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Candy man Dekum built lasting legacy in Portland

By John Terry, Special to The Oregonian January 10, 2010, 12:00AM

Frank Dekum had his finger in so many early Portland pies that it's nigh on impossible to recount them all.

Scarcely a banking or real estate deal happened in the city from the mid-1850s to the end of the century that he wasn't in some way involved. Most were highly successful and accompanied by wealth and influence. One was strictly for the birds.

Like others of youthful ambition who found fortune in the burgeoning metropolis -- William S. Ladd sold liquor; Henry Corbett ran a general store -- Dekum laid the foundation for his fortune in a modest way.



Frank Dekum

Born in Bavaria, Germany, on Nov. 5, 1829, he came to America in 1837 with his parents and six siblings. Joseph Gaston's 1911 "Portland, Oregon, Its History and Builders" says the family first lived in St. Clair County, Ill., and moved to St. Louis, Mo.

At age 16, Dekum apprenticed with a St. Louis confectioner, which later proved providential. In 1851, he and friend Fred Bickel took off for the California gold fields. Failing to strike it rich there, they moved on to the Colville, Idaho, area, scene of an 1852 gold strike. Again, no luck.

Dekum retreated to Portland, which he had visited on his way to Idaho. He opened a bakery and confectionery shop, the city's first. Stump Town, it turned out, had an insatiable sweet tooth. The firm of Dekum & Bickel prospered for a quarter-century.

"They had limited means at the start, but both had practical experience in the business, and their trade soon grew to large proportions," says Harvey W. Scott's 1890 "History of Portland, Oregon."

Dekum invested his profits in real estate, eventually becoming downtown's leading developer. At one point, says Gaston, "he was connected with the construction of every building in whole or in part between First and Third on Washington Street."

The eight-story Dekum Building, still standing at 519 S.W. Third Ave., was his crowning achievement. The imposing Romanesque structure was completed in 1892 for a then-whopping \$300,000 because Dekum insisted only Oregon

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materials be used.

Dekum also branched out into banking as a principal in the 1880 Portland Savings Bank and the 1886 Commercial National Bank of Portland, among others. Other investments ranged from railroads to the Portland Hotel.

But he was not all about business. He was a member of the board that turned on the city's Bull Run water spigot in 1895.

He was a charter member of the German Aid Society, which extended a helping hand to Portland's considerable German immigrant community. In 1888, he organized the German Song Bird Society.

"Here these people come," said Tom McAllister, veteran outdoor writer and since boyhood a member of the Portland Audubon Society. "They are recently removed from their homeland, and they missed their native birds, particularly their songs."

The Song Bird Society raised \$1,400 and sent to Germany for a variety of birds: skylarks, woodlarks, European robins, nightingales, song thrushes and chaffinches, among others. The birds were first put on public display in 1889, then released in City (now Washington) Park.

"You can just imagine putting all those birds out in Washington Park where people could go on their Sunday carriage drives and listen to them," McAllister said.

However, most of the birds perished after the trip from Germany. Another shipment was ordered and arrived in 1892. Dekum installed a large aviary at his home at 14th and Yamhill, where the new arrivals were pampered until their release in April 1893.

That batch fared better. An 1898 report said all the species except the nightingales "have multiplied with great rapidity."

Still, the German species failed to adapt to Oregon. Skylarks were reported in Southeast Portland's Ladd's Addition for some years, but, McAllister said, "none whatsoever survived."

Dekum died Oct. 19, 1894. As mourners gathered at his grave in Lone Fir Cemetery, The Oregonian's Ben Hur Lampman later wrote, "a nearby meadowlark began to sing -- singing ever so brightly. ...

"The meadowlark may have realized that the skylark could not be present."

-- **John Terry**, Special to the Oregonian

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