

The Meyer and Anna Star Family in Fredonia
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2000

Meyer **Star** was born around 1864 in Slutsk, Belarus. Anna **Bergman** was born in a nearby village around 1869. They were married in 1891 and emigrated to the U.S. After a short time in New York City and then Johnstown PA, they settled in Bradford PA, at *35 State Street*. Their first son, Harry, was born there in 1892, Leo in 1895 and Herbert in 1899. (Meyer had become a citizen on 7 June 1897.) The family apparently moved back to New York City for a time, since they were living at *348 Madison Street* on 13 June 1900 when the 1900 Federal Census was taken. They must have moved back to Bradford then, because William was born there in March 1902 according to the 1910 Census. Some of Anna's relatives immigrated to Bradford, so it is possible she was staying with them for her lying-in period.

There is a stock certificate dated 2 November 1916 for two shares in the **Star** Wine Co., Inc.; Pres. Buris **Hershonov**; Treas. Morris **Silberberg**. The stock was Meyer **Star's**, apparently for the kosher wine business located in Bradford, which he was moving to Fredonia. Around 1917 Meyer **Star** came to Fredonia and rented a small winery at *214 Central Avenue* from Harry Taylor **Wilbur**. He was born on 22 August 1856 in Villenova, Chautauqua County. The family moved to Fredonia in 1869, where he completed high school and attended the Fredonia State Normal School, although he left before graduating. He clerked in various local stores through about 1880, then was a traveling salesman into the mid-1890s. Gradually he bought up farmland and began growing grapes.

In February 1892 H. T. **Wilbur** bought a large lot on which he built a home at today's *214 Central Avenue*. By 1902 he had built a large winery behind his home and began the Fredonia Wine Co. The company's letterhead for "the oldest established wine cellar in Fredonia," listed H. T. **Wilbur** as President and "C. S. **Wilbur**, Treas." The latter was Henry **Wilbur's** wife Catherine S. (**Hartzell**) **Wilbur**. The **Barker** Historical Museum has a picture of *214 Central Avenue* and the large winery behind it. In April 1906 **Wilbur** bought the 12-acre property at 194 Central Avenue with a tenant house behind it, usually listed as 200 or 202 Central Avenue.

In 1917 **Wilbur** leased the winery to Meyer **Star**, who began producing kosher wine there. The **Star** family may have moved to Fredonia at that time. Certainly by the time of the 1920 Census they were recorded as living in **Wilbur's** tenant house at *200 Central Avenue*. It was torn down in 1944. The full 1920 Census entry has Henry T. (farmer) and Catherine S. **Wilbur** at *194 Central Avenue* and at *200 Central Avenue* and Meyer **Starr** [sic], 50, wine maker; Anna, 49; Harry, 26, wine maker; and Herbert, 20, wine maker. At *214 Central Avenue* was Harry T. **Wilbur**, 31, clerk in a steel mill and his wife Vivienne, 25.

That sheet of the Census was recorded on 18 and 19 January 1920. However, by 4 June of that year the **Stars** had left the winery at *214 Central Avenue*, moved into a part of the John **Gugino** house at *89 Risley Street*, and purchased a small winery building at *200 Water Street*. On 6 February 1909 William D. **Smith** bought a one-acre parcel at *200 Water Street* from Reuben **Wright** of Dunkirk. The acre was being taken off the south end of a larger lot held by **Wright**. Although there is no mention of a winery, the deed does stipulate that "it is agreed that any building now on the premises. . . are [sic] to be included in this transfer."

The Sanborn Insurance map of 1912 labels the building as a wine cellar, and **Smith** was still listed as a wine manufacturer in the 1917 Directory. On 6 October 1917 **Smith** sold the property to Alfonso **Yoviene** of Lackawanna. The deed records the property then on the premises and included in the sale: "6 wine fermenting tanks; 1 tank that had vinegar in. 1 wine press and cloths that go with it. 1 Olin gas engine. Rucks that wine is on. 1 Scoop shovel. Pulleys, shafting and belts. 20 tin boilers. 5 gallon copper measure. 1 copper funnel. 2 gas plates. Chain hoist. 1 Truck. 1 grape crusher. All barrel and kegs on hand excepting those that have apple cider vinegar in. bungs and plugs. 1 Set of platform scales. Also all wine in stock."

