WISCONSIN MEAT INDUSTRY HALL OF FAME

1994

Fritz and Armella Bernegger
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Fritz Bernegger was born in 1904 and died April 30, 1988. His early education was in Austria, and he immigrated to the USA in 1926. He was married to Armella Sambs (and subsequently after Armella's death, to her sister Myrtle Sambs), and they had two children -- Gary and Brenda. Gary is married to Joan and their children are Mark, Paul, Peter and Cathy. Brenda is married to David Wenberg and their children are Gretchen, John, Craig and Neil.

Mr. and Mrs. Bernegger were indeed pioneers in the Wisconsin meat industry. Fritz came to America as a young man with adventure on his mind and the intent of returning to his native Austria in two years. He worked his way through numerous jobs, and with Armellas help and support, established a successful meat business which was eventually merged into a large corporation. Armella was a true partner with Fritz in developing, leading and working in their business, and the two of them are fittingly recognized together for their accomplishments.

In Austria Fritz had farm experience in the family operation and did a three-year apprenticeship at age sixteen to become a professional butcher. When he came to America he existed by working on a number of farms in the Canadian wheat fields. He worked for Cudahy Packing Company in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the Layton Sausage Company in Milwaukee and for Hopfenspergers in Appleton.

The success story really began to unfold when he moved to New London, Wisconsin during September of 1928, where he got a job "to make good sausage", which he did in earnest. He struggled through a number of jobs and locations in a constant battle to keep a business going. Eventually, three stores emerged and the business was known as the Quality Meat Markets.

A slaughterhouse was built in 1934, and a full service packing house was built on a one-acre site in 1938. It was known as the Quality Packing House. In 1947, there were six people working in the plant which consisted of a stockyard, kill floor and sausage kitchen. Everything was hand work and the plant supplied all the fresh meat and sausages for the retail stores of the Berneggers and their partner Billy Schmidt.

The partnership was dissolved in 1953 with Schmidt taking the retail stores and the Berneggers taking the plant. The plant was organized as a corporation in 1954 and initially known as Quality Packing House, Inc. Subsequently, the so-called Hillside Meat Products was renamed as Hillshire Meat Products.

Growth and expansion took place rapidly. The plant came under Federal inspection in 1969. Mr. Bernegger realized it was no longer a family business, and on December 13, 1971, they were merged into Consolidated Foods. A few years later the name was changed to Hillshire Farm. By 1977, nine hundred people were employed in the organization, and they were manufacturing and distributing more than three million pounds of meat each week. In 1985, the name Consolidated Foods was changed to Sara Lee Corporation, and in 1989, Hillshire Farm was merged with Kahn's as an operating unit of the Sara Lee Corporation. Fritz and Armella Bernegger were especially proud of the Hillshire Farm's Smoked Sausage, and they observed it become the number one seller in the USA.
This is indeed a success story. A national level food organization was born, nurtured and matured by a husband and wife team during their lifetime. Recognition is due not only to that accomplishment, however, but also because the visible and financial status was only a secondary consideration to the Berneggers, whose first devotion was to family, church and community.