

HAMILTON COUNTY PIONEERS - THE RUOHS FAMILY

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posted August 27, 2007

http://www.chattanooga.com/articles/article_112236.asp

Joseph Ruohs, a native of Switzerland who spent much of his life in Chattanooga, was "the very last of the old guard of pioneers, and was the wealthiest of them all." Ruohs at one time "probably owned more land in Hamilton County than any other resident." He had started out in Chattanooga as the city's first resident undertaker. He made his own coffins and prepared the bodies, and his wife assisted with the business. Later, he advanced to the dry goods and grocery business, banking and real estate.

Ruohs was born in 1823 in the southern part of Switzerland near Lake Zurich. Ulrich Ruohs died before the birth of his son, Joseph. The mother, Marie Ruohs, remained in Switzerland, but Joseph Ruohs struck out for America when he was 18. He made his way to Nashville, where he learned the trade of cabinetmaker. It was at Nashville also where he met Nancy H. Morris, a daughter of James Morris, who was originally from Virginia. Nancy Morris had been born at Trenton, Tenn., in 1829. She had been left an orphan when she was 12. Joseph Ruohs and Nancy Morris were married in Nashville in 1849.

The Ruohs couple soon moved to Chattanooga and operated a furniture plant in addition to the undertaking business. This steam planing mill was on Market Street between Sixth and Seventh. One of his contracts was with Col. James A. Whiteside for the furniture for the Lookout Mountain Hotel. This contract was completed - except for the chairs - in 18 days. Ruohs also opened a store at Sixth and Market. Afterwards, he organized the Lookout Savings Institute and served as its president. It was on Market Street between Fifth and Sixth. The Ruohs home was at Sixth and Chestnut. The family wealth by 1860 had reached \$21,000.

As the uncertainties of the Civil War approached, Ruohs chose to invest the money he had accumulated in land. A portion of this widespread property was east of town just beyond the present Central Avenue. Here the Ruohs family had a farmhouse. The Daniel Kaylor family retreated to the shelter of the Ruohs place during shelling by Federal soldiers.

In the 1870s, Ruohs slowly began to sell off portions of his vast estate. His farmhouse property as well as some higher ground owned by Judge Robert Hooke was taken by the federal government for the National Cemetery. Hundreds of soldiers killed in the fighting around Chattanooga had been buried there. Ruohs was paid \$9,000 for this property, though he felt it was worth at least \$20,000. He sold another 175 acres nearby in the future Highland Park to some Northern investors. The selling price was said to be in the \$100,000 range. In 1872, Ruohs organized the first cotton factory at Chattanooga. This was the Mountain City Cotton and Wool Manufacturing Company. Over 2,000 looms and spindles were set up in a three-story brick building on the Rossville Road south of Montgomery Avenue (Main Street). The equipment for this plant came from an old cotton mill at Cuthbert, Ga. The plant was built under the supervision of a Swiss, who had built similar cotton factories in Europe. The facility had a slate roof. The cotton plant was in operation for several years, then Ruohs sold it and an adjacent 112 acres for over \$100,000. Later this cotton plant was destroyed by fire.

Ruohs was a devout Catholic, and he led in the erection of the elaborate Sts. Peter and Paul Church on East Eighth Street. Nancy Morris Ruohs, however, was a member of Centenary Methodist. Joseph Ruohs was liberal-minded and he sometimes appeared at the Methodist congregation with her. He was "a serious-minded man," but he "also enjoyed horseplay." He often traveled, visiting Europe "not infrequently." In 1873, he replaced his former dwelling at 535 Chestnut St. with a finer one.

For many years, it was the custom in Chattanooga on New Year's Day for many citizens to stop off at the hospitable Ruohs home at Sixth and Chestnut for open house. Joseph Ruohs was "a delightful host. He was a true gentleman of the old school, who was without pomp and affectation." Ruohs especially delighted in discoursing on his native Switzerland. "He was never happier than when telling of his fatherland and of the simple life of the good folk of the Alps." Though his wealth at one time topped half a million dollars,

Joseph Ruohs did not live ostentatiously. His banking room was in a modest frame building on Market Street between Sixth and Seventh. It was on the second floor and was reached by a flight of wooden stairs.

The writer Sam Divine recalled that Joseph Ruohs “had a fund of information about the early history of Chattanooga and loved to discourse upon the men and things with whom he was associated in his early business career.” Once Divine was entrusted to deliver \$1,000 from his father, John Divine, to Joseph Ruohs. He said, “ My instructions were to hurry back, but I forgot the return order and joined Mother Ruohs, Miss Mary and one or two other neighbor girls on the back porch and engaged in shelling peas and stringing beans for dinner. Time passed rapidly, and dinner was ready before I thought about the object of my visit. It was too late then to be in a hurry, so I stayed for dinner and the rest of the afternoon.” He later informed his angry father that he had spent the time talking with Joseph Ruohs. But John Divine knew that was not so. He said, “It's no use your lying about it for I've seen Col. Ruohs myself since you have, and he never said anything about having a lengthy conversation with you.”

The Ruohs name was destined to disappear from Chattanooga since the only son, Joseph Meinard, died along with his twin sister, Josephine, on April 9, 1864. Joseph and Josephine were eight years old. Their three-year-old sister, Emma Elizabeth, died three days later on April 12, 1864. Apparently the three Ruohs children fell victim to some plague that struck the family. The next year, the mother of Joseph Ruohs died in Chattanooga at the age of 71. All the Ruohs family members were buried at the Citizens Cemetery. Nancy Harriet was unmarried, but Irene Virginia married Gus H. Jarnagin, who had a store in town. The eldest child, Mary, married John B. Pyron, a dry goods merchant. A native of Shreveport, La., his parents had moved to Nashville in 1848. During the war, he fought with the 11th Tennessee Cavalry and rose to the rank of sergeant major. Their children were Ruohs Pyron and Anton M. Pyron.

Joseph Ruohs died in 1907 and his wife in 1909. They were buried in Citizens Cemetery.

Ruohs Pyron settled at Cartersville, Ga., and was connected with the Inmans in Atlanta. Anton Pyron married Corinne Harris. He died in 1911 when he was 29. Nancy Harriet Ruohs lived for many years at the homeplace on Chestnut Street. The Ruohs farmhouse near the National Cemetery survived until 1936.

*Read more stories by John Wilson at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>