



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

The Eymanns: Reedley's "first Mennonite family."

Author(s): Kevin Enns-Rempel.

Source: *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin* no. 24 (1991): 6-8.

Published by: California Mennonite Historical Society.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/258>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

no wonder that most people are totally confused by the perplexing linkages in this complicated situation!

Helena (Fast) Kleinsasser died on April 10, 1933. Rev. John Z. Kleinsasser lived until June 16, 1944, when he died, leaving a large family and church community behind.

Alan Peters

The Eymanns: Reedley's "First Mennonite Family"

Simply by arriving in Reedley in October of 1903, the Daniel T. and Babetta Eymann family secured a place for themselves in the history of California Mennonites. They were the first Mennonites to settle in the San Joaquin Valley, a region that less than eighty years later would be home to over 6000 Mennonites. Had they done nothing else of significance the rest of their lives, we still would remember them for that reason alone.

The Eymanns, however, were not the kind of people to do nothing else with their lives. The roles played by members of this family in Reedley—in business, politics, law, community service and church leadership—ensured that they would be remembered for much more than merely being the first Mennonites in that city.

The Eymann family that settled in Reedley consisted of Daniel T. Eymann (1841-1911) and Babetta A. Ruth Eymann (1845-1906) and their nine children: Jacob J. (1870-1960), August C. (1872-1915), Clara A. (1874-1950), Elizabeth M. (1877-1922), Daniel E. (1879-1923), Barbara R. (1881-1970), Marie A. (1883-1965), Ernest A. (1885-1977) and Edward R. (1887-1952). The four oldest children had already married at the time of the Eymanns arriving in Reedley, though each of them decided to move there as well.

The Eymanns wasted little time making themselves known in Reedley. Daniel T. Eymann set about building an impressive home at 295 South Reed Avenue, which *The Reedley Exponent* described as "the largest and best house so far built in Reedley."¹ Shortly after its completion, he began construction of another large house at 417 South Reed Avenue for his son August. Both houses remain today architectural landmarks in Fresno County.² Other members of the Eymann family constructed houses in the same small area, until more than a half dozen Eymann households were located there. Locals came to call it the "Eymann Colony."³

Members of the second generation of Reedley Eymanns were the first to become truly noteworthy leaders in Reedley. Their father had been a farmer, but the sons chose to enter other fields. There is a certain irony in this, since their father moved to Reedley in part so that they could afford to remain in farming. Several sons did remain involved with agriculture, but more as an investment than as a primary occupation.

Business

The Eymanns first came to public prominence in Reedley through involvement in business. As early as 1904 Herman

A. Eymann, Daniel T.'s brother, had established a hardware company in Reedley. Herman moved away from Reedley a short time later and other family members continued the hardware business. The hardware business was not new for the Eymanns, since Jacob J. Eymann had run such a business while still in Kansas. The Eymann Hardware Company was incorporated in 1907, with August C. Eymann as the company's largest stockholder.⁴ August died in 1915 at age 43, but his wife Mary assumed the presidency of the board of directors in his place. It later became known as the Eymann-Suderman Hardware Company to reflect the role of fellow First Mennonite Church member Henry L. Suderman on the board. The company established a store in Fresno in 1920. At that time the board of directors consisted of Mary Franz Eymann (president), H.L. Suderman (vice president/general manager), Ralph Eymann (secretary/treasurer), Jacob J. Eymann and Daniel E. Eymann.⁵ Ralph Eymann (1899-1925) was the son of A.C. and Mary Eymann.

Banking also attracted the attention of the Reedley Eymanns at an early date. In 1905 J.J. Eymann became a board member of the Reedley State Bank. Early in 1907 August C. Eymann began enlisting stock holders for a new bank in Reedley. In June Eymann and his fellow stock holders got their bank, though they decided to buy a "used" rather than "new" one. They purchased controlling interest in the Reedley State Bank, elected themselves as the new directors and changed its name to the First National Bank of Reedley. Soon after this they moved the bank into a new building constructed by the Eymann family on the corner of 11th and G streets. August Eymann served on the reorganized bank's first board of directors and was its first cashier.⁶ Jacob J. Eymann was its first and only president from 1907 to 1921. In that year the bank was absorbed by the larger Valley Bank of Fresno (which in turn was purchased by the Bank of Italy, today known as the Bank of America).

