

JOSEPH HENRY KRAFT

"Uncle Joe"
1857 - 1942

Joseph Henry Kraft was born on March 23, 1857 in New Albany, Indiana to George and Mary Elizabeth Terstegge Kraft. They had 10 or 11 children of which 4 lived to adulthood. They were Frank, who took over the Kraft Funeral Home on his father's death; Joe; Ida Kraft Broecker and Mary Elizabeth "Mayme" Kraft Horn Rogers.

George Kraft owned a small furniture factory on Main Street, which eventually became a funeral parlor. The family all belonged to St. Mary's Catholic Church, and when Joe was a boy he sang there and was said to possess a high, clear voice. This changed, and, in later life, singing was certainly not one of his accomplishments.

He attended the parochial school for an unknown number of years - not many from his remarks. At one time, a physician of New Albany approached his father and proposed that Joe "ride with him." This was equivalent to an "apprenticeship." His father "hooted" at the idea of his son having pretensions to being a doctor, and "that was that." However, to his dying day, lotions and potions and pills had a fascination for him and he was always mixing up noxious nostrums for man and beast and a lot of times they worked!

On the other hand, his father would have been satisfied for him to have become a priest and Joe imparted this bit of information to a couple of elderly women when he was middle-aged. One of them threw up her hands and exclaimed in German-accented English, "Oh, Choe! You'd have been a helluva priest."

When Joe was old enough to work, which in those days was pretty young, he became a delivery boy for . . . [Reineking], who owned a dry goods store, for 50 cents a week. He later said that he finally made as much as \$2.50 a week and earned every cent. He delivered parcels all over town - on foot - "Shank's Mare" it used to be called. Of course New Albany wasn't so extensive in those days, but he still covered a lot of ground. Mr. Reineking had a huge black umbrella which he and his employees used on rainy-day errands. Painted on top of it in large white letters, to foil pilfering, was the information, "Stolen from . . . Reineking." It was a sure attention getter but Joe was just a little embarrassed to be seen under it.

As he grew older he went to work for Sam Culbertson who also had a store in New Albany. When Hannah Elizabeth Lennox and her sister Sarah Jane came to town from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa and opened a small dry goods and notion store, he began to court Miss Lizzie who was a few years older than he and after several years he finally persuaded her to marry him. Love does peculiar things to you. For the first and only time in his life he ventured into wood-crafting. He made Lizzie a beautiful sewing chest complete with mirror and tray and inlaid with birds, flowers and animals. It is quite a tricky piece of work, is still beautiful and unlike anything else he ever did. He and Lizzie were married on July 3, 1879 at St. Mary's.

Joe and Lizzie started the Joe H. Kraft Dry Goods Store and Joe ran it until the last part of the '90s when his health became poor. Three doctors, in consultation, decided that he had only about 6 months to live so he began to get his affairs in order. He sold the store to Will Newburger and it became the "White House" now only a memory itself. The doctors, of course, made a slight error and Joe outlived all three of them.

Joe and Lizzie lived beyond town on the Paoli Pike across from the Wolf farm. They had one child – a daughter named Olive Lennox who married Frank Ashley Wells. One of the most exciting and near tragic things that happened during her childhood was an [attempt to kidnap](#) her on her 11th birthday in November 1892. Joe could still get angry over this in his 86th year. The family was tipped off about it by a Mr. Kane who lived and worked on the farm. The plans made by the gang sounded like a "Penny Dreadful," but Joe and a group of his friends from New Albany hid in the barn and ambushed the would-be abductors as they were stealing toward the house. One man was killed and the others received jail sentences after a lot of fol-de-rol. It was lucky they were caught on their first try because they had drawn up a list of prospective victims and Olive's happened to be the first on the list.

During the '80s and '90s Joe did quite a bit of hunting. He used to say that he could take a gun and dog during his lunch hour, go over on Pearl Street Hill and shoot enough quail for dinner that evening. He also loved to duck hunt and went to Maryland and Arkansas for this. His favorite hunter was a pointer named _____ and simply called "Hoosier." Hoosier had a lot of companions – a pug dog, a greyhound, a St. Bernard named "Capi" and several others. Joe loved to tell about the dog concerts they had. Olive had a toy piano on which she loved to pick out tunes. When she began to play the dogs came from all directions and gathered around her. The sound set up a responsive nerve in them and they howled in all keys – whether from pain or joy – who knows. When Joe told about it he would always roll up his eyes, raise his hands and say, "My God! They'd make the woods ring!"

Since Joe's health improved after the sale of the store and it became obvious that the doctors' prediction was a little premature, he edged into political life. He was appointed probation officer, an office he held for more than 18 years. During that time he performed more duties than the office called for. In those days rabies was much more prevalent than it is now, since most dogs receive their shots routinely today, and summer time then was a time of dread and caution where dogs were concerned. When a dog bit someone and was suspected, it was shot and its head sent to a lab in Indianapolis. If the test was positive (and to be safe it generally was), the victim went through a painful 2 weeks' anti-rabies treatment. Someone had to handle this business of sending the heads away and since no one rushed forward to do it, Joe took it over and it must have been a bad experience for him because he loved animals.

