

## George and Marietta Aschenbrenner of Northern Wisconsin Early Twentieth-Century Entrepreneurs

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George Bernard Aschenbrenner and Marietta Estelle Gilman were married on June 17, 1903 in Medford, Wisconsin. It was noted in the newspaper announcement of their wedding that the bride “has been a very able assistant in the Star-News office . . . and the groom is a successful general merchant.” How well those words “successful merchant” and “able assistant” would epitomize their life together. From their wedding day until they retired some forty years later, George and Marietta worked together in the family businesses.



OFFICE OF  
**Ellingson  
Lumber Co.**  
MANUFACTURERS AND  
WHOLESALE DEALERS IN  
**Lumber.**  
1903

Population about 150. Stetsonville has  
the following list of businessmen.

G. B. Aschenbrenner	Gen. Store
Ellingson Lbr. Co.	Lbr. & Gen. Store
Mehrsted & Priebe	Gen. Store
F. A. Beintker	Dealer in Agriculture Implements
Olson Bros.	Blacksmith
Joe Rindt	Blacksmith
Henry Amacher	Cheese Factory
Chas. Wachtel	Saloon
Joe Liberty	Saloon & Hotel
Geo. Aschenbrenner	Saloon & Hotel
Joe Leytle	Saloon
Brecke & Sons	Saw Mill in country
Pfaff Bros.	Saw Mill in country
Joe Deitzler	Saw Mill in country
Irving Newton	Saw Mill in country
Albert LaBerge	Saw Mill in country

This completes the list of Businessmen that get their  
mail here, there are also about 200 farmers and laborers  
who are patrons of this office.

An ad found in “100 Year Anniversary 1874-1974: Stetsonville, Little Black, Deer Creek.

according to an advertisement in the newspaper of the time. The ad further stated that the population was perhaps double that number, if farmers and laborers in the area were included. George B. Aschenbrenner had a general store and his dad had a saloon and hotel. There were three other saloons in the town, five saw mills, a cheese factory, two blacksmiths, as well as another hotel and two more general stores. At this time Marietta Aschenbrenner was operating the Cash Store, while her husband George, managed a furniture store upstairs. A short time later, Marietta opened a small grocery store in a part of the Crystal Opera House (100 Year Anniversary).

George and Marietta operated businesses in Stetsonville, Eau Claire, Park Falls, Fifield and Lac du Flambeau. Stories about the businesses come from newspaper and obituary columns, their son Fred’s taped family history, their son Robert’s memories, and snippets of information gleaned from the three publications, *100 Year Anniversary 1874-1974: Stetsonville, Little Black, Deer Creek*; *100 Years on the Flambeau: Park Falls, Lake and Eisenstein*; and Elva Lessard’s *Fifield: 1876-1976*. Over the years, the Aschenbrenners were frequently operating more than one business at a time. Their business activity is all the more amazing because they raised eleven children along the way: nine boys and two girls. The births of the children are noted here because they help to establish where the Aschenbrenner family lived and when they lived there.

In 1903, when George and Marietta set up housekeeping in Stetsonville, the town had a population of “about 150,”



Postcard showing Stetsonville, WI in 1909

A year after their marriage, the eldest son Harris made his appearance. The following announcement appeared in the local newspaper and was discovered, pasted into one of Marietta's scrapbooks: "Last Monday night a young gentleman stopped at the home of Mr. and Mrs. G.B. Aschenbrenner and engaged board, lodging and clothes for the next 21 years. We will take a cigar on that, George." The following year, a daughter, Bernice joined the family.

In 1905, George and Marietta were ready for adventures which would take them beyond the confines of their childhood home. They were twenty-five years old and had two young children. George had managed the Cash Store in Stetsonville for three years. In 1905, he bought a store in Eau Claire and moved his young family there (*100 Year Anniversary*, 15). George and Marietta stayed in Eau Claire long enough to add another child to the family. Aloysius was born in that city on January 31, 1907.

By 1908, the family had moved to Park Falls, sixty-five miles north of Stetsonville. Eldred (Al), the fourth child of George and Marietta was born in Park Falls on November 22, 1908. George had two brothers who were already living in this town. Older brother, Edward moved to Park Falls in 1902 and was appointed Head Cashier of the newly formed Park Falls State Bank in 1903. Younger brother, Lawrence arrived in 1905 and became Assistant Cashier. (Both brothers came to hold prominent positions with the bank and were involved in a number of other business and civic activities in Park Falls.) Although little information has been found on their years in Park Falls, we know that George and Marietta lived there for about 10 years and operated a general store and meat market in the town. There is a note on page 216 of the publication *100 Years on the Flambeau* stating that a man by the name of Hugo Bass came to Park Falls and "was hired by George Aschenbrenner to work as a butcher in the Aschenbrenner store." Besides Eldred, four other children were born in Park Falls during these years: Mike, Fred, George and Edmund.

