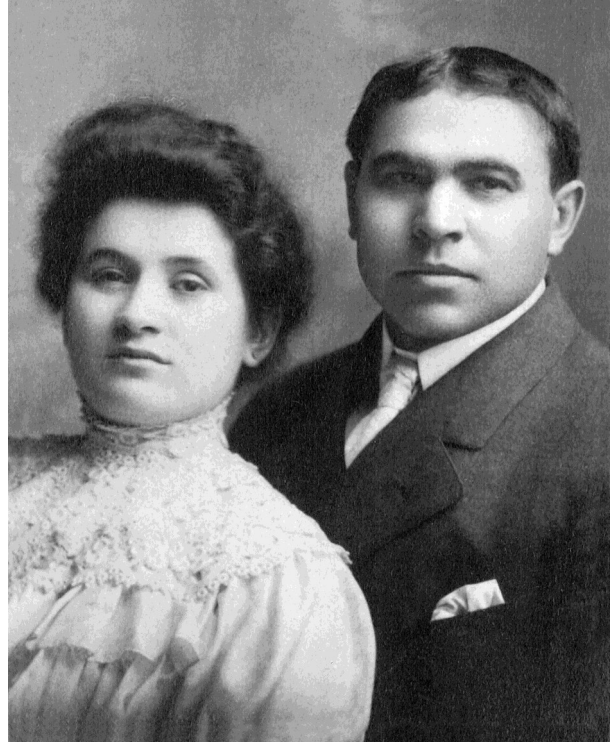


Herman and May Shark

Fund for Excellence in Marketing Education



As a young immigrant from Lithuania, Herman Shark was caught up in the excitement of a booming North Dakota economy advertised and promoted by the railroads and land speculators of the day. Young and newly married, he was ambitious to establish himself in a business which would give him freedom and independence and an opportunity to create a nest egg for himself and his family. As a young father, he wanted to teach his sons how to be independent, how to be free, and how to be responsible citizens in their communities. In short, Herman Shark was captured by the American Dream.

To understand the excitement of the times when Herman and May Shark came to Devils Lake, I turn to Dr. Elwyn Robinson's book, *The History of North Dakota*.

In 1883, Jim Hill had extended his railroad tracks from Grand Forks to Devils Lake. There was furious competition among many railroad companies to run trackage, east and west, north and south, in the great, open state of North Dakota. Involved were the Soo Line, the Northern Pacific, the Manitoba Railway, and the Great Northern. By 1880, North Dakota had 110 miles of

railroad track for every 10 thousand people, three times more track per person in North Dakota than there was in any other state in the nation. Simply put, that meant that there was a tremendous dollar investment in the raw, open, untested prairie state. But with promotion by the railroads, by the state itself, and by land speculators, 75 thousand copies of two 500-page books with sketches and pictures were published and distributed gratis throughout the United States. Thousand of settlers came in the greatest rush of new people to North Dakota that would ever be. From 1900 to 1910, North Dakota grew 81 percent, attracting over 300 thousand people. Devils Lake City grew 200 percent. Minot grew 385 percent. Williston grew 309 percent. The greatest growth was right here, on the "drift prairie" east of here, and on the Missouri slopes west of here. The Red River Valley had earlier been pretty well populated, and Fargo grew only 50 percent and Grand Forks 63 percent in the same ten-year period.

From 1900 to 1910, the population of the United States was growing faster than the ability of its farmers to produce food and fiber. It was boom time for farm prices. There were no overstocks of grain. In 1900, there were 45 thousand farms in North Dakota; in 1910, there were 74 thousand farms. Wheat acreage went from 4,300,000 acres in 1900 to 9,400,000 acres in 1910 and from 69 million bushels in 1900 to 159 million bushels in

Excerpts from a speech by John K. Norby, President, Norby's of Grand Forks, at the dedication of the Herman Shark School of Retailing, October 4, 1978

