

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Remarkable Multi-Millionaire

William C. Edenborn (March 20, 1848 – May 13, 1926), famous capitalist, inventor, railroad tycoon and industrialist, owner of Louisiana Railway and Navigation Company, which linked Shreveport with New Orleans, was born in Westphalia, Prussia. There he served an apprenticeship in a nail manufacturing shop. In 1867 he came to America, when he was only 19 years old, and began his career in the United States as a peddler.



William C. Edenborn

After his arrival in America, Edenborn first settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he found work as a mechanic in the wire industry. It was then on to Cincinnati, Ohio. Eventually, with a small amount of capital saved up, he made his way to St. Louis. On October 5, 1876, he married Sarah Drain and, in association with Frank M. Ludlow, erected the first wire mill in that city, producing the first coil of wire ever drawn west of the Mississippi River. As the company's president, he developed it into one of the largest industries of its kind in the

and still stay safely within his modest household budget.”

This tall and physically big man, “not fat, but huge and broad-shouldered,” with “eagle-keen blue eyes” and “close-cropped white hair” and moustache elicited chuckles, according to Frost, from the men in his neighborhood “as they tell of the hot nights up at 8018 Hampson street, when the big figure of the multi-millionaire went down the street to the corner grocery, returning with a bucket of fresh, cool beer.” Down-to-earth Edenborn, a mild-mannered resident of Carrollton, was at the time one of the richest men in the nation. Despite his wealth, he lived frugally on just \$200 per year, or about \$5,000 in today’s dollars.

To give one an idea of how much a multi-million dollar fortune was worth in 1926, linen suits tailored by Haspel Brothers were advertised on sale at Maison Blanche in the *Times-Picayune* on July 29, 1926 for \$7.65 each (or 3 suits for \$22!).



The main fleet has changed its position to the Florida coast and west of the Mississippi river, said Mr. Noble. He will have his "border patrol" ready for action August 15. The Mississippi and Alabama coast will be patrolled similar to the Canadian and Mexican border patrolls in an effort to prevent smuggling.

WIFE OF FARMER FIGHTS TO SHARE EDENBORN ESTATE

Child by Magnate's First Wife, She Says; Sues for Part of Millions

(By The Associated Press)
St. Louis, July 28.—Contest for a daughter's share of the \$75,000,000 estate left by William Edenborn, Louisiana capitalist and railroad owner, was begun today by Mrs. Sophie L. Xeler, farmer's wife of Combs, St. Louis county.
Mrs. Xeler filed suit in circuit court here to have Edenborn's hold-

Linen Suits

Styled for Men and Young Men

Sold Regularly for 12.45--14.75--16.75--18.75

Tailored by:
Haspel Brothers
Hirsh & Barr
Liberty Clothing Company

765

3 Suits for 22.00!

July 29, 1926 ad for linen suits alongside "Edenborn Estate" article

In 1898, William Edenborn began construction of the Louisiana Railway and Navigation Company, which connected the cities of New Orleans and Shreveport and linked areas of the state where the lack of transportation had slowed the development of industry. The railroad project provided to his adopted state cost some \$20 million and pumped \$50 million into Louisiana’s economy. Edenborn also served as chairman of the board of the Kansas City Southern Railroad. And with co-owners William Buchanan and Harvey C. Couch, Edenborn also owned the short-line, the Louisiana and Arkansas Railway. Acquiring a million acres of timberland, he was at one time Louisiana’s largest landowner and oversaw a vast cypress logging operation. He invested millions of dollars in Louisiana, developing its many latent resources. Two steamships owned by the Edenborns were named for the Mr. and Mrs., the *S.S. William Edenborn* and the *S.S. Sarah Endenborn*.

Mr. Edenborn is also noted for having originated the employees benefit and insurance association plan, later considered a great asset to the working classes.

The Prussian-born Edenborn was a leader of the state's significant German community during the polarizing days of World War I. Anti-German sentiment ran strong, as evidenced by the changing of the name of Berlin Street in Uptown New Orleans to General Pershing. Edenborn rallied German immigrants to support the American war effort, but got into trouble after speaking at a Liberty Loan rally for German-Americans in New Orleans. With wartime passions running high, his words were misinterpreted as seditious and he was arrested. Eventually tempers cooled, the war ended and Edenborn was never indicted.

Edenborn Avenue in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie in Jefferson Parish is named in the great industrialist's honor. Hessmer Avenue, also in Metairie, is named for Edenborn's Prussian mother, Antoinette Hessmer. Also named for her is Hessmer, Louisiana, a small village in Avoyelles Parish. Edenborn named the rail depot which served the area there "Hessmer" in 1902. Because the Louisiana Railway and Navigation Company ran through Ascension Parish, the city of Gonzales, Louisiana, was briefly named "Edenborn" in William Edenborn's honor.



After being stricken with a stroke, Edenborn was taken from his Emden property to a Shreveport hospital, where he died May 13, 1926. The *Wall Street Journal* counted him among the wealthiest men in the nation at his death. His funeral in Shreveport was huge, and mourners lined a concourse fifteen blocks long at the cemetery to pay their last respects. His obituary read:

"Always honest, always dauntless, always tireless, always a student and with a vision of his possibilities and duties, he forged constantly onward and upward from a penniless apprentice boy to the million dollar head of one of the greatest steel and wire industries of the world, his inventions and economics saving billions of dollars to humanity."

... and contributed greatly to Louisiana.

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