

Herman Papke

By Frieda Menish

Herman Papke was born on September 28, 1873, in Alsace-Lorraine. After a stay in Australia, he came to Alaska on a geodetic survey.

In 1902, he moved to his homestead of 40 acres and built a log cabin. The cabin was dug into the ground, making it necessary to stoop to get in the door. His cabin was like the nest of a sorcerer. Garlic hung everywhere and a bit of rosemary was tied with an old piece of seine twine. His chopping block was covered with scraps of meat and fat.

He became one of the most beloved old-timers of Petersburg, and certainly one of the most notorious. He was a man of constant charm and intelligent wit. He loved the outdoors, Southeast Alaska, and the freedom and beauty he found here.



Herman Papke

Photo courtesy of Clausen Memorial Museum

He wrote in his diary from the day he began his homestead until his death in 1964. He recorded the weather, temperature, direction of wind, birds and animals he sighted, flowers blooming, vegetables and fruits. Legend has it that he is responsible for spreading those beautiful purple lupine flowers all over the island.

Papke was one of the most advanced gardeners

of his time. The apple trees along his beachfront produced juicy yellow apples. His cabbage and cauliflower were as large as the wooden orange crates that he used to protect them from giant slugs. He continually worked to improve his varieties by grafting various plants and trees.

His haven was full of just about everything that would grow in the wet climate of Southeast Alaska. To alleviate the problem of his plants drowning, he hand dug a two-foot-wide draining trench around the garden and home site. He also put up a fence to protect his garden from the deer that roamed the area. Between harvesting his garden and fishing, he ate well.

He shared his garden produce, plants and flowers with his many visitors. Birds were his favorites. They were his companions and friends. Hummingbirds fluttered around his head and swallows were always welcome in his home.

Papke had a telephone. When he sighted a steamship or barge coming through the Narrows, he would turn the crank of his phone and relay the message to the steamship office in town, enabling them to have longshoremen on hand to unload the ship.

In 1935, a Territory of Alaska work party built the 14-mile road to Papke's Landing and a large dock. People could now drive out to "the end of the road" to visit him. When his log cabin burned down, due to the accumulated soot in the chimney, townspeople got together to build him another cabin.

There are many tales told of his eccentricities. It took a brave person to accept a cup of Papke's coffee. His pot was always on the stove and he continually added grounds and water. The heavy white porcelain mugs were darker than the brew he served in them, but it didn't deter his hospitality.

The small cabin the townspeople built for Papke is still there. The apple trees are still out there in a row along the beach, although crippled limbs are weighed down with moss and age. All the strawberries and raspberries you can eat are still growing in his garden.

But the beloved hermit, Old Papke, is gone. His prostrate trouble turned to cancer. His own doctor, he knew this was the end. Taken to the hospital, he refused to submit to an operation unless his friend, Ralph Hall, was with him. Papke did not survive the operation.