

Guide to the Frank Meinen Papers, 1927-1989

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Summary Information

Title: Frank Meinen Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1927-1989

Creator: Meinen, Frank, 1904-1991

Call Number: Eau Claire Mss BJ; PH 3912; PH 3912 (3); PH 3913

Quantity: 7.0 c.f. (4 record center cartons, 4 archives boxes, and 2 flat boxes)

Repository: Housed at the Area Research Center, William D. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire; owned by the Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division

Archival Locations: UW-Eau Claire McIntyre Library / Eau Claire Area Research Ctr.

Abstract: Papers of a Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, farmer, electric fence manufacturer, and political conservative, including correspondence, financial records of the farm and a fence business, detailed agricultural production records from circa 1920 through circa 1975, family and other photographs, and subject files relating to Meinen's involvement with agricultural organizations such as the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation and the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union of America, St. Peter's Catholic Congregation (Tilden, Wisconsin), and various conservative and religious issues. Also included are papers written by Meinen while a student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (1973-1982).

Language: English

Biography/History

Frank Meinen, Wisconsin farmer, electric fence manufacturer, and political conservative, was born on April 2, 1904. Of German Catholic descent, he grew up and lived his entire life as a bachelor on the same 240-acre farm near Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. Unfortunately, many of the details of his life are undocumented in the papers. It is known that Meinen and his younger brother Lawrence joined their father Nicholas Meinen in the management of the farm during the 1920's. In 1935 Frank Meinen, who was also a licensed electrician and an inventor, established the Meinen Manufacturing Company to produce electric fence controllers and equipment, leaving primary responsibility for managing the farm for their widowed mother to Lawrence. By the early 1940's sluggish business and steady losses forced him out of the manufacturing business, and Frank Meinen turned instead to fence repair and electrical contracting. After the death of their mother Frank joined Lawrence as partners in the operation of the farm, Meinen Brothers.

In 1953 Meinen began to manufacture the Kwik-E insulator, an invention designed to encourage pasture rotation through easy fence mobility. The Kwik-E was patented in 1956, but in 1962 Meinen was still attempting to sell the patent, his failure apparently due to an inability to keep unit costs down and to efficiently address repair problems. The papers do not indicate whether the patent was ever sold. Beginning in the early 1960's Meinen again turned to fence repair and electrical wiring.

Meinen was an active member of several agricultural organizations. Although the exact dates are uncertain, he is known to have belonged to the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union during the 1940's, holding at various times the local offices of president and secretary/treasurer. Meinen broke with the Farmers Union in 1948, however, citing his belief that the organization was headed by radicals. From 1949 to the 1980's Meinen was active in the Chippewa County Farm Bureau, a local affiliate of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation. At various times he served as secretary/treasurer and president of the local group. He was also active in various bureau programs and program committees.

Meinen was a man of strong political and religious convictions which he frequently expressed in the local newspapers. In 1982 at the age of 78 he received a BA in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. In January 1991, Meinen died at his home in Tilden, Wisconsin.

Scope and Content Note

Regardless of how representative Frank Meinen may be of Wisconsin farmers of his era, the records which he donated to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin should be of interest to agricultural historians. Meinen's recordkeeping habits, a prominent family trait, detail operations on the 240-acre farm from the 1920's through the 1970's with particularly extensive documentation concerning dairy and field crop operations.

There are, for example, records on the milk production of individual cows, notes on planting practices and yields in specific fields for extended periods, as well as a variety of accounting records containing information on sales, income, expenses, and depreciation of equipment. Taken together, the collection offers an excellent resource for examining the actual application of scientific and business management practices on a family farm. At the same time, the records on Meinen's electric fence activities provide useful data concerning one of the businesses which grew up in Wisconsin to support agriculture. The personal papers provide an extensive record of Meinen's political views on local, national, and world concerns, particularly communism, agriculture, and Catholicism. Unfortunately, the section contains few of the letters to the editor for which Meinen was locally well known, although there are some scattered handwritten drafts and clippings of printed letters.

The Frank Meinen Papers are arranged as MEINEN BROTHERS FARM RECORDS, ELECTRIC FENCE RECORDS, AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS, and PERSONAL PAPERS. Original photographs received with the collection are housed in the Visual and Sound Archives, with convenience copies filed with the papers.

