

Vestal Family Business Still Blossoming

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By Leah Huddleston

A landmark business in Cambridge City owes its roots to the Vestal family. It all started with Aaron Hamilton Vestal, who was born near Beaufort, North Carolina - on December 11, 1811. At the age of 18 Aaron went to Ohio and settled in Clarksville, Clinton County. There, on August 9, 1832, he wed Sarah E. Wysong. Their family grew quickly to include six sons and two daughters. In 1845 they moved to Cambridge City and in 1851 Aaron built a house where he lived until his death.

Mr. Vestal served several terms as Cambridge's Marshal and a number of years as a member of the Town Council. His wife Sarah died on July 15, 1876 and Aaron passed away January 29, 1889. Both are buried at Capitol Hill along with several of their children.

One of Aaron and Sarah's sons was Joseph Wysong Vestal. Joseph was born at Harveyburg, Ohio, on November 9, 1833. He married Josephine C. Lonbarger of Philadelphia in 1856 and they had five children. In 1860 Joseph established a florist and nursery business in Cambridge City. After much hard work he built his business into a success.

According to a Timepieces article by Jill King in this paper dated March 4, 2009, Joseph was also engaged in the sweet potato business for a number of years. He took great pains to obtain the best varieties for this climate and always took the highest premiums at both state and county fairs. He

attended to packing the potatoes and plants so they would safely carry a thousand miles or more.

His ad offered to "furnish Families, Hotels, Public Dinners, etc., on reasonable terms" but warned, "All orders must be accompanied by the money." In 1880 Joseph moved his company to Arkansas and established the Vestal Nursery, a very prominent business that shipped plants and flowers all over the country.

1921 Otto Becker bought Joseph Vestal's original greenhouses from a Mr. Mitting who owned them at the time. As Becker's grew, another of Aaron and Sarah's sons, Aaron Hamilton Vestal, Jr., helped Otto expand his business by building additional greenhouses.

Aaron Vestal, Jr. was born November 10, 1851 in Indiana. His obituary in the Cambridge City Tribune of June 27, 1935, states he spent his entire life in Cambridge City, doing carpenters work, where many homes and other buildings stand today as a monument for his efficient life's work. His last job was the remodeling of Otto Becker's home.

The Becker home is the big brick house on top of what was called "Rihm's Hill" in the 40s and 50s, where all the kids on the west side of town went sledding. At one point there were hot houses running all the way to Brick Church Road and an old barn. There was also an old office building that

was moved behind the present Turpin house across from Becker's greenhouses.

Aaron Vestal built many of the Becker greenhouses remaining today. Members of the Becker family have now operated the business for 94 years and have successfully sustained this business that was begun over 150 years ago.

In an interview with Sylvia (Becker) Davis (Otto's daughter), a number of years ago, she told of one of the Vestal boys being engaged to a very tall lady named Daisy Turner. He

bought her a fur coat, but later the engagement was broken, yet Daisy would strut up and down the streets of the town wearing the fur coat and became known as

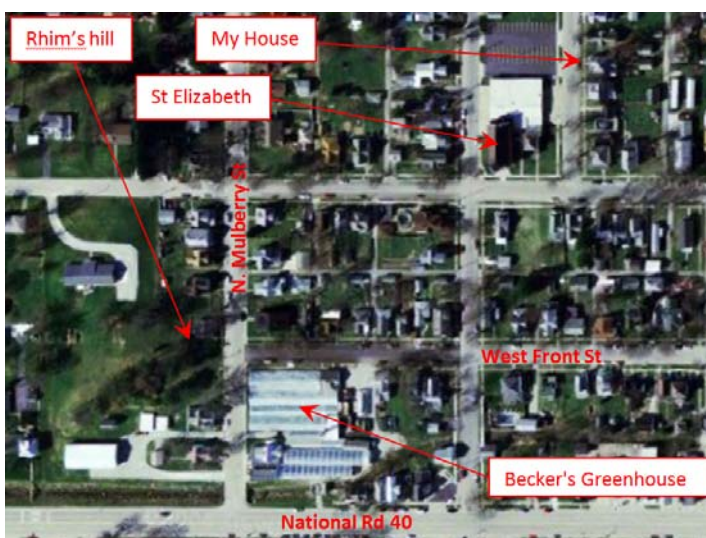
"Forgotten Daisy." She later married Harry Turner. The Vestal boy married and had nine children. One day after World War II the Vestal boy's wife and nine children pulled into Cambridge City in a big car. They took Sylvia in the car to find some family



graves. She said it was the first time she rode in an air-conditioned car.

