

THE ESCHENHAGENS: Saga of a Celebrated Family

By H. J. Summers

One of the most notable, worthy, and altogether fascinating families Brisbane has known were the Eschenhagens. When Queen Victoria was old, and Australia as a Federation had not yet been born, the Eschenhagen name was locally famous. It was vibrant of Brisbane's life through all the days of the Seventh Edward.

For Eschenhagen's — "the Rendezvous of the Fashionable" — was a renowned restaurant. To be seen there was the "done thing" socially. And the catering business associated with it set a standard that won for it the personal patronage of every Governor of Queensland from Sir Henry Wylie Norman in 1889 to Sir William MacGregor in 1914.

There would scarcely be one of today's citizens who lived through the 1890's and the first fifteen years of the 20th century who would not have been familiar with its name and fame.

And behind all this lies a history of romance, of a simple and unspoiled kind that is usually reserved for fiction.

It concerns —

Karl Ernst Eschenhagen, father of the family, born at Crossen/Oder, Germany, on 24 May 1850; and

Pauline Emma Stegemann, born at Hoppemuhle, Germany, on 26 December 1869.

The time of Mr. Eschenhagen's arrival in Australia is uncertain, but it is known that before coming here he had spent some years in Fiji and was one of that colony's first bakers. He belonged to one branch of a well-established German family of Eschenhagens that can trace its ancestry back for hundreds of years.

Pauline Stegemann arrived with her parents and two sisters and two brothers aboard the *Duke of Westminster* in 1884. Their meeting, eighteen months later, was to a story-book setting. After a morning service at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Wickham Terrace, Ernst (as he was known throughout his



Karl Ernst Eschenhagen

Brisbane years) saw a young girl crying bitterly on the footpath outside. He asked her what was wrong. She had mistakenly placed a gold sovereign in the church plate instead of a sixpence.

He took the girl into the Pastor, and the sovereign was returned to her. Thus was started a deep affection between the two, notwithstanding the difference in their ages, for Ernst was nineteen years her senior. Another sovereign was added later, and these were melted down and made into Pauline's wedding ring. This ring was made into two gold ear-rings, and so far as is known they are still in the possession of one of the grandchildren.

The year was 1886. Australia was in a condition of economic boom which preceded the bank crashes of the 1890's. Business opportunities were open, the newly married Ernst was eager to employ his well-grounded skills in cooking and catering, but he was short of material means.

He approached the principals of Morrow's Biscuit Factory who gave him, on trust, a bag of sugar and a bag of flour. On that, the business venture was founded.

The Eschenhagens opened their first shop in George Street near Herschell Street, at a site identified now as next to McKenzie's Shoe Store. The street number is 456.

From the start it was a first-class catering and cake-manufacturing enterprise, small but efficient; and it had instant success. Soon, four hands were being employed to cope with the custom the cafe was attracting.

The couple's first child, Agnes Pauline, was born above this shop on 9 December 1887. She was to die at the age of eleven on 5 January 1899, afflicting her father with a grief which he carried with him for the rest of his life.

EXPANSION OF BUSINESS

Rare success was awaiting the Eschenhagens in business. In 1891 they found it necessary to move into larger premises in Queen Street, at a site occupied later by Pike Brothers, and still more recently by Walsh's men's mercers. Other branches were opened in Edward Street and in Fortitude Valley, and about 1896 they established themselves in what became their most famous premises — in Queen Street near the Creek Street intersection, next to the (Queensland) National Bank headquarters. The building is occupied in 1977 by Jackson & O'Sullivan, printers and stationers. This was "The Rendezvous of the Fashionable",

the place where banquets and dinners without number were held, and from which balls and functions of every kind drew their catering.

The seating capacity of the "Rendezvous" was 480 — 240 downstairs, and a like number upstairs.



The Cafe Eschenhagen, Queen Street.
 This picture formed part of an advertising postcard and had been to Germany and back; hence the postmarks, dated 1898.

