at our house. The soloists included: Michael Rabin, a young violin protégé; Roberta Peters, then a young and beautiful Metropolitan Opera star; Isaac Stern, the famous violinist who loved to play Gin Rummy with my father and his agent at our kitchen table; and Helen Traubel, another Metropolitan Opera star of an earlier age. All of these performers liked my parents and their hospitality, and we had many nice thank you notes, and pictures autographed to Jake and Janet.

Michael Rabin was especially fond of my father because he would let him drive our car—something that the poor kid could not do in NYC where he was confined to a musical hothouse by his domineering mother.

Symphony Orchestra Contracts 2 Leading Musicians For '52

Two numbers for the new concert season of the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra already have been booked.

Jake Hoeschler, president of the musical organization, said Tuesday that Roberta Peters, beautiful singing star of the Metropolitan Opera, and Joseph Szigeti, top ranking violinist in the concert world, are scheduled for La Crosse appearances.

Season ticket sales for the 1952-1953 season open Wednesday night, immediately following the Artur Rubenstein concert in the Vocational Auditorium. Rubenstein, internationally famous pianist, gives two local concerts as guest star of the La Crosse Symphony Wednesday and Thursday nights.

Tables will be in the school halls to facilitate purchase of the season tickets which have not increased in price. During the coming season, however, Hoeschler said, the practice of two night concerts will be discontinued. It is anticipated



ROBERTA PETERS

that in view of the single night shows, an early demand for tickets will be made. Hoeschler emphasized that only 1,200 seats will be available.

Miss Peters, charming soprano of the Met, has a heavy schedule of television, concert and operatic engagements for the coming season. Szigeti is a master of all styles of violin presentation, whether it be classic, romantic or modern music.

Officials and personnel of the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra urge citizens of the area to participate in the membership drive of the civic organization which has done much to further good music and fine entertainment for this region.



JOSEPH SZIGETI

Roberta Peters particularly liked my younger sister, Janice, and would always ask about Janice whenever we would see Ms. Peters in later years in New York.

As a result of my parents' entertaining these stars—something easier to do in a small town as opposed to the big city—I grew up assuming that having stars like that around was no big deal. In later years, your grandmother and I would visit them after a concert in New York or Chicago and they always remembered Jake and Janet in La Crosse.

Besides heading the La Crosse Symphony board for about 5 years in the early 1950's, my father also used to promote other acts like the June Taylor Dancers at the new Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium in La Crosse. He also organized pro-am basketball and donkey softball games. He was always dreaming up wacky stunts like having chickens fly out of the Auditorium rafters when the referee fired his gun to end a period in the game.

One time I was helping carry up a crate of chickens to the catwalk in the rafters; the chickens had been stored outside in a truck for a few hours. Another guy dumped out the crate when the gun went off, but this time, because the chickens were so cold, they did not fly and just dropped 80 feet to the auditorium floor where one or two staggered around dazed and injured. No one laughed at that joke.



METROPOLITAN OPERA PLANNING—After a Tuesday night dinner at Holiday Inn where James Lombard, left, of Minneapolis, spoke to devotees of the Metropolitan Opera, he went to WKBH where Ken Allen, center, interviewed Lombard on Allen's nightly Hi Fi Concert program. Jake Hoeschler, right, is district chairman of the Midwest Metropolitan Association. Lombard outlined the Midwest season, which begins May 21. Five operas will be presented this spring.—Tribune Photo.

My parents were also Guarantors of the annual visits from New York by the Metropolitan Opera to the Twin Cities. The Met came with full productions of eight different operas to Northrop Auditorium at the U of M. My mother would buy tickets to all eight shows, but my father would only come up for the performances connected with the big parties.

Sometimes he did not have a ticket and would just pretend

that he was an usher supervisor because he was dressed in his tux and the new, part time student ushers would not actually know that he was an imposter. He would direct them around and then simply walk into the hall to find a vacant seat or go over to the house physician's office where he would trade stories with Dr. Henry Buchwald, who often was the volunteer house doctor. Jake always liked the parties better than the operas.

