

Born on the High Seas **Written by Max Baumann**

Barbara Schibli-Peterhans from Fislisbach had been a widow since 1845. Her husband Martin had left her with three girls and a boy between the ages of one and seven, as well as part of a house, 1 hectare of land, an old cow, a pig, a small wagon, a manure barrel, and clothes, but also debts of 1,428.97 francs, so that only a remaining asset of just under 440 francs was left. Guardian of the children became Barbara's brother, the baker Jakob Peterhans. Soon the young woman came into conflict with the law, which is why she spent some time in prison; to pay the costs, her parents had to grant her an advance on her inheritance. It is unclear whether the guardian had already placed the children with other families during Barbara's time as a widow.

Soon afterward, Barbara Schibli fell in love with Samuel Baumann, nine years her junior, a citizen of Stilli. He came from a poor factory worker's family that was then living in Ennetbaden. The two married in 1847 and quickly decided to emigrate to America—but without the children! The woman had her parents pay out the remainder of her inheritance. The guardian sold the family's property, whereby the buyer of the house also had to take in the eldest daughter Maria Barbara Rosa, then nine years old, for the next six years, with the obligation to “clothe her and send her to school, to maintain and care for her decently in health and sickness.” The remaining children were placed in foster families.

Barbara Schibli-Peterhans, now Mrs. Baumann, and her husband Samuel traveled in March 1848 to Le Havre, from where the ship “James Corner” was to carry them to the New World. Although the woman was already eight months pregnant, the newly married couple was eager to hurry toward a better future as quickly as possible. Thus, on April 27, in the middle of the Atlantic, Barbara gave birth to a baby boy. He was immediately baptized, undoubtedly in the presence of many passengers who welcomed such a diversion. The godfather was the captain himself, H. S. Walker. In their enthusiasm, the hopeful parents gave the child the name of the ship, “James Corner.” After their arrival in New Orleans on May 8, they had the birth officially registered, but the clerk apparently did not understand the first name correctly and wrote “James Connor,” and that remained his name for the rest of his life. In this form the joyful event was reported to Stilli.

In America the couple immediately looked for work and found employment on a plantation in Jefferson in the state of Louisiana, opposite New Orleans, he as a gardener, she as a maid. After a year they returned to the city, where the man first worked in a dairy business and later in the transport trade. Meanwhile the woman and the child gathered blackberries and sold them at the market. In 1855 they were able to afford the purchase of 2 acres of land in Kenner, a newly planned small town 10 miles north of New Orleans.

Here Samuel ran a horse-rental business with great success. Now, in 1856, he could afford to have his wife's four children from her first marriage come to America. But only a year later two of them fell ill with yellow fever and died. Son Albert died somewhat later when a collapsing chimney crushed his head. Thus only one daughter remained, who later married a miller from Württemberg.

Samuel's family lived frugally. In this way he was able to expand his business to ten horses, two mules, and several wagons and carts. This success aroused the envy and hostility of a competitor. In 1865 a fire was set and everything burned down. The family lost all their possessions; Samuel had insured nothing.

But he did not give up. In 1866 he acquired another property in Kenner. After two years, however, the newly rebuilt business was also set on fire. This time it was insured, and so he began again from the beginning. Yet further setbacks followed: crop failures and a flooding of the Mississippi. This emerges from a letter Samuel wrote in 1878 to his home community of Stilli. The municipal council had tracked down his address in Kenner and asked him to assume the debts of his completely impoverished 80-year-

old mother. Referring to his own difficult situation, he replied that he could only pay his mother's bread debts, nevertheless 240 Swiss francs, a considerable sum at the time.

In 1876 Samuel Baumann acquired American citizenship. The son—since he had been born on a U.S. ship—had already been an American from birth.

Young James Conner attended school in Kenner, always at the top of the class, as he later wrote in his memoirs. For two years he worked as a druggist. Then he switched to trade and agriculture and engaged in horticulture and the planting of sugarcane.

At the same time he was politically interested. Already at the age of twenty he worked as an election helper within the Republican Party. In 1871 he was elected to the school board, in 1873 to the district council and to the city government of Kenner. In 1880 he rose to mayor; he held this office for four years. From 1879 to 1888