



**ALFRED CHARLES AND FRANCES CATHERINE  
(RIEHLE) HENNIG**

**A Family Narrative Prepared by their Grandson,  
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*This narrative is based on public and family records, and on family oral history. **Yellow highlighting** indicates that there are photos or documents that pertain to the highlighted topics in the gallery that follows this narrative. The author assumes all responsibility for the accuracy of this narrative, and welcomes any comments or corrections that readers might care to submit.*

Alfred Charles Hennig and Frances Catherine Riehle were married on Wednesday, September 15, 1915, in Athens, Wisconsin. He was age 30 and she age 25 at the time. Over the next ten years, they had **seven children**, all of whom lived to adulthood.

Alfred was born on Friday, August 28, 1885, in the Town of Halsey, Marathon County, Wisconsin. He was born on the family farm of his parents, Richard Carl (also called Karl Richard in some records) and Maria Anna (Hesse) Hennig. Richard and Maria Anna and their two oldest children (a daughter Anna Ida and a son Richard Carl Jr.) migrated from Saxony, Germany in 1881. They lived briefly in Ohio, where their third child, a daughter, Anna Lena, was born in 1882. By 1885, they had moved to Wisconsin where seven additional children were born, all on Richard and Maria Anna family farm, a few miles northwest of Athens. Alfred was the oldest of that group. Three younger sisters in that group died between 1888 and 1901. An unnamed sister died at birth in 1888 and two others died at about age 5: Anna Frida in 1895 and Selma Anna in 1901.

According to the Town of Halsey Centennial book,<sup>1</sup> published in 1983, Alfred was the first white person born in that township. The township came into existence just two years before his birth, so it is possible that other white children were born in that general area before the township existed.

Little is known about Alfred's early years. Census data for 1895, 1905 and 1920 do not include information about his education but they do state that he could read and write English. The census of 1930 states that he did not attend school but the 1940 census states that he completed eighth grade. Thus, his educational status remains uncertain.

According to the 1983 Halsey Centennial book, Alfred helped his father clear timber from his parent's family farm when he was a young boy.<sup>2</sup> The 1900 census lists his

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<sup>1</sup> Accessible at <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?id=WI.Halsey>

<sup>2</sup> The farm was located a mile or so northeast of Athens, just north of CTH A and eventually had acreage on both sides of modern-day Nehrass Road.

father's occupation as a "farmer" and Alfred's as a "farm laborer." Most likely, Alfred worked on his father's farm. It is not known what kind of farm they operated but it probably was a dairy farm. According to the Halsey Centennial book, Alfred also **helped his father in the logging business**, which was probably a side business of his father's. This was a common source of "winter income" in north-central Wisconsin at that time.

Frances was born on Tuesday, February 4, 1890, in the Town of Rietbrock, the next township south of the Town of Halsey. She was the second daughter and second oldest of the five children of William and Mathilda (Kulas) Riehle. She was born on her parent's original family farm, located about three miles due east of Athens on the south side of what is now Townline Road.

As is the case with Alfred, little is known about Frances's early years. According to census data, she had completed four years of school by 1900. She would have been age 10 at the time, so this would have been consistent with her attending school full-time up to that year. Later censuses indicate only that she had "attended school" without specifying the number of years.

In 1902, Frances's parents sold their original family farm on Townline Road and bought another farm about two miles further east down the road. Their new family farm was located on the opposite (north) side of Townline Road, which put it in the Town of Halsey. Their farm later became the family farm of Frances's younger brother Bernard "Ben" and his wife, Mildred (Jacobwitz) Riehle.<sup>3</sup>

It is not known how Alfred and Frances came to know each other and enter into the relationship that eventually lead to their marriage. What is known is that in 1907, at age 22, Alfred moved north to Canada to **apply for a homestead**. A collection of postcards that Alfred sent to Frances while he was in Canada existed at one time in their later family home, so their relationship must have begun before Alfred's adventures in Canada. She would have been about age 17 at the time. Those cards would be an invaluable resource to learn more about their history and personalities at that time but they seem to have disappeared.

Alfred's venture in Canada occurred during what became known as "The Canada Craze" in that part of Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup> By that time most of the unimproved land in central Wisconsin had been sold and land prices were rising. Many sons of farmers

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<sup>3</sup> A **one-room schoolhouse** was located on the Riehle family's new farm, within easy walking distance of the farm home. One interesting possibility is that Frances and some of their children might have attended school in it but no records have been found to determine if that actually happened.