George started doing business in Fifield, five miles south of Park Falls, while the family was still living and working in Park Falls. In 1912, George purchased the Dirimple building on South Central Avenue in Fifield. This building had been recently remodeled by its previous owner, following the fire in 1893. George set up and operated "The Quality Store" at this site until 1920. For a time he operated the store with a man named Semereau (Lessard, 34). It might well have been his brother-in-law, as his sister Anna had married a man named Ed Semereau.



*George and Marietta in their office above the store in Fifield, WI*



## Our Family History



The family stayed in Park Falls until about 1918. Fred remembered the family's move from Park Falls to Fifield. They made the trip by train, traveling about four and a half miles to Fifield on the C Line. "When we arrived there, also in the winter time, I was put on a large sled with pieces of luggage and taken to our new home."



In 1920, George bought the Tappy Erdman building and moved his store up along the north side, remodeling all into one big store (Lessard). At this time, the family was living in a large apartment over the family's warehouse behind the Erdman building, while a new home was being built. Robert and Harriet's earliest memories go back to their home above the warehouse. Soon, George had moved his family, which included ten children at the time, into a large two-story home, built a few blocks away, on a lot the size of half a city block. At the back of the lot was a barn where they kept horses.



In the early part of the twentieth century, one could find a good variety of items in a small-town store. An apt description of the interior of the general store comes from Fifield: "Stores of early days as is said, had an aroma all their own, a mingling of many odors from barrels of pickles, sauerkraut, vinegar, salt pork, crackers and more. It depended on the arrangement of ingredients. Cookies those days came in large wooden boxes and later large square cardboard ones with hinged, glass covers, candy in large wooden pails; spices and sugar sold in bulk, sugar later in cloth bags; cheese, prunes, peas and beans

*Undated photos of the Aschenbrener Store in Fifield, WI. Probably taken in the late 1920s*

also in bulk; lard or suet (lard substitute) out of large wooden pails; slab bacon and smoked sausages hung overhead; eggs came in large crates and were sold by the dozen in paper bags;



Marietta and George B. Aschenbrener. Date of photo unknown.

butter was cut from a large slab and yeast, sold in multiples of 3-cents worth from a pound block; tea came loose, later in boxes and huge bags of coffee sat waiting to be specially ground. There was a limited supply of vegetables and fruits due to lack of refrigeration facilities and the fact that home canning was done on a large scale. Meat was kept in large wooden ice boxes with doors of various sizes and was weighed, as was everything else, on large, cumbersome table or hanging scales. Ice that kept meats, etc., cold was put up in winter from rivers or lakes into huge ice houses and completely insulated with sawdust. It was carried piece by piece into the iceboxes with ice tongs after washing. Staples of clothing; wool socks, heavy underwear, plain shoes, etc. were stacked or hung around a dry goods area and often over grocery area for lack of space, all creating that great hodgepodge that typified the small early country store. Everyone seemed to have a store account and bills were usually paid once a

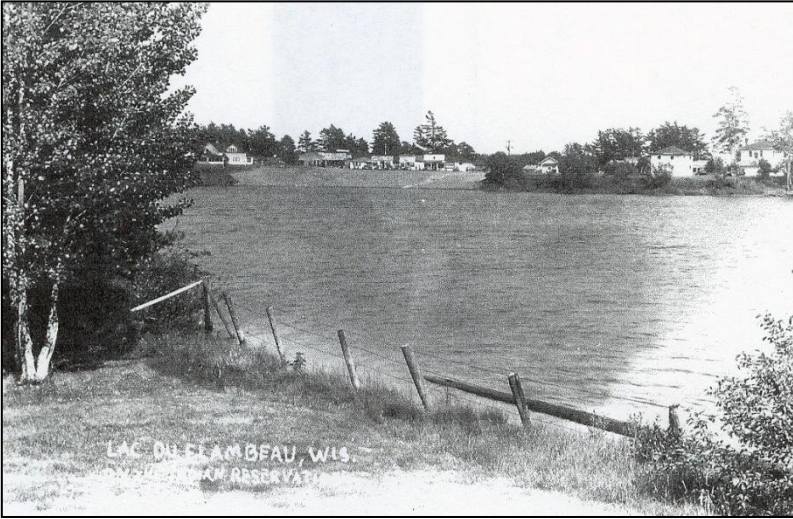
month with the customer receiving a large striped bag of mixed candy in return – children anxiously awaiting that exciting day. The bonanza of country store “odors” and bags of candy have long since disappeared (Lessard, 34).”