It is worthwhile pausing here to take a mental glance at the building in which this enterprise thrived. The name "Eschenhagen" was in a surmounting place on the turret; was repeated on both the front windows, and was sunk in brass letters into the footpath in front, so that anyone passing could not help remarking that it was "The Rendezvous of the Fashionable". And the inscription "By Special Appointment to His Excellency" above the door was not a commercial boast but a statement of Vice-Regal fact, attested by scores of Government House receptions to which the restaurant had catered.

The secret of the Eschenhagen's success was the personal direction the partners gave to their enterprise, a Germanic passion for hard work, and a faculty for blending a well-trained competence with a sense of the superlative in service for its own sake — virtues less accountable in the impersonal trading habits of our own time.

No detail of a transaction was too small to engage their attention, with the result that the Eschenhagens soon were catering not only for the cream of Brisbane society but for squatter families celebrating some occasion on their station runs.

Ask for the engagement of a (then rare) motor car and it was provided, on a road circuit stretching through near and distant suburbs and as far as Toowoomba. The service charge (return) was £1/15/- to Sandgate, £3/10/- to Ipswich or Redcliffe, £12/10/- to Southport, £20 to Toowoomba. Cars for four passengers could be engaged for a whole day on a route not exceeding seventy miles, for a charge of £5/5/-. Cars could even be hired for shopping in town, at a charge of 12/6d. for the first hour and 10/- an hour afterwards.

And when it came to seeking music for a wedding breakfast or a banquet, an orchestra was there for the hiring. The charge for three musicians for two hours was one-and-a-half guineas (£1/11/6), with an additional half-guinea each for every extra musician, and ten shillings an hour extra for each musician playing over two hours.

Anyone who was entertaining could go along to Eschenhagen's and hire cooks, waiters, waitresses, tables, chairs, linen, silver, crockery, marquees ("£2 to £10 to seat from sixty to a thousand guests").

But these were ancillary services to the central business of running a high-class cafe and restaurant. A twelve-page booklet

published when the "Rendezvous" was at its prime lists prices as mouth-watering, in today's terms, as the delicacies that came from the Eschenhagen ovens.

This was not achieved without spirited competition. Rowe's, the other outstanding Brisbane restaurant of the time, had been established by Mrs. Rowe in 1880; in Albert Street where Halliday's Turkish Baths later stood. Her cafe and catering service thrived there until 1894 when it went into premises in Queen Street next to the present A.M.P. Society building. In 1904 it moved round the corner into Edward Street, where Mr. William Effey gave Rowe's his personal management for many years.

The two businesses operated in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and Brisbane had room for both of them. By 1909, we find in a contributed article in E. J. T. Barton's "Jubilee History of Queensland" (pp. 329-330), the Eschenhagen enterprise was employing seventy people and still growing.

Ernst, the father, lived to see only part of this mounting prosperity. He died on 18 March 1906 and was buried in the family grave at Toowong Cemetery.

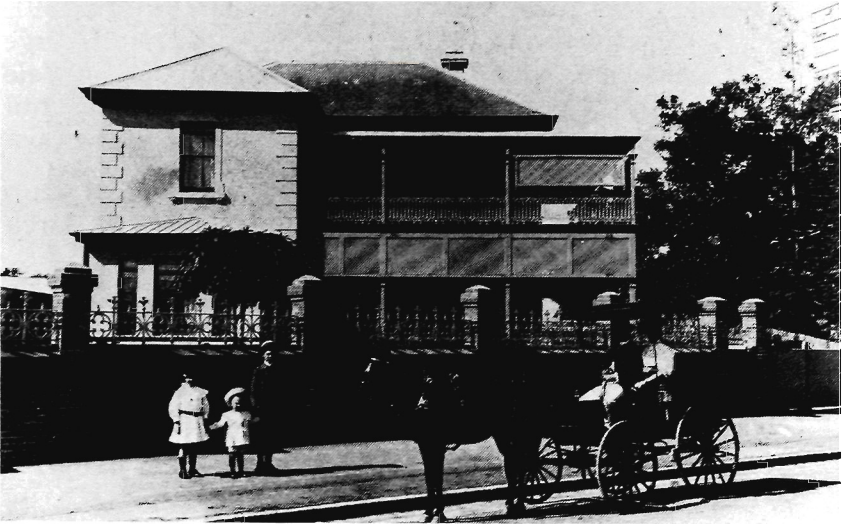
Mrs. Eschenhagen carried on the business after her husband's death, with the able assistance of her oldest son Karl Edward (Charles). She herself died on 4 July 1921 at the age of 51, of cancer.

