

Our Renneker Family History

A report delivered by Beth Brickell at the 1995 family reunion

In 1836, Frederick Renneker came to this country from Oldenberg, Germany (near Hanover) and traveled up the Mississippi River from New Orleans to St. Louis. He settled one day's ride west of St. Louis in the farming community of Jonesburg. Frederick was a farmer who signed his name with an "x" when he was naturalized as an American citizen.

Downtown Jonesburg in 1994

Jonesburg was settled almost exclusively by Germans. A group of Germans in Hanover interested in migrating to America sent a representative to find an area with natural features that resembled Hanover. The representative found Jonesburg, first settled in 1822 by a man named James Jones. Word spread that the area was similar in climate and terrain to Hanover and many Germans came over. They were given 40 acres each on which they



planted tobacco primarily. They also established a tobacco factory that later moved to St. Louis and grew into Liggitt & Meyer.

Pioneer cabin in Jonesburg

Frederick's oldest son, Gerhard, was 7 years of age when the family settled in Jonesburg. His name was anglicized to Garret. Garret was born in Oldenberg, Germany on November 28, 1830. He had three brothers and a sister.

On January 3, 1853, Garret married Susannah Hines from Koshkonong, a community in southern Missouri. Two years later, in 1855, Garret bought 160 acres of land near Jonesburg on which he raised tobacco. He also acquired a sawmill and seven town lots in a railroad town of Pendleton, near Jonesburg, where he and Susannah raised their family of nine children.



Garret and Susannah's second son was John Richard Renneker, born April 4, 1857. John's older brother fought in the Civil War for the Union Army and died at the Battle of Gettysburg. Most of the citizens of Jonesburg, however, were southern sympathizers and bushwhacked the first federal troops that passed through the community on the railroad.

Former Houke farmland outside Jonesburg today

On December 28, 1877, John married Catharine Houke, called Cattie, who was the daughter of a prosperous Jonesburg farmer, Andrew J. Houke. It is said that Cattie's father didn't approve of her

marriage to John Renneker, an extremely handsome young man with thick curly black hair. Perhaps the bad feeling had something to do with different allegiances between the Houke and Renneker families during the Civil War.

In 1994, I went to Jonesburg and found the acreage north of town where the Houke farm was located. The farm was established by Cattie's grandfather, George W. Houke, a native of Prussia. In a small cemetery known as the Houke-Hill Cemetery, located on the original family farm, I found the tombstones of Cattie's grandparents, G. W. and Catharine Houke, as well as of her parents, Andrew J. and C. A. Houke.



Houke-Hill Cemetery

John and Cattie left Jonesburg a year or two after they married and moved to Brandsville, a small town on southern Missouri near the Arkansas border, where they lived for approximately a decade.



Tombstone of Catharine and G. W. Houke

John was a furniture maker and acquired three town lots in Brandsville. He was also elected Brandsville's constable in November 1892. In those days when people traveled by horseback, a county sheriff couldn't effectively service an entire county, so constables were elected to serve as his representatives in outlying communities. Soon after John was elected constable, the following notice appeared in the newspaper of West Plains, the county seat:

The Daily Gazette, Nov. 11, 1892: "John R. Renneker's majority for constable in this township is 129. We state this so emphatically because some of his Republican enemies are circulating the report that his majority was only 20. We might add in this connection that if John had wanted any more votes he could easily have gotten them – but he felt sorry for his opponent and didn't want him to miss blacking the board."

Less than a month later, John had an interesting duty to perform as constable, also reported in the newspaper:

The Daily Gazette, Nov. 26, 1892: "J. R. Renneker went over to Winona yesterday and arrested a young man named W. E. Bridges who was wanted in this county on a charge of seducing a young lady living near Brandsville. The matter will probably be compromised by Bridges marrying the woman he ruined."

John and Cattie had eight children. Mary Elizabeth, called Mayme, born January 3, 1889 in Brandsville, was their sixth child and third of four daughters.

I visited Brandsville a year ago. There are now less than 100 people living in the town – mostly old timers. When John and Cattie settled in Brandsville, the town had been established only 10 years or so earlier by a Mr. Brand who had bought land for a large peach orchard. The peaches were cultivated for wine and three wineries sprang up in Brandsville.

When I was there, I was especially interested to learn if a pond existed that was part of a story that Mayme, my grandmother, told me of an experience she had when she was a child. She told me that all the kids ice skated and played with their sleds on a pond. She said a train track ran alongside the pond and that one day a train appeared as she started down the hill on her sled and there was nothing to do but to go across the pond and between the wheels of the moving train and out the other side.

I asked some of the old timers in Brandsville if there was such a pond and they said, “Oh, yes,” and took me there. The pond is now dried up but there is a clear indentation in the ground where it existed. They told me that all the kids in Brandsville swam in the pond in the summer and ice-skated on it in the winter. They said peach trees covered rolling hills on three sides of the pond. On the fourth side was the train track, still there today.

The pond exists exactly as Mayme described it in her story. She would have come down one of the rolling hills between the peach trees on to the pond and there would have been no way off the pond other than across those railroad tracks directly on the other side! I was convinced studying the terrain that she did exactly what she said that she did!

Brandsville collapsed as a community by the turn of the century because of a prohibition in the 1890s against alcohol. All three wineries folded and the community died. John and Cattie then moved their family to Black Rock, in north Arkansas. A few years later, they continued down the same road to Memphis, Tennessee.



In Memphis, Mayme met a young man from Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, Lewis Gilbert Shryock, at a Walgreen’s lunch counter. They both worked in the neighborhood – Gilbert at a jewelry store and Mayme at a dime store.

They began to date and Gilbert proposed one night after they had spent an evening at Overton Park. Mayme said “yes”.

Gilbert Shryock and Mayme Renneker, 1906

Gilbert had spent his paycheck that night on cotton candy and rides and he told Mayme that he would have to wait until his next paycheck to buy a marriage license - whereupon Mayme

reached in her purse, took out her own paycheck, and they bought their marriage license with it the next day.

They were married on May 14, 1906. She was 17 and he was 20.