

Herman Schroeder (1821 – 1905) & Baroness Maria von Buchau Schroeder (1827 – 1901)

Much of what we know about Herman Schroeder comes from his own stories. However, some of this information might not be completely true, as he was known to exaggerate and sometimes lie about his achievements. The following biography of him and his wife tries to clear up some of his tall tales.

Herman Schroeder was born on May 22, 1821, in Althandensleben, near Magdeburg, Prussia. He was the only son of William Christopher and Elizabeth (Stolz) Schroeder. His father was a music teacher in Napoleon Bonaparte's army during the Napoleonic Wars. It is said that his father helped give the signal to retreat from Moscow. Later, Herman's father became a prisoner of war and was taken to Siberia. He managed to escape and went back to Germany, where he worked as a builder and architect. Herman was born during a difficult time in Europe when there was a major famine. Poor harvests, high food prices, and the end of the Napoleonic Wars led to an economic depression, which caused many people to suffer.

Herman often said that his parents wanted him to become a Catholic priest because they were very religious. Even though they didn't have enough money for this, they sent him to the best schools. Herman was a good student, and he claimed that this caught the attention of some wealthy people and a bishop who helped pay for his education. However, after his mother passed away, Herman decided not to become a priest. Instead, he studied philosophy, natural medicine, and later architecture. As an architect, Herman was very successful and made a lot of money. He even claimed that he built one of the first railroads in Germany, but we can't confirm this.

Herman's wife, Maria von Buchau, came from an aristocratic family. She was born on March 23, 1827, in Altmark, Prussia. Her father was an important military leader who served under General Blücher, the commander of the Prussian army at the Battle of Waterloo. Maria's family had a long history, including connections to the first Swedish governor in America. Despite her noble background, Maria fell in love with Herman, who was from a middle-class family. During a time of political unrest, Maria shared Herman's views and wanted to overthrow the government. They married in 1846, despite resistance from her father.

In 1848, Herman became involved in revolutionary activities, advocating for a republic and challenging the aristocracy. As a result, he was arrested and sentenced to death. However, he and Maria managed to escape the night before his execution and fled to New York City. Herman later claimed that they only had \$10 and a gun he had taken from a soldier during their escape. However, we cannot confirm these details.

Finding work in New York City was difficult, so Herman and Maria moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where Herman studied medicine. In just two years, he became a respected doctor and spent time practicing in Mansfield and Mount Gilead, Ohio. In 1851, they moved to Bloomington, Illinois, after a long wagon journey. There, Herman built a home from an old log cabin, which he said was the first one in Bloomington. He also started practicing medicine again, but the people in town couldn't afford to pay him. So, Herman began buying and selling land. He bought several lots, built houses, and eventually purchased land near El Paso, Illinois. He even founded a town called "Schroederville," which is now Gilman, Illinois.

Although Herman made money through real estate, he sold "Schroederville" in 1856 to start a vineyard in Bloomington. He liked to claim that his vineyard was the "first in the West," but that wasn't true. Still, his vineyard was successful, and he sold millions of grapevines across the U.S. and even to Canada, France, and Germany. He became well-known for his vineyard, and

in 1860, he bragged about how much money he made selling his grapes at the State Fair in Decatur.

Herman also helped Bloomington grow in other ways. In 1866, he built the first opera house in the city, called the Schroeder Opera House, which cost over \$70,000 to build (about \$943,000 in 2008). The opera house was a popular place for performances and could seat 300 to 400 people. Herman later sold the opera house in 1896 for \$50,000 after his health began to decline.

In 1869, Herman built the Minerva Block, a building with a library, art, and sculptures. He named it after their youngest daughter, Minerva. The Schroeders lived in this building and owned valuable items, including what was said to be the first grand piano in Bloomington, sent by Maria's family from Germany. Herman also had a statue of the Roman goddess Minerva placed in the front parlor of their home on the Minerva block.

In addition to these ventures, Herman got involved in coal mining. In the 1860s, coal was discovered under Bloomington, and in 1863, people started drilling to find a local source. Herman claimed that he helped find coal and even served as president of a local coal mining company for a short time. However, it is unclear exactly how he was involved. He owned a portion of the company and resigned in 1870 to focus on his other businesses.