VICTIMS OF WAR HATE

The tragedy of the Eschenhagen family was that they were victims of the anti-German hatred that blinded reason at the outbreak of the First World War. The generation that lived through the 1914-18 years will recall only too well how human passions were inflamed. For this family, the price of it all was ruin for the productive business they had built up brilliantly from a humble foundation.

In 1915 it was found necessary to sell the business to the catering firm of Johnsons, of Melbourne. Under the new owners it did not recapture the glamour that surrounded it under the Eschenhagen name, and eventually it closed.

The first private home of the Eschenhagens was "Crossen/Oder" — named after Mr. Eschenhagen's birthplace in Germany. It was on North Quay, next to the Honourable Patrick Perkins' old home, "Aubigny" (later called "Loretto", and Brisbane's first Mater Misericordiae Hospital). On 2 December 1938 the Christian Science Church bought the "Crossen/Oder"



“Crossen/Oder” on North Quay, the family’s home for many years.

property and portion of “Loretto”, and on this joint land was built the First Church of Christ, Scientist, Brisbane. It is situated between Makerston Street and the northern approach to the William Jolly Bridge.

The family’s second home was on Gregory Terrace opposite the Brisbane Grammar School and was known as “Chippendale”. It was purchased from the Forth family. Extra accommodation was added and it was renamed “Cliveden Mansions” and later rented to Mrs. Beatrice Wiley.

Their last home was on Gregory Terrace next to St. Joseph’s Christian Brothers’ College. It was built by Mr. Tom Hall, architect for the Brisbane City Hall, whose wife, formerly Miss Lingley, had as a child been a passenger on the steamer which brought the Stegemann family to Brisbane in 1884.

This last house was the one in which Mrs. Eschenhagen spent many long months ill before she died. And members of the family recall that one of the Christian Brothers, an accomplished pianist, knowing she was dying in her room, came regularly to play at that end of the College so that she could hear him through the open window.

Children of the marriage were—

Agnes Pauline, born 1887, died 1899.

Karl Edward, (changed his name to Charles Edwards during 1914-1918 World War), born 1889, died at Sydney, 27 November 1969.

Bertha Clara Elise, (later called Leah), born 7 June 1891, died Brisbane, 11 October 1938; married George Edward Willert of Baffle Creek near Miriam Vale (Q.) in February 1919 and lived in the area until her death, her husband being engaged in the raising and fattening of cattle.

Ludwig Ernst, born 15 July 1894, died Sydney 1 March 1931.

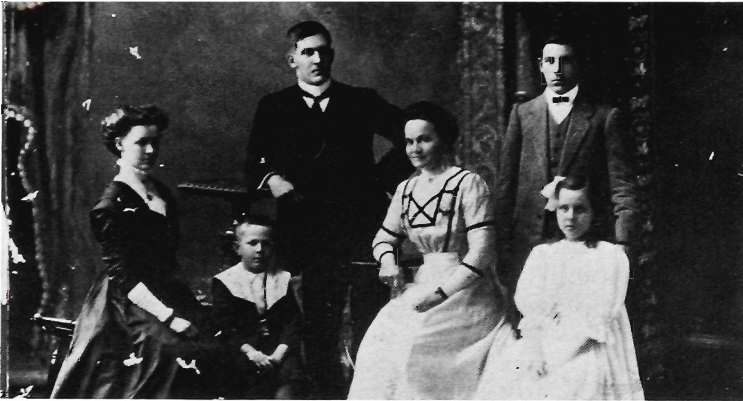
Hedwig Anna, born 20 October 1899, married Claude Slack, merchant, of Kew, Melbourne, on 13 June 1922.