<sup>4</sup> An excellent historical resource for this period in central Wisconsin is the book, "Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925," by Joan M. Jensen. Published in 2006, it is a fat book (500+ pages) with lots of details about life during those days in four central-Wisconsin counties: Lincoln, Taylor, Clark and Marathon. Much of it might not be of interest to everyone reading this narrative, but it is available through inter-library loan in most Wisconsin libraries, and is worth a browse. The "Canada Craze" is mentioned on p. 18 of that book.

(like Alfred) could not afford to buy land for their own farms. With the authorization and encouragement of the Canadian government, recruiters came to central Wisconsin specifically to entice young men (and their families) to move to the sparsely settled areas in western Canada and establish homestead farms in it.

While he was in Canada, Alfred apparently earned money for his expenses by working on ranches as a “wrangler,” which means he “broke horses.” The author recalls seeing a photograph of him riding on a “bucking bronco” in a corral up there but, like many other memorabilia, that photo has since been misplaced or lost.

Alfred submitted his application for a Canadian homestead in 1908. The application is somewhat difficult to read, but it appears to have been for 160 acres located near Haneyville in Alberta. (The town name was changed to Coronation in 1935.) Photographs taken at the time of his application do not portray very attractive living conditions. The area was mostly flat and treeless, and living quarters frequently were sod huts (similar to the terrain and early “homes” in the Great Plains in the U.S.). According to some potential settlers from central Wisconsin who returned from scouting trips to that area, “It is a lonesome land, and in winter it is colder than it is even here.” Photographs also suggest that it would not have been a particularly appealing home-site location for a young wife.

In any case, Alfred’s Canadian adventure seems to have fallen through. There are no records of his living in Canada after his homestead application in 1908, nor any stories about what happened next.<sup>5</sup> In any case, Alfred’s name does not appear in the 1910 U.S. census or in the 1911 Canadian census. One possibility is that he returned to Wisconsin to live with his parents. However, for some reason, Alfred’s parents also were not listed in the 1910 census.

The next mention of Alfred in public records is his WWI draft registration card. It states that he was living in Athens in 1918. This would have been 2-3 years after his marriage to Frances and the birth of their first two children, Verene and Karl. He was not drafted but all military age males had to register. According to his draft card he was a self-employed carpenter at the time. The same record also states that he was a citizen of Canada. He probably was required to renounce his U.S. citizenship to obtain a homestead in Canada. No records have been found for his “re-naturalization” as a U.S. citizen, but this undoubtedly occurred since he voted regularly and held various public offices in his later years.

Meanwhile, there is evidence that Frances was in on Alfred’s Canadian plans. U.S. naturalization records, dated 1926, exist for her. She is described in those records as a citizen of Great Britain and Ireland. Since she and her parents all were born in the

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<sup>5</sup> One piece of oral history told by Frances’s daughter, Verene, to Verene’s son, Gary, was that Alfred travelled to Canada with a partner who absconded one night with all of their funds. This story has since been corroborated by Greg Fisher who heard it from his mother (and Verene’s sister), Lucille.

U.S., this would not have been necessary unless she too had renounced her U.S. citizenship. This might have been part of Alfred's quest for a Canadian homestead. Frances is listed in the 1910 U.S. census as residing in the home of Wheaton and Dora Denning in the Village of Athens. The Denning's were originally from Dorchester, a village about 10 miles west of Athens. They had five children at the time, ranging in age from four to twenty. Wheaton's occupation was listed as a "tie maker."<sup>6</sup> Frances was age 20 at the time. Her occupation was listed as a "servant and seamstress" for the Denning family. That was a very common occupation in those days. In particular, her skills as a seamstress would have been a "meal ticket" for her, since sewing and clothing repairs were required skills in most households at that time. It is not known what happened to the Denning's after that census.

Equally interesting is that the Denning's next door neighbors were the family of Alfred's older brother, Richard Carl Hennig, Jr. They would have provided a convenient point of contact between Frances and Alfred during his years in Canada.

Not much is known about Alfred and Frances in the early years after their wedding in 1915. According to oral history mentioned to the author by their daughter (and his mother), Verene, she was born in 1916 in a house a short distance north of the Village of Athens on modern-day State Highway 97. That house still existed in the 1970s and might still be there. However, the author has since forgotten which house it was!

