

The Notorious Count Hans Munchow



Introduction

The Tankerhoosen Valley was home to many interesting characters over the last 300 years, but one of the most intriguing was Count Hans Bonhart Munchow.

Hazel Lutz wrote short stories for the *Rockville Journal* to introduce Vernon to our history . In the 1970's the Vernon Historical Society published them in two small Volumes. In Volume 2 Lutz wrote a story on Valley Falls that included most of what we knew at the time about Count Munchow. This is what she wrote:

One of the early Colonial homes along Valley Falls Road is located opposite the pond.

In the late 1890's it was owned by Count Munchow, a Hungarian nobleman who lived the life of a gentleman farmer there. It was he who built the large, elaborate stable at the crest of the hill to house his fine horses.

The Count, some recall, was a tall, well-groomed man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard, who sat up straight in the narrow carriage with a seat just wide enough for two, himself and his Great Dane dog. At times he rode his saddle horses along the trails through the woods nearby .

The Count was responsible for bringing other Hungarian families to Vernon to work as masons, cooks and caretakers on his estate.

Legend has it that he suddenly auctioned off all of his farm tools, sold his property and went to Hollywood where he became a successful movie producer.

This description was repeated in most other accounts. As you'll see much of what we thought we knew about the Count was wrong.

The Internet has allowed us to learn much more about him than was available in the 1970's and the account that follows is pieced together from online documents and newspaper articles.

Hans Munchow's Early Years

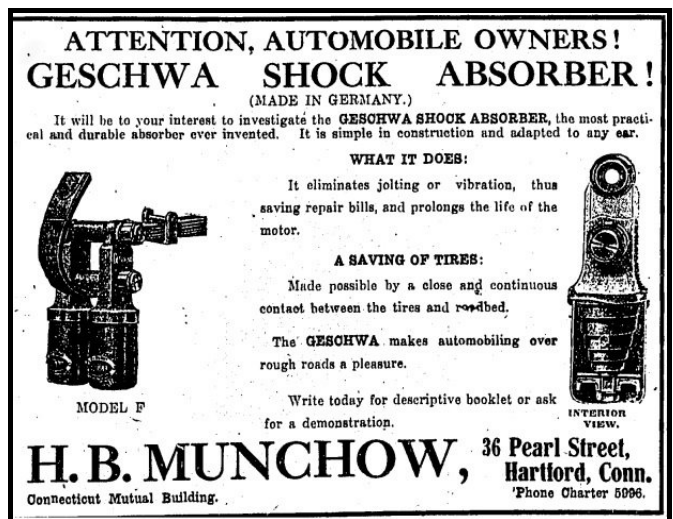
Hans Bonhart Muenchow was born in 1883 in Germany. He says he graduated from the University in Berlin at age 19, was an officer in the German army serving in German East Africa and had also been stationed in Russia. This has not been verified.

His first voyage to America was in 1907 when at the age of 25 he came to New York City. The automobile was just emerging as the successor to the horse and buggy and Hartford at the time was the center of automobile manufacturing in the country.

Hans chose Hartford as the place to make his mark. Returning to Germany he convinced the German Geschwa shock absorber company to let him be their representative in America.

When he moved to Hartford in 1908 Hans added the 'Count' having noted America's fascination with European Royalty. He rented a Hartford office on the fourth floor of the prestigious Connecticut Mutual Building at the corner of Pearl and Main.

Known in the city as 'The Baron' he likely charmed the wives of Hartford's business community as well as the businessmen themselves exaggerating his importance.



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In 1909-1910 he made two trips to Germany to consult with his employers. Returning in January 1910 he met and wooed Henrietta Cassin from Louisville, KY - the heiress of the largest liquor distributor in Alabama and 25 years his senior. At that time wealthy Americans enjoyed visiting Europe and slow travel by ocean liner provided time to meet fellow passengers. Hans was charming, charismatic and without scruples.

Count Munchow At Valley Falls Farm

Munchow must have been confident of marrying Henrietta because 2 months later in March 1910 he purchased Valley Falls Farm.

The purchase included the farmhouse, the old barn across the street and the tenant house on Bolton Road as well as the land along Railroad Brook, including the mill pond and dam. He would later purchase the old cotton mill site with its tenant house.

Why Vernon? The location was convenient, just two miles from Vernon Depot where he could take the train to his office in Hartford. He may have also been attracted to Vernon because of the large German population in Rockville.

Vernon believed a millionaire had come to town and likely welcomed him with open arms. In the 1910 census, taken just after his purchase, he lists his trade as a Traveling Salesman of Mining Stock. The 1910 census also tells us he already has his German hired hands and staff living onsite.