I would sometimes get to go to the opera when one of my parents' friends got sick. The tickets were always very good because they all ordered early each year. As a result, I got spoiled by the expensive seats. Later, when I had to buy my own tickets, I always sat much further back and up in the house. My first opera was *Der Fledermaus*. I especially like sitting in the first row where I could look down into the pit and watch the orchestra.

Professional Fishing in La Crosse

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

When I was a boy in La Crosse, my father would sometimes be invited to watch big fish roundups that the local professional fishermen would organize on the river during the winter. I joined him on several occasions. These were fascinating events because: i) the fishermen were a rough sort of subculture not visible to regular folk; ii) it was a chance to get a big walleye pike or some other type of good game fish if the wardens were not around; and iii) it provided a glimpse of a part of the economy that few knew existed (and I suspect may no longer exist).

There were two kinds of professional fishing on the Mississippi in the winter—gill netting and fish roundups. Small scale gill nets were tended by individual fishermen who skated between their net locations, pulling a sled with a big box into which they would throw their catch. In the fall they would drive 15-foot poles into the river bottom before the ice formed. Each pair of poles was tied together with a rope.

When the ice was strong enough to support a skater, the fishermen would chop the ice from around the poles, attach a gill net to one end of the rope and use the rope to pull the net between the poles where it would be attached to each pole beneath the ice. The poles would refreeze into the ice. The gill net fishermen would leave for a few days to allow the fish to swim into the net (like a giant curtain) and get caught by their gills. Then the fishermen would return, chop the poles free from the ice, attach a rope to the net and pull the net out one of the holes in the ice with one of the poles. They would remove the fish that were caught in the net, place them in the box on the sled and pull the net back beneath the ice and reattach it to the two poles to repeat the process a few days later.

The fishermen would then skate back to where they had parked their car and then take the now frozen fish to Epstein's Fish Market on Front Street north of State where Uncle Jay Hoeschler subsequently built the Riverside Apartments.

The second method of commercial fishing was the big roundup using wall and purse nets at the down-stream end of a big slough. This method required placing a series of poles in the water from one side of the slough to the other with ropes below

water connecting the poles. When the ice was strong enough to drive on, the fishermen would organize a team for the roundup. First, they would stretch a wall net that went beneath the ice to the bottom of the river between the poles across the lower end of the slough. In the center of the wall net, they would place a purse net (a sort of big bag net with a drawstring on the mouth). They would then sweep the snow off the ice above the floats that held the wall net up against the bottom of the ice so they could see the floats. This was intended to confirm that the bag net was where it had been originally placed.

Once the nets were properly placed, thus sealing off the downstream end of the slough, the team would head to the top of the slough (as much as a mile away). There they would use chain saws and power post hole diggers to cut holes in the ice. They would then dangle chains into the water through the holes or plunge the water with a hub cap attached to a pole to make noises to scare the fish down the slough toward the nets. At the same time, a truck dragging chains and pieces of noisy steel would drive back and forth from one side of the slough to the other side to make additional noise.

As the beaters worked their way down the slough, the fish would collect in front of the wall net. Apparently, the fish would sense the possibility of escape into the opening of the purse net (though they were not sure, it seems). In any event, they would not make a dash into the purse net until the pressure from the drivers got so great and so near that the entire school would burst through the opening of the purse net at one time and, in the process, pull the floats from view beneath the ice. That was the signal to the two guys who had the ropes around the mouth of the purse net to pull the ropes tight and close the net with the fish inside.

Then the chain saws were used to cut a 20'x20' section out of the ice. The purse net was then pulled to that opening and thousands of fish would be boiling the water from inside that bag net. The team was allowed to take all the carp, sheepshead and other rough fish that were in the trap. They would throw them

onto the ice where they would immediately freeze. The frozen fish would then be put into boxes and on a big truck for the trip back to Epstein's. The rough fish were cleaned and sold by Epstein's for gefiltefish, a pickled fish loved by European Jewish immigrants in NYC. Many of my Jewish friends at NYU Law School would not believe that such bottom-feeding rough fish were used for gefiltefish since they had always thought that the base stock was good cod and other ocean fish. But they were always intrigued by my story of such roundups.