MEINEN BROTHERS FARM RECORDS include correspondence, financial and tax records, diaries, and crop and cattle records. The files are organized into five categories: general files, herd records, field records, poultry records, and financial records. The general files include a variety of miscellaneous correspondence and administrative documents, together with several diaries relating to the day-to-day operation of the farm in the early 1960's. Frank Meinen continued this diary, but it was later concerned primarily with his health and so those volumes have been filed in the category of personal health records. Earlier diary-like information is also contained in some of his field notebooks. The financial records are most thorough in documenting the 1940's through the 1960's and feature copies of federal and state tax forms, inventories, and account books. Some records listed with Frank Meinen's personal financial records may contain information related to the farm.

Of the production files, the cattle records are the most extensive, spanning the period from the 1940's through

the 1960's. They include information on individual cattle and their milk production. Crop records are less extensive, although there are numerous forms completed by Lawrence Meinen concerning seed corn production and testing he carried out from the 1930's through the 1950's.

The ELECTRIC FENCE RECORDS are arranged alphabetically by subject and contain correspondence, instructions and promotional literature, photographs taken for advertising purposes, sketches and notes, and financial records. The records are most extensive for the period when Meinen operated under the name Meinen Manufacturing Company, with some correspondence pertaining to later work carried out under the name Meinen Sales & Service. The correspondence contains a general file of all electricity-related letters covering the period 1937-1975 and a separate alphabetical file covering relations with agents during the period 1937-1941. The agents' correspondence contains detailed information on sales and on the difficulties experienced by Meinen in marketing and servicing his product. This correspondence provides an interesting comparison to the experiences of Edwin J. Gengler of the Prime Manufacturing Company, whose records are also held by the Historical Society and who operated during the same period. Other correspondence relates to advertising, testing, and financial problems. The later Kwik-E files emphasize advertising, promotion, sales, and patent matters. There are few true accounting records for Meinen's electrical activities, although there are numerous customer account sheets and inventories.

The AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS files contain correspondence, memoranda, notes, membership reports, questionnaires, publications, and financial statements regarding four organizations to which Frank Meinen belonged. The most extensively documented is the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation and the Chippewa County Farm Bureau. Of particular note are correspondence and memoranda from the period when Frank Meinen was president of the local chapter. The file on the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union of America contain some information on his 1948 split with that organization over perceived left-wing activities.

There are few true personal items within the PERSONAL PAPERS section. Rather the section consists primarily of correspondence and printed material focusing on Meinen's political and religious views and family photographs. This linking of Catholicism and political conservatism in the heavily-weeded subject file makes it extremely interesting. Many of the files originally consisted only of printed matter; those which Meinen annotated have been retained while unannotated publications have been separated to the SHSW Library. Although few of the files remaining in the collection are extensive, they provide important insights into Meinen's conservative ideology. Also of note is an almost complete run of annual reports, 1950-1978, of St. Peter's Congregation to which the Meinen belonged.

Also part of the personal papers are World War II letters from a neighbor in the service; correspondence with Mary Swaty, an acquaintance prompted by their mutual subscription to a conservative newsletter (much of the biographical information about Meinen was found in these letters); health diaries and notes; personal income tax forms; and a 1962 inventory listing the contents of his library. For brother Lawrence Meinen the file contains personal income tax and correspondence received from a lonely-hearts club. Original family photographs received with the papers are available in the SHSW Visual and Sound Archives; Xerox copies are filed with the collection.

Additional materials were donated by Meinen shortly before his death in 1991: these include academic materials (notes, exams, and so on) from his studies at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (1973-1982); general papers pertaining to the Chippewa County Farm Bureau; and correspondence and other personal materials. The additions were incorporated into AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS and PERSONAL PAPERS as boxes 9 and 10.

Administrative/Restriction Information

Acquisition Information

Presented by Frank J. Meinen, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, 1989 and 1991. Accession Number: M89-035, M91-031

Processing Information

Processed by Todd L. Shafer (Intern), 1989-1990.

Search Terms/Subject Terms

- Chippewa County Farm Bureau
- National Farmers' Union (U.S.)
- Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation
- Catholic Church—Wisconsin—Chippewa County
- Agricultural industries—Wisconsin
- Conservatism—Religious Aspects
- Electric fences
- Farms—Wisconsin—Chippewa County
- Farmers—Wisconsin—Chippewa County

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