1911 Stevens - Duryea

To repeat Hazel Lutz, "Munchow was a tall, well-groomed man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard, who sat up straight in the narrow carriage with a seat just wide enough for two, himself and his Great Dane dog."

To enhance his image he bought and drove to work a large green Stevens-Duryea (dur-e-a) Roadster.

Rose Martin

Munchow hired a stenographer from Rockville, Rose Martin, who he drove to work and, per the *Hartford Courant*, 'with a gallant air assisted her from the car to the elevator.'

Rose was the granddaughter of A. Leroy Martin who owned E. J. Martin's Sons, which manufactured silk fishing lines on Mountain Street in Rockville.

She was 4 years younger than Hans and probably impressed that a young man of his wealth and nobility was interested in her. She may have met him in Rockville's German social clubs.

Living In Vernon

Hans and Henrietta were married at the bride's home in Louisville in June 1911, a year and a half after they met and he had purchased Valley Falls Farm. Henrietta would not have lived in the old farm house and likely stayed in Hartford after their marriage.

Munchow owned Valley Falls Farm from 1910-13. In that short time he built the Stable and several of the buildings on the hillside which give the farm its picturesque look. He also rebuilt the red barn.

He moved very quickly as a January 1912 piece in the *Hartford Courant* said, "he has his barns completed and equipped with modern conveniences, running water and steam heat. In the spring he plans to build a new house and lay out the grounds."

Locally Count Munchow had an air of mystery. He was thought by many to be a Hungarian nobleman and certainly nurtured that impression. Hans was likely part of the Rockville German organizations and did endear himself to the town. As an example in August of 1910, soon after buying the Valley Falls Farm, he hosted the annual picnic of the Vernon Center Congregational Church's Sunday School. The article mentions the large pond and plenty of room for outdoor games. He hosted them again the following year just after he was married. A *Rockville Journal* article reports, "Everyone voted it the best ever held and that Munchow did everything in his power to make it pleasant." Boats on the lake were at the disposal of the picnickers and there was an abundance of ice cream furnished by the big hearted host."

In March 1912 Hans returned from another trip to Germany. He was 30 years old. The trip does not seem to have gone well as a month later he began transferring his property to Henrietta. The property was subject to a tax lien, four mortgages and some commercial attachments, including one for the Hartford Brown-Thompson department store.

At the same time his transformation of the Valley Falls Farm was complete including turning the Tenant house into 'The Alabama' for Henrietta.

The following year he continued to live the good life in Vernon, but his debts and worries grew.

In February 1913 Hans returned to Germany for the last time. The ship's manifest listed him as 32, single, and a merchant. He likely had been dishonest about his sales results, but also tensions between Germany and Europe were building and the First World War was looming.

They may have let Munchow go because when he returned Hans gave up his quarters in the Connecticut Mutual Building and rented a house on Albany Avenue for one month where he and Henrietta went to live.

Then he vanished. The headline in the April 24, 1913 *The Hartford Courant*. was "**Exit Munchow; Creditors Mourn**"

There was one other major factor influencing Munchow's exit from Hartford. He was having an affair with his stenographer and his wife was likely aware. Henrietta was 54 years old, her husband had spent the money she brought to the marriage and she was far from Kentucky. As the *Courant* wrote it was 'as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.'

At the same time Rose Martin packed her things and left Rockville saying she was going to Pittsburgh, PA to work. The rumor in Vernon was that Hans went to Hollywood to produce movies.



**EXIT MUNCHOW
CREDITORS MOURN**

The "Baron," Landgrave of
Vernon Center, Retires
From View.

The Hartford Courant headline.

Henrietta was left to clean up the financial mess Hans left as the property was in her name. She sold the farm quickly and returned to her family in Louisville.

Henrietta's Story

According to our limited knowledge at the time Count Munchow's wife Henrietta was taken advantage of, paid for Valley Falls farm, and was cleaned out after Munchow left town with his mistress.

We visualize a wealthy Southern belle who might have been spoiled by her father and was not very worldly. What we found changed our view of Southern women as they moved towards their own independence at the turn of the century.

The headline of the April 24, 1913 *Hartford Courant* article on Munchow's flight reads "**The 'Baron's' Wife, Money Gone, Gives Up Her Home,**" followed by, "It is said that Mrs. Munchow was quite wealthy when she married. She came from Kentucky and has traveled extensively abroad, where it is thought that she met Munchow. Everything that belonged to her has been wiped out by the energies of her husband, it is said. "

Her story is actually much more complex.

Growing Up In Selma

Although Henrietta was born in Louisville, KY she was raised in Selma, Alabama and throughout her life traveled back & forth between the two Southern cities.

Henrietta's father was Henry Kassens (1840-1899) a German immigrant who married into a prominent Louisville, KY family just before the Civil War. A year later Henrietta Kassens was born.