BUFFALO FOR NEW YORK

Some 25 tons of buffalo (fish) were taken from Beaver Dam Lake at Beaver Dam, Wis., this past week and transported to Epstein's Fish Market in La Crosse where they were filleted to be sent to New York City where they are made into gefilte fish. While the La Crosse firm gets many of its fish from commercial fishermen on the Mississippi River, a spokesman said that fish have been transported from as far away as Sturgeon Bay for processing.—UPI Telephoto.

The game wardens were notified of such roundups but if they did not choose to come and observe, the team would throw us some big game fish which we would take home for dinner.

Epstein's is now gone, and I do not know what is left of the commercial fishing business in La Crosse. It may have gone the way of mother of pearl buttons, another old industry from the area that is now no more. I still see commercial fishing done in the summer using long lines with multiple hooks but am not sure about the winter scene. All I see now is a few solitary ice fishermen but no evidence of the roundups of old.

More Trees in La Crosse

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

Besides skiing at Gunnar Gundersen's, we also had great fun sledding on the north side of Edgewood Bluff in the Baier pasture overlooking Uncle Toa Gundersen's house. That hillside is not completely wooded, and Randy Baier has his house up there. But sixty years ago, old Mr. Baier (Randy's grandfather) still had milk cows that kept the pasture eaten down and open for us to sled in the winter.



Indeed, when I was a kid, Ebner's Coulee and the flanks of the bluffs were much less wooded and more open than they are now. Since the Baiers still had cows, the hillside pasture on the east side of Harvey Baier's house was quite open except for a few big oak trees. That, and the big pasture on the south side where Randy lives above the former Toa Gundersen house, is now heavily wooded. There was a farm lane from the road to the pasture in front of the Gundersen house. That is now the location of Randy Baier's driveway. When the Baiers got rid of their cows, the trees started to seed themselves onto the slopes and now you cannot even see Randy Baier's house high in that pasture.

We used to sled down that pasture on American Flyer type sleds. It was possible to start move than halfway up the bluff and you could really develop a lot of speed before you were required to turn near the bottom of the hill to avoid hitting a windmill and cistern cover. When I think of it now, it seems quite dangerous but neither we nor our parents thought anything about it in those days.



Another victim of new woodland growth in the Coulee is Grandad himself. Everyone knows of Grandad's bluff but, even when I was young, few people knew the source of the name—a profile of an old, bearded man which could be seen from Cass and Losey Streets on the south shoulder of the bluff above

our house in the Coulee. Then the trees provided the hair above his rather high forehead and his long flowing beard beneath a prominent eyebrow, nose and chin further down the slope. Now the new trees obliterate all of his facial features.

When we first moved to the Coulee in about 1951, the pine forest plantations behind our house and around Gunnar Gundersen's were middle aged, the trees having been planted years earlier on what appeared to be vineyard terraces on the slopes, at least behind our house. Today those trees are quite mature and many of them are dying of old age or overcrowding. You can still sense the terraces when you walk up the hill behind the house, however.

As kids we used to climb the bluff and explore the quarries above our house (on the south flank of Grandad's Bluff over his profile). We would find shell fossils in the sandstone outcrop of his nose and eyebrow, and I think about the time that that area, high above the valley floor, was once under water.

More recently, my brother Jake had a tree blind in the deciduous woods just west of the top row of pine trees where he and other bow-hunting buddies would put out piles of apples as, I believe, illegal food for the deer that they would then shoot with their arrows. The family that bought our Coulee house also likes to bow hunt and I expect that they are taking equal advantage of all the deer that roam the property.

Household Help in the Coulee

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

We lived in Ebners Coulee, a valley on the south side of Granddad's Bluff in La Crosse. Our house was an old, white colonial situated partway up the bluff on the left side of the road. My parents called it "Hill House".



When we were in grade school at Blessed Sacrament, down on Losey Boulevard and King Street, my mother would hire farm girls to work as live-in maids for the princely sum of \$20 a week, plus room and board. At that low-rate these girls were not the brightest. It is interesting to think back on how we, as pre-teens, figured that out quickly and loved to take advantage of them.