The lumber business was another early interest of the Eymann entrepreneurs in Reedley. By 1905 the Eymann family was operating the Western Lumber Company; J.J. Eymann served as the company's president. At some later point Daniel E. Eymann became president of the company. Earl I. Eymann, a son of August and Mary Eymann, served for some years as manager of the yards. J.J. Eymann remained active in the lumber company until 1929, when he entered real estate with Charles W. Huey, another former Reedley mayor.⁷

The Eymanns also became involved in business enterprises beyond their own family. J.J. Eymann served on the original board of directors of the California Associated Raisin Company, today Sun-Maid Growers of California, from 1912 until 1923. He also was a director of the Woodlake Citrus Development Company, which owned over 800 acres near Woodlake.⁸ In 1926 Earl I. Eymann purchased the Ford Motor dealership in Fowler. A year and a half later he bought the Reedley Ford agency from his uncle Ernest Eymann and operated that business until 1940. After selling the Ford dealership, Earl Eymann entered the real estate business with his uncle J.J. Eymann.⁹



The Eymann family. Seated, left to right: Marie, Daniel T., Edward, Babetta and Barbara. Standing, left to right: Daniel, August, Clara, Jacob, Elizabeth and Ernest.
Photo courtesy of the Eymann family

Politics

The Eymanns entered the political realm in 1913 when J.J. Eymann became the first mayor of the newly-incorporated city of Reedley. He served in that office until 1914. Mayor Eymann is perhaps best remembered for having spearheaded the purchase of a city water system for Reedley.¹⁰ J.J. Eymann also served on the Fresno County Planning Commission from 1936 and 1943, and ran unsuccessfully for the Fresno County Board of Supervisors in 1940.¹¹

J.J. Eymann was the first, but not the only Eymann to serve as Reedley's mayor. His younger brother Ernest A. Eymann occupied that position from 1923 to 1924, the city's fifth mayor.

Earl I. Eymann had the longest and most varied political career of the Reedley Eymanns: He began his public life as chairman of the Reedley City Planning Commission. In 1943 he entered county politics when he was appointed to the Fresno County Planning Commission to replace his uncle J.J. Eymann. Earl became chairman of the commission in 1948, serving in that capacity until 1954. He was second vice president of the California County Planning Commissioners Association during this time. From 1955 to 1957 Eymann served on the Fresno County Civil Service Commission. His last public position was in the 1960s as a member of the Personnel Committee of the State Center Junior College District.¹²

Law

The third generation of Reedley Eymanns distinguished itself most notably in the legal profession. Paul Eymann (1906-1968), the son of August and Mary Eymann, and his cousin Dan B. Eymann (1921-1977), the son of Daniel E. and Lela Eymann, both made noteworthy contributions in that field. Paul Eymann completed his law degree at USC in 1933. The following year he was appointed as a deputy district attorney for Fresno County, a position he held until 1937. In that year the Fresno County Board of Supervisors appointed Eymann Justice of the Peace for the 8th Township in Reedley. Several months later he became city judge of Reedley and eventually city judge of Orange Cove. In the early 1950s these three positions were combined into a single Reedley Justice Court judge, in which role Eymann also served until his retirement in 1965. Besides his work as a local judge, Paul Eymann also served occasionally as an acting Superior Court judge in Los Angeles and Fresno counties. He was a member and chairman of the legislative committee of the Justices' and Constables' Association of California.¹³

Dan B. Eymann received his law degree from the University of San Francisco in 1947. The following year Eymann was named a deputy district attorney in Fresno County and in 1950 became the chief assistant to the district attorney. He quit the district attorney's office in 1951 to become the Fresno District Counsel for the federal Office of Price

Stabilization. When that office went out of existence a year later Eymann entered private law practice. Dan Eymann was appointed to the Fresno Municipal Court in 1954 and won reelection to that position every six years until his death in 1977. Eymann helped establish the San Joaquin College of Law in Fresno, and was the school's first dean. For several years the law school shared the campus of Fresno Pacific College.¹⁴

Service organizations

The Reedley Eymanns were also active in service and charitable work for their community. They perhaps served no organization of this kind so well as the YMCA. For some 30 years J.J. Eymann served on the Fresno County board of the YMCA, while Earl I. Eymann served as chairman or president of the YMCA Sequoia Lake board, Fresno County board and Pacific Southwest Area Council during the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁵ Earl Eymann also served as chairman of the Reedley Community Chest in the 1940s and was a member from 1940 to 1959 and president from 1944 to 1959 of the Reedley Hospital Corporation.

