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Stories from the Family History & Genealogy Center ...



A Danish Horatio Alger - Mention Peter Pan Bread to mid-westerners of a certain age, and memories of childhood trips to the corner grocery store are awakened. But few people realize that this former grocery staple was manufactured by a company founded by a Danish immigrant. Born on May 2, 1863, in the village of Riserup on northern Falster, Peter F. Petersen arrived in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1882 as a young journeyman baker with just enough money in his pockets to pay for a week's board and the dream of baking high-quality bread and cakes. He was dismayed to discover that bakers were not in high demand in Omaha just then - most people preferred to bake their own bread. To survive he turned his hand to a variety of tasks, including railroad work and droving, until he found employment in a bakery at the princely rate of \$2.50 per week and board. When this business didn't thrive, young Petersen headed to western Nebraska to homestead with his father. Through living for years in a sod shanty and hauling buffalo bones by ox-team 40-50 miles in order to buy groceries, Petersen's dream of becoming a baker never dimmed. 1890 found him back in Omaha with a small amount of savings - just enough to buy a very small bakery. Over the next decade it was nip and tuck whether his dream would survive. But it did, and a half-century later, the P.F. Petersen Baking Company was one of the largest institutions of its kind in the Midwest. Petersen married a fellow Danish immigrant, Petra Danielsen, in 1891 and became deeply involved with civic and business affairs as his business expanded. Accounts of his activities can be found in Omaha business publications and newspapers over the next half-century. He served as president of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, was a member of the board of both the American Bakers Association and the American Institute of Baking, a charter member and later president of the Omaha Rotary club, a member of the Forest Lawn Cemetery Association, and of several Masonic and fraternal organizations, as well as other civic and charitable organizations. He lost one son, William B. Petersen, during World War I. A second son, Milton Petersen, graduated from Harvard University and followed him into the business, as did a son-in-law. At the time of his death in 1945 the former journeyman baker with a dream had proven that, with hard work and ingenuity, America indeed was a place where dreams could come true.