For instance, when one maid asked whether or not anyone had ever died in the house, Jimmy and I were quick to recount the gruesome details of whatever ghost story or homicide we could conjure. Then, to complete the experience, we would return from evening Boy Scout meetings, slip into the basement through the side cellar door, and pull the switch of the main fuse box. We would then rattle the furnace duct work until the poor young girl was ready to flee the house.

Another practical joke a few years later almost ended in tragedy when I was 16. I picked up the current maid downtown in the old WWII jeep that I was allowed to drive. We proceeded on Main Street to 25th where I could see a northbound train on the railroad tracks at the foot of Granddad's Bluff blocking our way. I therefore turned south one block, then east, toward the Bluff on King Street. I could see the train on the tracks, but I knew that there was a dirt road in the weeds parallel to the tracks.

As a joke, I drove toward the tracks and pretended that the steering wheel was loose and unresponsive to my (pretend) efforts to turn to avoid the train (Of course,

I was actually headed toward the hidden dirt road.). Just as I turned on the dirt road at the last minute, the maid screamed and was about to jump out of the Jeep. Luckily, I was able to grab her and prevent a serious injury. And luckily, I was able to convince her not to tell my parents about this near-tragic practical joke.

One day I was doing homework in my bedroom above the kitchen when I smelled smoke. I went downstairs to investigate. When I opened the door from the dining room to the kitchen, I was greeted by thick smoke from the ceiling, almost down to the floor. I could see that the smoke was coming from a grease fire in a frying pan that was in the sink. The faucet had been turned on and the running water was causing the grease to splatter. I quickly took the frying pan outside and left it on the lawn.

When I returned to the kitchen to open the windows to dissipate the smoke, I heard loud gasps coming from the other side of the room. There, sitting on the floor where the smoke was not so thick, was our maid. She explained that the frying pan burst into flames, so she tried to put it out with water. All the smoke had frightened her, so she fell to the floor, unable to figure out what to do.

Such experiences taught me the difference between officer mentality (decisiveness and resourcefulness), and enlisted personnel thinking.

Jay is Missing!

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

My father, Jake, owned the Hoeschler Brothers Drug Store at 5th and Main Streets in downtown La Crosse. In those days it was open on Saturday evenings and Jake periodically had to cover the store when other pharmacists were not available. It happened that my mother was going somewhere one such evening, so my 6-year-old brother, Jay, went with my father to the drug store. Because there wasn't much he could do at age 6, my father put him in the Hollywood movie theater down the block and told him to come back to the store when the movie got out about 9 pm.

In the meantime, business was rather slow that night. When someone stopped in and asked my dad to show him a house he had listed at his real estate office, he simply closed the store and took the better prospect to see the house, without a further thought about Jay.



At 9 pm, when the movie got over, Jay walked to the drug store to find it closed and dark just like the rest of downtown. He decided not to wait around but to walk the 30 plus blocks from downtown to our house south of Granddad's Bluff. (The store was on 5th Street and the house was on 34th Street).

←This photo was taken of Jay when he was about 6 years old, his age in this story.

On the way, Jay stopped at the house of our great uncle, Frank Hoeschler, on Losey Boulevard, but not to ring the bell. He only paused to take a leak in the bushes.

I had been at a high school dance that evening and got home about 11 pm to hear the phone ringing. My father and mother were on the line asking if I had seen Jay because he was missing. I said no and agreed to stay near the phone in case they or the police were to call again.

On their second call I went upstairs to see if Jay was there and found him asleep in bed where he had gone upon reaching home. Jay was tired from his walk and did

not want to wait up for anyone else to come home. He knew we would, eventually. Thus ended the great search for Jay.

My parents would often leave us 4 kids home alone without a babysitter when we were young. I remember that Uncle Jimmy would sometimes get frightened and lock himself in our bedroom by jamming a broom handle between the two back-to-back doors that opened into that room. If I had been out myself and got home before my parents, I would sometimes have to pound on the bedroom door to wake my brother to get him to remove the broom so that I could crawl into my own bed.

Jimmy and I slept in bunk beds with Jim on the top. I used to try to trick him into looking over the edge to see what I was doing down below. When he did so, I would kick up on the center of his mattress from below and push him out of the bed. I sometimes pushed too hard and would bounce him out onto the radio/record player we had on the table next to the bed. Such is the life of a younger brother!