1910. It was into this boom time that Herman and May came in 1906.

Herman had arrived in the United States at age 18 from Lithuania. He paid off the cost of his Transatlantic passage by working in a home furnishings store in St. Paul. There he later became a door-to-door salesman for religious pictures and then a salesman for distilled spirits, sold in wooden barrels to drug stores “for medicinal purposes,” of course! In St. Paul he met May Glickson, and in 1905, when Herman was thirty-one, they were married. In 1906, they came to Devils Lake, a boomtown in North Dakota. They had only a few hundred borrowed dollars. In efforts to promote business, he had noticed a store in St. Paul that featured a “railroad wreck” sale at very advantageous prices to customers. He bought some of the goods, and in Devils Lake he put up signs and ran ads in newspapers and had a railroad wreck sale of his own. Obtaining credit to buy stocks of merchandise was a problem, but he managed it, and he often joked with his banker friends that they were “in business with him.”

Each of Herman and May’s four sons—Leo, Saul, Sam, and Myer—was bar-mitzvahed in Devils Lake at the district court chambers where services were held during High Holy Days by a rabbi coming from St. Paul. A ladies’ aid was organized, and through May Shark’s efforts, a special charter was granted to the group by the national Haddassah organization, despite the fact the group was smaller in number than was ordinarily allowed.

In 1924, Sivert Thompson of Devils Lake established the Missouri River Diversion Association, and by 1935, the group had convinced the Army Corps of Engineers to build an earthen dam at Garrison, North Dakota, to re-flood Devils Lake, which had gone dry and parched in the Twenties and Thirties, and to irrigate thousands of acres of arid lands west of Devils Lake. The drift plain had turned into a dustbowl during the Thirties, and rural electrification and telephone came late. The remoteness of rural life was taking its toll upon the people around Devils Lake.

In 1942 and 1943, there were damaging floods on the Missouri River, and in December 1944, the year of Herman Shark’s death, the Congress of the United States enacted the Garrison Diversion Flood Control Act which brought new waters to Devils Lake, the return of waterfowl, and 48 thousand acres of irrigated land to the west.

In 1935, Herman and May’s son Leo opened a store in Bismarck. Leo was twenty-nine then, and under his good management the Bismarck store prospered. Years

later, his son, Evan, began a young men’s store, also in Bismarck.

In 1936, Saul Shark finished high school, and in 1938, Sam did. When Saul was twenty-four and Sam was twenty-two, Herman staked the boys in opening a new store in Minot in the depth of the Depression. There was so little money for merchandise that to make the shelves of the store appear well-stocked, Herman would send empty stock boxes along with salesmen coming through by train from Minneapolis, and they would leave the empty boxes in Minot for the Shark store there to place upon their shelves. On Saturday nights, the boys would telephone their father to report how business had been during the week. Herman made them tell him first how it was in Minot. Then he’d fudge a little and say the business was even poorer in Devils Lake.

In the early 1940s, Saul entered the Air Force, and Sam continued managing the Minot store. Myer was completing law studies at the University of Minnesota.

A few days after New Years 1944, Herman Shark died. He had had a distinguished career in retailing, opening a new store in a new building in 1928, remodeling it after a famous Chicago men’s clothing storefront in 1939, and serving as fire and police commissioner in Devils Lake city government from 1930 to 1940.

Myer Shark returned from Minneapolis in 1944, opened a law office for a short time, and closed it to rejoin the family business. Saul returned from service in 1947, and in 1951, Saul returned to Minot. Sam left for Minneapolis to enter business with his father-in-law, and Myer became manager of the Devils Lake store. In 1955, Myer remodeled the store, and in 1966 he remodeled it again. Meantime, in 1956, he moved to Fargo and opened a Shark’s men’s store there.

Herman Shark made opportunity where there was only freedom and very little opportunity. In the face of the greatest financial crisis of our nation’s history, he ran for city commission in Devils Lake. He served his community. He staked his sons to new business ventures in Minot and Bismarck. He re-invested in his own store at the end of the Thirties. He did not sit by waiting for rain. He moved ahead to do something about the life he shared with his family and with his community.

In 1978, the Shark Building in downtown Devils Lake was given to the Lake Region’s community college by Sam and Lorraine Shark. The gift was made in memory of Herman and May Shark. The sale of the building funded an endowment which provides a budget each year to enhance and enrich the learning experience for students enrolled in the Marketing/Management program at Lake Region State College. ♦