On the same day as the sale from **Smith, Yoviene** sold a half-interest in the winery to his son-in-law, John **Verel**, who was then residing with his wife at *373 Water Street* with the Anthony **Joy (Gioia)** family. On 29 December 1917 Alfonso **Yoviene** recorded his business at the Mayville Court House as the Fredonia Wine Co. giving his Lackawanna address, so **Yoviene** apparently took over the name from the **Wilburs** at the time the **Stars** leased the *214 Central Avenue* property. The new Fredonia Wine Co. was managed by **Verel**, and on 11 August 1919, **Verel** bought out **Yoviene's** remaining half interest.

In 1919 the 18th Amendment was passed and on 16 January 1920 Prohibition went into effect. **Verel's** response was to put the winery up for sale and establish, temporarily, his Fredonia Grape Products Co. at *373 Water Street*. On 4 June 1920 Meyer **Star**, with a bank mortgage, purchased the property at *200 Water Street*. What the **Stars** purchased was a one-acre lot with a one-story building, about 60 x 100 feet set back from Water Street some 90 feet. It now makes up part of the rear of the building complex. Meyer **Star** also bought a house and lot at *175 Water Street* in 1922. In 1925 he and his wife Anna were living there as well as a nephew, Meyer **Schreiber**, then 20 years old, attending school. Born in Russia, he had been in the United States only two years.

Because of the new Prohibition laws, the **Stars** were restricted to producing only wine for sacramental use. That continued until 1926 when there was a significant change. On 18 June 1926 Meyer **Star** formally deeded the property at *200 Water Street* to the Fredonia Products Co., Inc. Some original stock certificates dated 10 August 1926 give the company name as Fredonia Sacramental Wine Co., Inc., with the printed word "Sacramental" crossed out and an inked "Products" inserted. The company had William **Star** as President and Harry **Star** as Secretary-Treasurer. Meyer also deeded the house at *175 Water Street* to his wife, Anna. Another significant event of that year was the marriage of Harry **Star** and Grace **Cantor** in New York City on 7 December 1926.

Although the assessment rolls after 1926 and the 1930 Census continue to refer to the wine cellar and the **Stars** as wine makers, the 1930 Directory lists only the Fredonia Products Co. at *200 Water Street* as "catsup mfrs." In an article in the *Fredonia Censor* of 15 September 1933, Herbert **Star** was quoted as saying that "since 1926 the concern has made no wine. . . turning its attention to bottling of ketchup." However, the article adds that there were 15,000 gallons of medicinal and sacramental wine made since Prohibition began stored in the cellars. That seems to suggest wine production ceased in 1926 but not wine sales.

As soon as Prohibition ended the *Censor* of 19 May 1933 announced that the **Star** winery was experimenting "with a new 3.2 wine. Mr. **Star** plans to start production as soon as his permit is received." By 16 June the *Censor* reported the winery as "feverishly clearing the decks in an effort to prepare themselves to handle at least a small part of the requests for 3.2 wine shipments pouring in every mail." "The first establishment in western New York to be thus licensed, Fredonia Products Co., Inc., were caught off guard by the rush orders that came in." New machinery was being brought in to speed up the processing, and Herbert **Star**, "a former Fredonian now residing in New York city, who is at present in charge of the sacramental wine offices in the metropolis" was moving back to Fredonia to help with the increasing sales volume.

The winery had been experimenting for about a month trying to make a palatable 3.2 wine but had only succeeded early in June. Under their "famous 'Old Colony'" label, they produced "port, sherry, tokay and other types." To better manage the increase in orders, the **Stars** purchased three huge oak chip vats. Ten feet tall and ten feet in diameter, each vat held 4500 gallons. This was in the first week in September 1933, and they also added what the *Censor* of 15 September 1933 jokingly referred to as "four tiny pocket-flasks of a mere 3000-gallon capacity." In July 1934 a 60 by 85 foot concrete and tile addition at the front of the old winery building was begun, to be used as a fermenting room for their Old Colony wines.

By early in 1934 the **Star** winery had more than doubled its previous year's sales, according to a report by Herbert **Star** in the *Censor* of 9 September 1934. Prohibition had called for stringent

requirements so that "American Jews turned largely to the home preparation of their wines." With repeal, "Kosher wine. . . has come back at one leap to its former commercial prestige." The article goes on to say that "the **Star** family have been engaged in making kosher wine" since 1891, and their plant, located here in 1915, did a thriving business in this commodity. Prohibition checked the flow to a mere dribble, though the Fredonia Products company has each year prepared the certified sacramental beverage." The 1915 date seems dubious, but "prepared" may mean bottled and shipped from what was already stored.