Rihm's Hill in the Winter

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A few corrections like the spelling of Rihm were made
By Charlie (Kenny) Eldridge



I used to go to Rihm's hill in the winter to ride my sled. The hill was huge, both high and long, and it took forever to trudge to the top of the hill to slide down. This monster hill was located at the end of West Front St., across N. Mulberry St. This is a tee intersection with the hill on the west side of Mulberry.

With excitement and trepidation, I went to the clubhouse to get my sled. I had a clubhouse in my back yard that was a playhouse for the girls that lived in the house before we moved into it in the spring

of 1948. At the time we moved in, it became a clubhouse and it was still standing the last time I went by the house. This was a time of excitement to get to go Rihm's hill but danger lurked in all the trees and with the bigger boys. It seems that back then, I was afraid of everything . . . even the dark.

With all my layers of clothing, hat, coat, boots, and dry gloves (gloves never stayed dry for long in the winter) I was off to Rihm's hill. The sled was hanging in the clubhouse all year unless we were using the clubhouse and then it hung in the garage. Needless to say, the runners were rusty from a season of non-use. I suppose the thing to do would be to have sanded the runners and oiled everything. Did I do that? Of course not! I just pulled the sled from my home that was close to St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church and across Simmons St. to Rihm's hill. I tried to drag it across all of the pavement that was clear of snow and ice so the runners would be shiny and slick by the time I arrived. The process worked well.

It seems that this was 'the spot' on this side of Cambridge because Mulberry St. was blocked off on both sides of the hill and Front St. was blocked off down the street a ways so we could slide down the hill and into the street. Additionally, I heard that the owners watered the hill to make it better for sledding. I never knew who owned the property but, I assume, it was someone in the Rihm family. As I approached the hill, excitement grew as I was looking at hundreds of kids sliding down the hill. There were probably only a dozen or so but in a little kid's mind, there were a lot.

Arriving at the hill, I stayed to the side with my sled and started up the hill. I remember the long arduous climb and watching the sleds whizzing by as other kids were enjoying sledding on the hill. The climb was long and a little tiring but I finally arrived and was ready. Uh oh, now the real fear set in. It was a long way down and the speed would be unbelievable. Another problem was that other kids would pile on as you would get started. This was a common practice where one would start and someone else would do a belly flop on top of you. It seems that most of the sleds went down with two kids and not one. The problem with this practice was with the skill of the second kid in hitting the target without turning over the sled in the process. That would entail picking out the larger kids to ride with so as to put the most weight on the bottom. Since I was a larger (read fat) kid, I almost never got to go down by myself.

It seemed that the ride to the bottom was like being shot from a cannon. The hill was icy and there were trees along the way with an icy path in between them. This was a very dangerous hill and we were going very fast and running between the trees. At the bottom was the street and the speed was at least 100 MPH . . . OK, maybe 20 or so but it seemed like 100! At the bottom, we crossed Mulberry and raced along Becker's greenhouses forever until we came to a stop. It was only after we stopped that I found out who was riding with me and now we faced the long trek back to the top of the hill.

After many trips to the top, I was tired and cold, my hands were freezing, my ears were

numb and it was time to go home. I think my gloves would have stayed dry were it not for throwing snowballs at the sleds going down the hill. After all, they threw snowballs at me when I was going down.

Getting home was interesting. It felt good to strip out of all of my outer clothes with the exception that my pant legs were always icy and freezing against my legs once my boots were off. I had to strip off my jeans so that mom could drape them onto the radiator with my wet gloves. Now came the bad part, warming the hands. I wanted to put them under warm water but dad insisted that I use cold water. It didn't make sense to me that cold water would burn my hands but it did. It was only after my hands had warmed up that warm water could be used.

I can't remember how old I was when I went to Rihm's hill the first time or when I outgrew sledding down the hill. Recalling the adventures makes me want to buy a sled and go again to Rihm's hill. At this point in my life, I am sure that one of the trees would get in my way.

I was explaining to my wife about the excitement and fun I had on that huge hill and then took her by to see it for herself. I was saddened when I noticed that the house that stood on the crest of the hill was gone and we were amazed when we realized how small the hill actually was. It is amazing to me how our memory changes over the years and how big things are to children.