In the Civil War Selma was destroyed and after the war the city was rebuilt and Henry saw opportunity. He became a partner as a wholesale dealer in alcohol products. The business grew with the town and he was a popular and active member of the growing community.

This was the world in which Henrietta grew up, the daughter of a prosperous Southern merchant. As Henry had no sons he was devoted to his oldest daughter.

Woman Of The House

When Henrietta was 25 her mother died and with no brothers was then living alone with her father, who had his own health issues. She was now the woman of the house and handled much of the family business.

Henry enjoyed travel and often Henrietta accompanied him or traveled to Europe on her own or with a friend.

She was active in Selma society life, but also was a businesswoman. Opportunities for single women were limited in the late 19th Century, but Henrietta invested in real estate both in Selma and Louisville, holding mortgages on a number of properties.

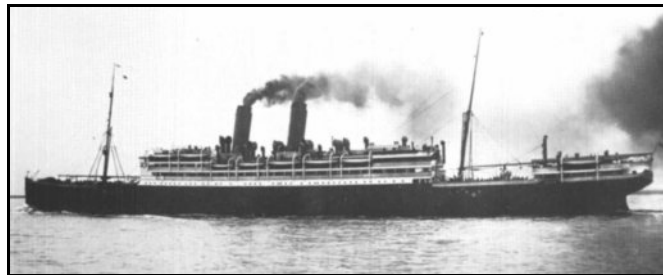
Henry became the largest liquor dealer in Alabama by his death in 1899. Henrietta was his executor with the challenging task of disposing of Henry's business.

After her father's death Henrietta made her primary home in Louisville, returning to Selma regularly to see old friends and attend to her own business interests. She continued traveling to Europe.

Such was the life she was settled into as she turned 50 - Selma, Louisville, social clubs, business and travel.

Enter Count Munchow

Henrietta returned to Europe every two or three years and the trip she took for her fiftieth birthday in late 1909 would bring her to Connecticut and ownership of Valley Falls Farm.



SS Prinz Friedrich Wilhelm

Henrietta returned from Bremen, on the SS Prince Friedrich Wilhelm arriving in New York City on January 16, 1910. It was contemporary, but smaller than the Titanic, which was launched in 1912. On the voyage she met and was charmed by Munchow. The trip took 12 days and the activities aboard ship were likely similar to those depicted in "The Titanic" movie.

As mentioned Hazel Lutz describes Count Munchow as "a tall, well-groomed man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard." He was 6 feet tall, 195 pounds with brown hair and brown eyes. A newspaper article notes his genial manner and personal magnetism. He must have made quite an impression on Henrietta. She was 50 years old, but on the ship's manifest listed herself as only 35. Hans was 28 so the age difference may not have seemed that much.

For Hans Henrietta was a dream come true; a way to quickly achieve the lifestyle he so desired. Besides her small fortune, her Southern heritage would likely enhance his status in Hartford. For Henrietta this might have been a dream come true also; an opportunity for adventure; a chance to become the wife of a European Count.

The courtship was brief and they married a year later at Henrietta's home in Louisville.

Henrietta's Two Years In Connecticut

When Henrietta came to Connecticut in that Summer of 1911 it is unlikely she lived at the old farm. As she did in Selma she may have stayed in a Hartford hotel or rented quarters in a house. Hans office was in Hartford and the railroad provided convenient travel back and forth to Vernon.

Hans moved very quickly on construction and planned a new house for Henrietta but settled for the quicker and less costly upgrade of the tenant house on Bolton Road he named 'The Alabama' for Henrietta.



The Alabama in 1915.

It only took a year for things to began to sour. As an experienced business women she must have paid close attention to Hans' lavish expenses and the money he borrowed for the property. She may also have become aware of his affair with his young Rockville stenographer for in April of 1912 she had Hans transfer most of the Valley Falls property to her protecting her investment.

On April 24, 1913 Hans left town in the middle of the night. Henrietta told the newspaper she knew nothing about his leaving.

She quickly paid off Hans' debts and in August sold the 154-acre Valley Falls property to Anna Werner, another Southern female German land investor, for \$8,000.

Life After Hans

After recovering most of her money Henrietta returned to Louisville as the wife of a German Count. She was no longer a spinster retaining Munchow's name through the remainder of her life. In 1922 she and Hans formally divorced in Bridgeport, CT.

She continued to travel to Europe until the stock market crash. She lived until 1940 dying at the age of 81 and outlived Hans by one year.

Henrietta certainly lived an interesting life from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War 2. She took full advantage of her status and the times to travel widely participating in the social life of Selma and Louisville. And for 50 years she was a successful business woman.

Henrietta's legacy to Vernon was financing the transformation of Valley Falls Farm from a small New England farm to a European style gentlemen's farm.