He loved children, too, and tried to straighten out the erring ones before they got worse. But he wouldn't stand for real lawlessness and so got the reputation for being a bogey-man. Mothers would say to a mischievous child, "If you don't behave, Joe Kraft will get you." On the other hand, children considered him their friend and called him "Uncle Joe" and he usually had a pocketful of candy or peanuts to give them.

Up until 1907 he had a full beard as seen in a family album. In that year he had the beard removed and wore only a moustache the rest of his life. The change was so great that he frightened his granddaughter into tears when she thought a stranger was picking her up. His trademark was a cane. He had quite a collection of them – plain and fancy – several still in existence. The one he carried most often was a heavy stick with a high brass tip. He plunked it down on the sidewalk with every left step he took and you could hear him coming half a block away – especially at night. The neighbors all said that they felt everything was O.K. in the neighborhood when they heard that sound. He also used the stick when he chased troublemakers. He had a knack of pitching it between their feet when they were running and tripping them.

Someone was always crying on his shoulder or coming to him for help. The eternally indigent and the crafty ones correctly sized him up as a soft touch and a Mr. Fixit and even followed him to his home to lay their burdens on him. One time his granddaughter - scantily clad - dashed into a clothes closet in a small sitting room to pick up some garments and was trapped there for an hour when Joe brought a “client” into the room for a very involved and trifling bit of business. He genuinely liked to help people – the deserving and sometimes the not-so-deserving, who knew how to tell a pitiful tale.

He was pretty good at keeping order in crowds and moonlighted now and then at picnics and dances at Glenwood Park. It was at one of these affairs that a disgruntled fellow purposely backed his car into Joe, pinning him against another car. He had some difficulty over this incident since it left him with a crushed kidney; however, that didn’t seem to slow him down.

He loved food. He told the story many times of coming home when he was just a kid and finding a big pot of stew on the stove. He was hungry and wolfed down a big bowl of it before finding out that it was a stew of chunks of snake which his mother was rendering for the oil. Snake oil was one of the great cure-alls in the 19th century.

He loved unusual food for that time and always knew where to get the guinea hens, squabs, shrimp, wild mushrooms and December strawberries. He especially liked Limburger cheese, which is not unusual, but Lizzie made him keep it on the back porch because of its penetrating fragrance. Because he liked his vegetables very fresh in summer and fall, he rented an acre or 2 down near the gas plant and after work each day, Spring and Summer, he would ride the Ekin Avenue trolley down to the patch and work his garden. He had a green thumb and his produce was A-1. When the vegetables ripened, he would ride back home on the car with a market basket full of tomatoes, corn, lettuce and so forth. Among other things, he raised enough celery to bury part of it in a small dirt pit where it was blanched and kept the family in home-grown celery till Christmas time.

Joe loved holidays – Christmas, Thanksgiving and especially the Fourth of July. He was like a kid with the fireworks and always had a super piece to finish off the evening’s show. In the Ekin Avenue days when darkness had finally arrived on the Fourth, the sparklers, fountains and Roman candles burst forth like bright night-blooming flowers all up and down the street. The children at the Orphan’s Home had sparklers and looked like a field full of fireflies as they ran round and round their large yard. This was a magic time for

Joe and must have been the high time of summer for him for he always felt that after the Fourth we were fast heading into Autumn.

Everything was either black or white for Joe – there was very little grey area. Things were good or bad, joyful or miserable, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong. There wasn't much room for a happy medium. A friend was always a friend but an enemy was unforgiven till his last day. He had definite ideas on everything and was stubborn, so he must surely have been a thorn in the sides of some of his fellow politicians.

After his stint as probation officer, he was court bailiff for a time and was then elected sheriff for 1926-30. Lizzie died after a long illness while he was in office. He never did get over her death and mourned over it years later. He lost a bid for another term as sheriff, so he went back into a small retail business – discount this time – and seemed to really enjoy it. It probably brought back the old days, although it was a far different operation.

During all of these years he was convinced that he was going to strike it rich in either oil or gas, if he just kept at it long enough. There were a number of dry holes in southern Indiana to bear witness to his obsession. He finally, with several other fortune seekers, managed to bring in a few extra modest oil wells in southern Kentucky. They never did come up to expectation and at present are mostly under Cumberland Lake near old Burnside.

In 1933 he was elected township trustee and was holding this office when he died at the age of 86 after a couple of stays at St. Edward's Hospital. This office was a satisfaction to him, for he was still helping people - although there were doubtless many who didn't deserve that help. But he was happy to be of assistance to those deserving it.

Wealth and fame were not a part of his life, but he had many friends and several generations of New Albanians affectionately called him "Uncle Joe." A month or so before he died, he was talking about the past and said, "If I had my life to live over again, I'd do it exactly the same way." And that's saying a great deal.

- Written by Mr. Kraft's only grandchild, Helen Wells Cooper Hauss, and presented to the Floyd County Historical Society on September 27, 1983 by his great-granddaughter-in-law, Mrs. Lennox Joseph (Nora) Cooper.

Additional notes: Olive Avenue, off of State Street, was named for Mr. Kraft's only child, Olive, mother of Helen. Also, there has been a Joe Kraft Park located off of West Seventh Street. I do not know if this park is still in existence. – Lola K. Sloan, President 1983-84, Floyd County Historical Society. [*The park is still there.* - 2010]