

# Blue Eyes, and a Touch of Larceny

---

**May 16, 2022**

**Palo Alto County, Iowa**

*(a sequel to "At the Bottom of the Atlantic")*

*After surviving the shipwreck, Frederik Bekker's story continues in America. "Fred", as he became known in his adopted homeland, used skills learned from his survival experience and his innate cunning to make his way in America. Fred also added a measure of trickery to his list of character traits, as we shall see.*

Fred made his way from the SS *Missouri* docked in Philadelphia, to Chicago. We have no idea of the circumstances, other than he worked as a carpenter and took night classes to learn English.

In 1892, the year leading up to the Chicago World's Fair, Fred worked at the fair site, plying his carpenter's skills.

**This portrait photo was taken in Chicago when Fred was about 17.**



While in Chicago, Fred learned from co-workers that land was available for settlement in Iowa. He made his way to Palo Alto County, with the dream of becoming a landowner and farmer.

Settlement land was no longer available when Fred arrived in Iowa. He worked on threshing crews for established farm owners, while he saved for land of his own. Fred had his next brush with fate on one of those farms.

Our earliest relative to live in North America was Septimus Whistler. His unusual name means "seventh", usually referring to the seventh son, or seventh child. Our Septimus was a first-born child, so we don't know why he was given the name. In any case, Septimus and his wife Eliza May immigrated to Iowa from England in the late 1880's, with their daughter Florence, who would have been a teenager. The family farmed in Palo Alto County, near the town of Emmitsburg.

Septimus employed a threshing crew to harvest his crop in the fall of 1895. Fred Bekker was part of that crew. How Fred got the job as a steam engine operator, is the first instance of recorded deception on his part.

---

*Fred learned to speak English well, but he never mastered the written language. His daughter (my grandmother) Florence wrote a detailed family history late in her life. The quotes embedded below are Grandma's account of the Bekker family while they lived in the American Mid-west, c 1888 - 1911. Some of Grandma's wording has been amended for clarity.*

---

*"Fred wanted to work on a threshing crew, but he had no experience. He hired on with a crew but only lasted one hour. Fred was fired when the foreman found out he didn't know a thing about it. Fred had picked up a little knowledge about operating a threshing machine in his very short time on the job and was able to hold his second operator's job for a half day before he was found out. With a half day of hands-on operating, Fred was able to pass himself off as "experienced" and held his next job permanently."*

Fred went on to become a master machine operator. Grandma tells the story of just how much his skills had developed:

*"Fred jumped down from the top of the separator to the ground one day and landed on a pile of frozen cow dung, and sprained both of his ankles. After sitting in the house for a day, the boss had him carried outside in a chair, to observe the separator. The boss's comment was "the machine won't run without him".*

Not only did Fred impress his employer, but he also caught the eye of Septimus' daughter.

*"My parents Florence Whistler and Frederik Bekker were married at Emmetsburg, Iowa (on January 15, 1896)".*

*We don't know which church the Whistlers belonged to, or if Frederik and Florence even married in a church, but this **Trinity Episcopal Church**, built in 1879, is the only house of worship still standing in Emmetsburg from that period.*

The newlyweds didn't waste any time starting a family. A daughter, Fay came along in 1897, followed by Clifford, Carrie, my grandma Florence May, then Fredrick Jr, and Gilbert. Another son, Roscoe would be born in Canada.



Fred's brother Bendixon ("Ben") Bekker had also immigrated to the US and was living in South Dakota. Fred and Ben decided to apply for homesteads in Saskatchewan. Over the winters of 1909 and 1910, they traveled to the Gravelbourg area, leaving their families in the US while they staked

their claims. The brothers moved livestock and machinery by rail through the port of entry in 1911 but were forced to use more of their cunning and chicanery to gain entry to Canada.

Some of the livestock being transported had fallen ill and would not have passed inspection at the border. Not wanting to face a lengthy quarantine, the brothers devised a plan to circumvent the inspection. Ben had a bronc stallion, so they positioned the horse near the door of the rail car. When the inspector came by, he took one look at the rank horse, closed the door, and said, “*Well, these seem healthy enough*”. Welcome to Canada!

The Bekker brother’s trickery wasn’t finished yet. Somewhere east of Moose Jaw, the railcar containing Bekker livestock was identified as having a damaged axle bearing. Railway mechanics hung a paper “*Hot Box*” sign on the car, which meant it would be removed from the train for repair at the next stop. Some time during the night the “*Hot Box*” sign disappeared, and the Bekker livestock and settler’s effects made it to Gravelbourg unimpeded.



Hotel in West Bend, Iowa, built in 1890, while the Bekkers lived in the area.

The Bekker wives and children reunited with the brothers in Gravelbourg in the spring of 1912, ending the family’s time in the American Mid-west.

I like to think that we who have followed have inherited some of the resourcefulness and cunning of Fred Bekker. I know that we all have Fred’s ...

... blue eyes, and a touch of larceny.