Herman Schroeder tried many different businesses because he saw opportunities everywhere. He started a vinegar and cider factory, which grew into a large, successful business that he eventually sold. He also ran a pickle factory on South Clinton Street for a while. Additionally, he tried raising silkworms by planting many mulberry trees to feed them. However, in 1877, after realizing that the climate in Illinois wasn't right for silkworms, and that the silkworms he bought didn't survive the cold winters, he gave up on this idea. The mulberry trees, however, continued to grow well.

After a trip to Europe in 1875, Herman decided to try another business – making sausage. After months of preparation, he opened his sausage factory on South Main Street on December 3, 1877. The factory produced sausage, lard, and sugar-cured ham. It was well-equipped with steam heat, city water, and the best tools. Herman hired only experienced workers and made sure the factory was very clean. He sold the sausage locally but also planned to send it to Germany, his home country. However, his first large shipment to Germany was contaminated with trichina (a parasitic worm in undercooked pork), and most of the meat had to be thrown away. This upset the German importers, and the German Ambassador even visited Herman, threatening to stop all pork imports from the U.S. Herman defended American pork and argued that other companies weren't inspecting their meat properly. Sadly, the ban on American pork in Germany and other European countries led him to retire from the sausage business.

Through all these different ventures, Herman often boasted that his businesses brought at least half a million dollars to Bloomington, which was spent locally. Despite his failed businesses, his vineyards and nursery continued to thrive.

Herman and his wife Maria had nine children, whose names showed their political views. Some were named after famous revolutionaries and historical figures, like Mazzini (an Italian freedom fighter), Garibaldi (another Italian revolutionary), and Franklin (named after Benjamin Franklin). Only three of their children survived to adulthood: America, Franklin, and Minerva.

Herman was known not only for his business ventures but also for his strong opinions. He didn't believe in traditional religious stories, saying that he couldn't accept the idea that the first man was made from clay. He considered himself a Democrat, but his political beliefs often

shifted. He also strongly opposed absolute governments, like those ruled by kings, and believed that the people should have power.

Herman was also ahead of his time in his views on race. Before the Civil War, he promised that if Black Americans were ever given the right to vote, he would walk through the streets of Bloomington with a Black woman and a band to show that there should be no discrimination based on skin color. When the 15th Amendment passed in 1870, giving Black men the right to vote, Herman kept his promise and walked through the streets with an unnamed African American woman.

He also spoke out against alcohol prohibition, arguing that it never worked in history and couldn't be enforced. His opinions often upset some people, especially other German immigrants in Bloomington, but he also had many supporters.

Herman was seen as a friend to the community. In 1873, after his daughter America's wedding, a group of lawyers gave him a gold-headed cane to thank him for his contributions to Bloomington, especially for helping to build the Opera House and Minerva Block.

Maria, Herman's wife, was also successful. In 1861, a law was passed in Illinois that allowed married women to keep their property and earnings, and Maria used this law to her advantage. She owned a store, a farm, and several houses, making her a powerful figure. She was said to have controlled the family's finances and was careful to ensure they were secure.

In 1887, after 40 years of marriage, Maria filed for a legal separation from Herman, claiming that he treated her harshly. She also said he was too stingy with money. During their separation, Herman built a house in his vineyards called "Villa Maria" for her, though she never lived there. Instead, she stayed in their apartment on Minerva Block, while Herman lived in the villa.

Despite their separation, Herman gave money to support community projects, like a teachers' college in Normal and a hospital for the elderly. In 1898, he donated land for the Deaconess Hospital to build a facility for elderly people, which was named "The Dr. Herman Schroeder Old Folks Home."

In the final years of their lives, both Herman and Maria faced declining health. In June 1900, a large fire in Downtown Bloomington destroyed their home and many of their possessions. After the fire, Maria's health worsened, and she spent her last months in a hospital. She died on November 27, 1901. Herman continued to visit her every day until her death. Afterward, he lived alone in an apartment, where he died on April 7, 1905 after a heart attack.

Herman and Maria were buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. Herman was remembered as one of the town's pioneers and unique characters.