An invoice listing items purchased at the Aschenbrener store in Fifield by the Town Board in 1914 gives an idea of the variety of things to be found in the store. There were mattresses and springs, selling for about \$2 apiece. Kettles, faucets, tin dishes, teaspoons, burlap, and rubber boots were sold, as well as ham, carrots, cabbage and parsnips (Lessard, 43).

Years later, George’s son Fred would comment that “there were enough of us children that dad had to hire very little outside help. The help he hired was usually an extra butcher, or an extra warehouse man, or a cook and housekeeper for the house. As each of us went to college, we were given one day’s vacation from the store that we used to travel from northern Wisconsin to Dubuque, Iowa or to Milwaukee, depending upon where [we] went to school. We then went to school, had a 2-week break at Christmas, at which time we were allowed to go home, returning after New Year’s and then stayed in school until June. At that time we had one day travel time from Dubuque back to the Northwoods, in order to go to work behind the counter again.”

STATEMENT		
Return this Statement for Correction in Case of Error		
Date: <u>June 27, 1914</u>		
To: <u>Town Board</u>		
T. G. B. Aschenbrener Dr.		
Terms:	No.	St.
		#1
1914		
May 7	1 pair Rubber Boots	4 50
10	1 Spoon	10
	1 tin Peppers	2 10
	1 tin Carrots	3 50
	1 crate Cabbage	4 10
	1 bag Parsnips	46
	2 Kettles	1 28
	3 lbs	15
	250 # Potatoes	2 10
12	8 Springs	16 00
	8 Mattresses	15 60
	Burlap	1 70
	1 tin	1 90
	0. Lin	18
13	2 tin table forks	60
	1 tin	15
	6 Tin dishes	30
	6 2 qt	60
	5 Gal Oil Can	60
	5 Gal Oil	60
14	20 # Spices	90
	3 tinners	30
	1 Cullender	15
	10 Butter	3 00
	Ham	7 95
	Faucet	10
	1 Parsnips	1 25
		67 50





Lac du Flambeau, WI. Photos taken sometime in the 1930s or 40s. The Aschenbrener home was located at the edge of the lake, far left corner in the top photo. The Aschenbrener grocery mart was located on the street above, across from the lake.

to carry the mail. He had the job for about a year, until a new postmaster took office and, with his earnings, he bought a bicycle.

Marietta was not one to miss an opportunity to earn a few extra dollars. In 1972, Richard wrote that when the electric lights were brought to Fifield, his mom “had the job of turning on the two streetlights each evening and turning them off in the morning.”

Working in the family store did have its light-hearted moments. As Fred recalled, “We were always instructed to take the groceries out to the car for the customer. One of my brothers said, ‘I have your groceries, where is your car?’ The customer said, ‘Well, I parked it outside.’ Again, the brother was pretty young and he said, ‘Well, it would have been a neat bit of parking had you brought it in’” Fred told another story: “My father had a walk-in refrigerator, and the

Fifield’s first post office opened its doors in 1877. In 1920, George Aschenbrener was appointed postmaster, a position he held until 1935 (Lessard). The post office occupied various buildings in the town, including the Aschenbrener store for a time. While George was officially postmaster, it was Marietta who actually carried out the duties and responsibilities as postmistress. As with their

other businesses, it was a family affair. Daughter Harriet served as postal clerk for a time. Robert’s first job was also associated with the post office. At fifteen years old, he was made the mail carrier, handling the mail between the train and the post office. His job was to meet two trains daily in the winter, one going north and the other going south, and four trains in the summer. During the winter months, the mail was pulled to the post office in a sled; in the summer, Robert used a wagon



The Aschenbrener boys delivered to the various resorts around Lac du Flambeau.



door would not always stay closed tightly. So he said to us “whenever you go by and this door isn’t locked, switch the handle, so it will stay cool”. So, bearing that in mind, one day one of the younger brothers walked by, saw the handle unlatched, latched it, and went on his way. About an hour later, someone had to get into this refrigerator, and there is my father, half frozen. He came out and said, “Who locked that door?” My brother admitted to it. [Dad] said, ‘You’re fired!’ He said ‘You can’t fire me, Dad. I live here.’”