Church leadership

The Eymann family belonged to the General Conference Mennonite Church before arriving in Reedley, and so it was natural that they would be interested in helping establish such a congregation there. Daniel T. Eymann had the organization of a General Conference congregation in mind when he travelled back east to promote a Mennonite settlement in Reedley. His efforts resulted in several General Conference families coming to the area, who helped organize the Reedley First Mennonite Church on June 10, 1906. Nine of the twenty-five charter members were Eymanns. Even before that date, Babetta Ruth Eymann organized the women of these early Mennonite arrivals into a women's missionary society, of which she was the first president. Her death in 1906 only a few months before the church's organization, prevented Babetta from making further contributions to the Mennonite community in Reedley.¹⁶

In church work as in other fields, the second and third generations of Reedley Eymanns made the most significant contributions. J.J. Eymann was the first family member to assume active church leadership roles. In the 1920s he went to Mexico as part of an inter-Mennonite committee searching for land on which to resettle Russian Mennonite refugees. During the 1920s and 1930s he served on the General Conference Mennonite Sanitarium Committee, during the 1930s and 1940s he was a member of the General Conference Board of Trustees and from 1941 to 1945 he was a member of the General Conference Executive Committee. Both J.J. and August Eymann served at various times as Sunday school superintendants for the Reedley First Mennonite Church.

Earl I. Eymann was a member of the Reedley First Mennonite Church Board of Trustees for several years and served as a member of the General Conference Mennonite Board of Trustees/Board of Business Administration from the early

1950s until 1971.

The Eymanns of Reedley were hardly a typical Mennonite family. They entered public life in a way that most Mennonites have been reluctant to do. The "quiet in the land" seldom have occupied the mayor's chair or the judge's bench. For whatever reasons, members of the Eymann family did not feel themselves enclosed by these traditional restraints. As a result, they have left a lasting mark on the community that Daniel and Babetta Eymann claimed as their home in 1903.

Kevin Enns-Rempel

ENDNOTES

1. January 19, 1905, p. 5.
2. *Heritage Fresno: Homes and People*. (Fresno: Historic Homes Committee, American Association of University Women, 1985), pp. 97-98.
3. Harold Eymann, "Eymanns Here for Nearly a Century," *The Reedley Historian*, Oct. 9, 1986, p. 10A.
4. *The Reedley Exponent*, June 6, 1907, p. 8.
5. The Eymann-Suderman Hardware Company introduced itself to Fresno with a full-page advertisement in the *Fresno Morning Republican* on September 5, 1920.
6. G.A. Reimer, "Banking Was, Still is Bustling," *The Reedley Historian*, Oct. 14, 1982, p. 10B; "A Change In Our Bank," *The Reedley Exponent*, Mar. 7, 1907, p. 5.
7. "J.J. Eymann, 90, First Reedley Mayor, Dies," *Fresno Bee*, Nov. 10, 1960.
8. Ellis A. Davis, *Davis' Commercial Encyclopedia of the Pacific Southwest: California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona*. (Oakland: author, 1915), p. 545.
9. Ben Walker, ed., *The Fresno County Blue Book*. (Fresno: Arthur H. Cawston, 1941), p. 507.
10. "J.J. Eymann was simply 'Mr. Nice Guy,'" *The Reedley Exponent*, Oct. 27, 1988, p. S1.
11. "Reedley Man Quits Planning Board," *Fresno Bee*, Apr. 13, 1943; "J.J. Eymann Seeks Election as Supervisor," *Fresno Bee*, Feb. 17, 1940.
12. Earl Eymann's political involvement is documented in the following *Fresno Bee* articles: "Earl I. Eymann Is Named to County Planning Group," Oct. 27, 1943; "E.I. Eymann is New Leader of County Planners," Dec. 18, 1948; "Earl I. Eymann is Honored by Planners Group," Jul. 20, 1954; "Eymann is Appointed to Civil Service Board," Jan. 26, 1955; "Eymann Bucks CSEA Balking for SCJC Post," Jan. 9, 1968.
13. Ben Walker, *Fresno Community Book*. (Fresno: Arthur H. Cawston, 1946), pp. 277-278; "Sanger Man is Named Deputy District Attorney," *Fresno Bee*, Nov. 13, 1934; "Eymann Seeks Reelection as Reedley Justice," *Fresno Bee*, Feb. 18, 1950.
14. "Thuesen Names Reedley Man Deputy Prosecutor," *Fresno Bee*, July 2, 1948; "Savory Names Dan Eymann as First Assistant," *Fresno Bee*, Feb. 1, 1950; "Fresno Judge Eymann Dies at 55 of Leukemia," *Fresno Bee*, Mar. 7, 1977.
15. "Earl I. Eymann Heads Sequoia Lake Directors," *Fresno Bee*, Mar. 9, 1949; "Reedley Man is Elected to Head County YMCA," *Fresno Bee*, Jan. 26, 1950; "Reedley Man Heads Five State YMCA Council," *Fresno Bee*, Mar. 23, 1953.
16. Ted Loewen, ed. *Reedley First Mennonite Church: The First Seventy-five Years, 1906-1981*. (Reedley: First Mennonite Church, 1981), pp. 25-26.