According to the 1920 census, Alfred, Frances, and their first three children, Verene, Karl and Clarence, were living with Frances's parents in their second family farm on Townline Road. Alfred's occupation still was listed as a "carpenter" in that census. Their fourth child, Rosalia, was born in April of that same year. Frances's parents (William and Matilda) and two of Frances's siblings (Lena, age 32, and Ben, age 23) also were living in that home. With four children of their own, it was obviously time for Alfred and his family to move on!

**According to public records**, Alfred and Frances bought a 40-acre plot of land in 1920. The land was located about a mile north of the Riehle family-farm home (as the crow flies) on the north side of County Highway A, about five miles east of the Village of Athens. That parcel would become the north half of what eventually became the 80-acre family farm of Alfred and Frances. They purchased the land on a **land contract for \$1500 from Rietbrock Land and Lumber Company (RLLC)** on July 24, 1920. RRLC owned many acres of land in the townships of Halsey and Rietbrock when it was still covered with timber. The land contract specified that Alfred was to cut and remove timber from the land he had purchased and turn it over to RLLC. This would have left Alfred with a lot of work to do, but it undoubtedly made the purchase price more affordable.

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<sup>6</sup> Most likely this means that he worked in a sawmill in Athens that made railroad ties, which was a booming industry at the time.

The property immediately adjacent to Alfred's on CTH A was purchased from RLLC in 1920 by Frances's sister, Anna, and Anna's husband, Frank Hart. The two properties were essentially a traditional 80-acre plot divided "the long way" into two narrow 40-acre parcels. The records show that the Harts also entered a land contract agreement with RLLC with the same stipulations about timber cutting.

According to the 1983 Town of Halsey Centennial book, Alfred had cleared enough timber from his 40-acre parcel to build a log cabin on it shortly after he purchased the land.<sup>7</sup> He built a barn on it in 1923 which was still standing at the time of his passing some 60 years later. According to the same Centennial Book, Alfred next built the wood-framed Hennig family farm home in 1928. If the above dates are correct, the last three of their seven children were born in the log cabin, before the farm home was built in 1928.

On June 29, 1929, Alfred and Frances obtained a mortgage loan on their property in the amount of \$2000 from Jozefa and Albert Horacek.<sup>8</sup> They apparently used these funds to pay off their RLLC land contract and possibly for other farm improvements.

Only five months later, in October of 1929, the stock market crashed, triggering the onset of the Great Depression. This created great hardships, especially for small farmers with large families and a collapsing milk market. Apparently, Alfred and Frances could not meet their mortgage payments. On Christmas Eve Day, December 24, 1932, Jozefa and Albert filed court papers for foreclosure of the mortgage.<sup>9</sup> The full amount due to the Horaceks was \$2129. Other records state that various fees and back payments of taxes also were due. On January 21, 1933, the court found

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<sup>7</sup> The author has no photographs or other information about the original Hennig log cabin. However, he does recall that an "old building" that was being used for storage and was replaced with a more modern machine shed in about 1945-46. Perhaps the "old building" was the original log cabin?

<sup>8</sup> I could not find detailed records for Jozefa and Albert but there are records for several Horacek families living in the Athens area at the time. Those records indicate that the original ancestors came from Bohemia in the 1880's. A few families with that name still live in the Athens area.

<sup>9</sup> A brief historical aside: The Great Depression did not start immediately after the stock market crash in 1929. Most people thought that there would be short recession with full recovery of the stock market. The long-lasting Depression was triggered primarily by bank failures. The failures started in the 1920's but began to soar in 1930. The basic problem was that many banks did not take in enough payments on their loans to cover the amounts that depositors wanted to withdraw from their deposit accounts. The Federal Reserve System provided protection to its members for such shortfalls but only a third of the nation's banks were covered by that system. The rest of the banks (16,000 in all) were operating "on their own." This led to "bank panics" by depositors who wanted to get their money out while the banks still had some money. Many unprotected banks simply ran out of funds and closed their doors, leaving their depositors with worthless bank account statements. The establishment of the FDIC and tighter lending rules in 1934 corrected this problem. Nevertheless, many victims of bank failures refused to put their money in banks after that. According to my mother, Verene, pockets in Frances's clothing, dresser drawers and other "hiding places" were found to be "stuffed with cash" after her passing. Not a huge sum, but enough to support the family for a few months. Perhaps Alfred and Frances lost their first mortgage due to a bank failure? (For more information, see [https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/banking\\_panics\\_1930\\_31](https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/banking_panics_1930_31).)

in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered the foreclosure to proceed. Alfred, Frances and their seven children, ages 4 to 15, no longer owned their family farm and home.