George built the Lac du Flambeau store in about 1930. This was on the Chipewa Indian Reservation and George had secured a 99-year lease for the property. It remained open all year. The three month summer tourist business at this location generated more income than the Fifield store in a year. Summer at the lake was a busy time for the whole family. Robert reported that, as a teenager, he would get up at 4 A.M. to go to the resorts to take orders for the day. He would return to the store, fill the orders and deliver the goods. Back at the store after a short rest, he would work until 8 or 9 o’clock at night. After that, the whole family would go to one of the family taverns in the area, not getting home until very late. They didn’t get much sleep in the summer.



This area in northern Wisconsin was popular as a summer resort. As Fred later recalled about his time at the lake, “we met every type of person imaginable. We learned how to be a diplomat in handling each and every one of them.” Native Ojibwe shopped at the Aschenbrenner store, as did the wealthy families with summer homes in the area. These families came from Chicago, Milwaukee and other places in the Midwest.

*Portraits of George and Marietta taken c. 1951 for their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary*

Some visitors were more notorious than others. Everyone who lived in the Midwest during the 20s and 30s seems to have a personal story to tell about the Chicago gangsters. The Aschenbrenners had their story. These outlaws came into being during the Prohibition Era. Al Capone (who ruled the rough side of Chicago) had a summer resort in the vicinity of Lac du



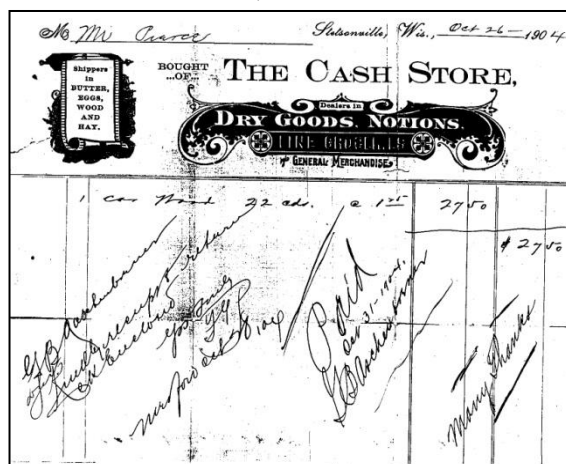
Flambeau. Capone and his buddies shopped at the Aschenbrener store. Fred reportedly sold a fishing license to Al Capone. Robert recalled that when he and his brothers made deliveries to the Capone residence, they were invited to stay for the parties. "Al was never there, but his cohorts were friendly." Robert further noted that, "Up in this neck of the woods, these mobsters of the 1930's generally managed to be law-abiding citizens."

The gangsters did not escape the attention of the FBI, however. Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson were other well-known gangsters who came through Lac du Flambeau in the late 20s and early 30s. In 1934, Indiana-born John Dillinger was living in Chicago and considered "public enemy number one." Robert remembered that the FBI used the Aschenbrener building in Fifield to store machine guns and other arms as part of an operation to capture Dillinger and his gang.

In 1935 or 1936, George bought a mink and fox farm. This was a 40-acre enterprise, located on a side road about 2 miles outside of Lac du Flambeau. On the ranch was a three-story home. The top floor was actually a tower, with 360-degree views from which the activities of the animals, housed in pens, could be observed. For a time, George Jr. and Lorraine lived at this house and managed the farm.

At some time in the late 30s or early 40s, George bought a roadhouse, which he operated for several years. It was named Club 47 and was located on the highway between Lac du Flambeau and Woodruff. The bar was often tended by George or son Mike. Robert recalled that after the war, the furniture he and Ann had in their first home in Columbia, Missouri came from the lounge located in this roadhouse.

By the late forties or early fifties, George and Marietta had sold their homes and businesses in Wisconsin and moved to Tucson, Arizona, where the year-round climate was more agreeable for both. George died on January 25, 1953 of a heart attack, soon after he and Marietta celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. After George's death, Marietta moved to Encino, California with her youngest son Richard. She stayed with him until he was unable to care for her. She spent the last few years of her life in a nursing home in Park Falls, Wisconsin. Marietta lived to be 100 years old, dying on March 17, 1981.



A receipt for goods signed by George B. Aschenbrener in 1904

**Sources:**

*100 Year Anniversary 1874-1974: Stetsonville, Little Black, Deer Creek.* Medford: Taylor County Genealogical Society, 1974.

*100 Years on the Flambeau: Park Falls, Lake and Eisenstein.* Park Falls Centennial Committee. Friendship, WI: New Past Press, Inc., 1989.

Lessard, Elva. *Fifield: 1876-1976.* Park Falls, WI: MacGregor Litho. 1976.