Munchow After Vernon

Count Munchow seemed to vanish when he left Connecticut in April 1913.

As the Courant wrote "it was as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up." At the same time Rose Martin quickly packed her things and left Rockville telling family she was going to Pittsburgh to work.

The rumor in Vernon was that the Count went to Hollywood to produce movies. But Munchow was running from creditors and needed to vanish.

One thing he left in Hartford was his title - no longer would he pass himself off as a Count. No longer was he the proud land baron with fancy horses, dogs and cars.

Hans and Rose did go west in 1913, not to California but to West Texas where Rose gave birth to daughters Eva in 1914 and Marie in 1917.

Texas must have been quiet for Hans. He seems to have stayed out of trouble and feeling safe they returned to New York City in September 1917.

In March 1919 he applied for citizenship. In the application stated he was married to Henrietta Munchow of Louisville, Kentucky, that he had two children living with him - Eva and Marie - and that he is employed as a chauffeur. He was naturalized a year later in April 1921 at the time age 37.

The Hanover Finance Corporation

About 1920 Hans came up with a new scheme to make money. He formed the Hanover Finance Corporation of which he was the president. It was the time after the Great War and before the 1929 stock market crash when things were booming. His idea was to find investors through salesmen to sell bonds by telling investors that the business of the corporation was to finance banks and holding out the prospect of large profits.

The investors he targeted were German immigrants of a humble station in life who had saving accounts. As a fellow German immigrant Hans worked slowly gaining their trust until they assigned their bank accounts to him. In Hartford he was a colorful rogue scamming the wealthy; but in New York he preyed on his fellow German immigrants.

Hans, probably under investigation, saw the collapse coming and in 1921 resigned as president of Hanover and filed for bankruptcy. At Bridgeport, CT Superior Court in February 1922 Hans and Henrietta were formally divorced. Two months later Hans and Rose finally married just before his arrest. Likely Rose needed the legal status as his wife and mother of their two young children.

**ARRESTED ON CHARGES
BY 20 POOR INVESTORS**
Former Head of Finance Corporation Held in \$7,500.

In July 1922 Hans, at age 37, was arrested in Manhattan as 20 people complained they had entrusted an aggregate of \$30,000 to him. This included an aged music teacher who lost her life savings, a mailman who also lost his savings and even a boot black. There were big headlines in New York City newspapers.



Rose in 1924

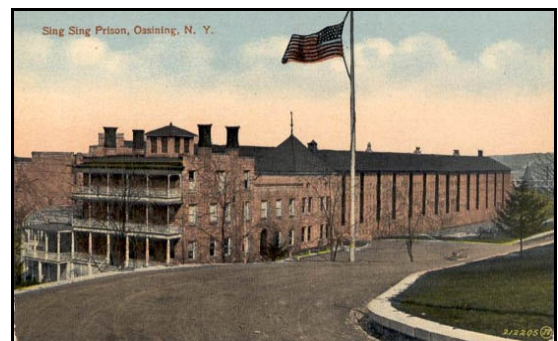
But there is no record of a trial or punishment. In the 1925 NY Census, now married to Rose, he has moved to Long Island City, Queens and is in a single family house. He lists his occupation as Salesman. Later records indicate he, among many others, may have bribed the District Attorney's office to avoid prosecution. This was the age of Tammany Hall.

In 1928 Hans was at it again. A permanent injunction against him was obtained restraining him from alleged fraudulent practices. A housekeeper at the Hotel Ambassador in Manhattan said he persuaded her to turn over \$7,000 in bonds promising her an investment which would bring her a monthly return of \$70 to \$90.

In July 1935 Hans is again arrested for the criminal act of 'obtaining money by fraudulent representation.' He just never learned. The value of the money involved was only \$222, but this time his past caught up with him and he was sent to prison in New York's famous Sing Sing Prison. He was 52 years old and sentenced to 114 days. At the time he is incarcerated Rose has separated from him and he has not been supporting her or the children.

After leaving prison Hans applied for Social Security in July 1938 but died a year later in Manhattan on June 20, 1939 at age 56. Henrietta died a year later in Louisville.

Rose separated from Hans near the end, but it was she who provided information at his death. Then Rose and her daughters disappear from historical records.



Hans & Henrietta Munchow's Vernon Legacy



Hans best years were the few he spent in Vernon from 1910 to 1913. He played the role of a European Count, had money to indulge his fantasies and likely charmed Hartford and Vernon. A fascinating character Hans left Vernon with a much loved site that would attract the Beach family two years later in 1915. Had they not improved the farm and tenant house would the Beaches have been attracted to the property?

The Munchow's played an odd but important role in the preservation and attraction of Valley Falls Farm leaving us a fascinating story to tell.