There is a gap in the records regarding what happened to the Hennig family for the next year. Then, on February 1, 1934, court records show that they were able to obtain a mortgage in the amount of \$2400 from the Land Bank Commissioner. This was a government agency created under the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act of 1933. It allowed the agency to issue mortgages directly to farmers at “lower interest rates and more liberal terms of payment” as compared to banks and other usual sources.

On March 27, 1934, the Horaceks filed “satisfaction of judgment” paperwork in court acknowledging that they had been paid the full amount due specified in their original foreclosure petition. The Hennigs were owners of their family farm and home again. By law, the Horaceks could have evicted the family and called for a “sheriff’s sale” of the property. Apparently, however, they were patient with the Hennig family and gave them time to obtain their Land Commission mortgage. That mortgage eventually was paid off in full on April 1, 1947.

Going back to the 1930 census, Frances’s older sister, Lena Riehle, also was living in the Hennig family home at that time. Lena also owned the 40-acre parcel directly across the road from the Hennig-Hart parcels. She purchased that acreage from Emil and Elsie Hubing in 1927 for \$1500. Unlike the unimproved land that Alfred and Frances (and the Harts) purchased from RLLC in 1920, the Hubings apparently already were tilling at least a portion of that property. It is likely that Alfred used Lena’s property to raise crops on it for his dairy farm operation while she was living with them. In 1940, three years after her marriage to John Kroening, Alfred purchased Lena’s 40-acre parcel for \$1000. This was \$500 less than she had paid for it some 13 years earlier. At least part of the difference might be attributed to the effects of the Depression on land values. That purchase completed the 80-acre Hennig family farm on County Highway A.

Over the next several decades, Alfred, Frances and various members of their family lived in the family home that Alfred had built in 1928. By 1948, six of their children had moved away. Their son, Clarence, remained a bachelor and lived in that home, performing most of the heavy labor in his parents’ later years. During all of the years the Hennig family lived in it, the house did not have indoor plumbing. However, it was subsequently modernized after it was sold after Alfred’s passing and remains occupied and apparently in good condition to this day.

Alfred and Frances ran a traditional dairy farm, with occasional diversions into cash crops such as peas. The author recalls hearing that they also dabbled in growing ginseng, but that didn’t work out.<sup>10</sup> They also raised pigs and chickens, both for the table and for sale, and sold eggs to local grocery stores in Athens.

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<sup>10</sup> In 1917, Frances’s younger sister, Clara, married Henry Kage, of Marathon, Wisconsin. The Kage’s eventually became ginseng growers and did quite well at it. In those days it was necessary to obtain

Alfred was active in the local community, serving on the Halsey Town Board, on the Board of Directors of the Marco Cooperative, and as president of the local Farmers' Union. Frances and Alfred celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary on their family farm in 1965.

With a herd of only fifteen or so milk cows, and few modern conveniences, their dairy farm was never particularly prosperous. Sometime along the way (1960s?) state regulations were adopted requiring that dedicated milk lines, rather than open milk cans and pails, were to be used for transferring and storing milk for later pick-up by the buyers (usually a nearby cheese factory). Apparently, the family did not have the funds for that upgrade and they subsequently discontinued their dairy operations. Both Alfred and Frances would have been of retirement age and eligible for Social Security by that time.

Frances passed away from consequences of a cerebral hemorrhage on Monday, May 3, 1971. She was age 81 at the time. Frances also suffered from a blood disorder (leukemia?) for a number of years prior to her death.

Alfred passed away on Monday, January 17, 1983, at age 97. The cause of death shown on his death certificate was septicemia related to gangrene in one of his feet, but the general consequences of old age also played a role. Alfred died in a hospital in Wausau but he lived with his son, Clarence, in the family home until he passed away. The farm was sold after Alfred's death and Clarence moved to an apartment in Athens. Alfred and Frances, and their sons, Clarence and Karl, are buried under a shared headstone in Calvary Cemetery, Athens, Wisconsin.

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ginseng seeds from growers who already were in the business. They were hard to come by outside of family circles and Alfred and Frances most likely got theirs through the Kage's.