Oskar Wilhelm, (later changed his name to Oscar Edwards), born 1 January 1905. Now living in Sydney.

One of the attributes of this family was that they were good athletes. They had their own gymnasium at the Gregory Terrace house, and shone in competition at their schools. Charles, the eldest, was a fine physical specimen and distinguished himself in several sports including wrestling, swimming and rowing. At one time he held the Queensland amateur wrestling championship. Charles was brought into the business in 1907, the year after his father died, and when he himself was barely 18. Now he became his mother's right hand, and was outstandingly successful in building the business.

When it was sold he went to Sydney, engaged in catering, and specialised in the tea and coffee trade. He was welcome in every hotel and club, not only for the warmth and charm of his character but as a co-founder of the Australian Hotel and Catering Institute. For several years he wrote a "Charles Edwards Column" for the institute's journal. He gave eminent service on the institute's New South Wales Division, and in recognition of his work was elected a Fellow of the Institute in 1967, the year he retired. He suffered a stroke, and died on 27 November 1969. He married in 1917. His wife died two years before him. They had three daughters and a son.

Two members of the original Eschenhagen family survive at the time of this writing — Hedwig (Mrs. H. A. Slack, of 26 Mountbatten Avenue, Main Beach, Southport, Q.) and Oscar Edwards, distinguished artist and art collector, of Kew Cottage, 330 Alison Road, Coogee, N.S.W.



Family Picture (c. 1909) Seated: Leah, Oscar, Mrs. Eschenhagen, Hedwig.
Standing: Charles and Ludwig.

Mrs. Slack remembers the days at "Crossen /Oder" on North Quay, and the foundation of the Mater Hospital by the Sisters of Mercy in the house next door, in January 1906. She attended, at various times, the old Norman School in Brisbane, the Moreton Bay High School for Girls (conducted by the Misses Greene), the Brisbane Girls' Grammar School, and the Methodist Ladies' College, Melbourne.

She and her husband, Mr. Claude Slack, travelled extensively overseas after their marriage, and in the mid 1930's moved to London where they conducted a guest house until the outbreak of World War II. They returned to Australia, leased the Cecil Hotel at Southport, and ran it successfully for 20 years. Mrs. Slack, now a widow, lives in retirement at Main Beach.

SUCCESS AS AN ARTIST

Oscar Edwards prospered in a transport business in Sydney and was able to retire in 1938, at the early age of 33, to develop the art for which he had such rich natural talent, and to form the first of his extensive art collections. The magazine "Art and Australia" in its issue of September 1969 carried a special article on Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Edwards, their art collection, and the house at Coogee which they built in 1936 and established as a treasury of art in several forms.

Oscar had begun his collecting in the 1930's; was one of the first students of Desiderius Orban, the Hungarian-born artist who arrived in Australia in 1939. By the 1940's Oscar was established as a notable exponent of collage, in which his acute aesthetic sense was given full expression. He and Mrs. Edwards visited Europe in 1952 and 1953, met many leading artists

including Picasso, visited Matisse at his home in Nice, and returned to Sydney to give their art and art collection a new impetus and direction. The Edwards' had long been the collectors of letters of famous people. Now they developed a world-wide correspondence with artists, dealers and critics. The scope of this correspondence was shown in an article, based on excerpts taken from more than seventy such letters, which he wrote for "Art and Australia", June 1965, entitled "The Idols of Massimo Campigli". The article cited numerous manuscripts and criticisms he had received from artists during the previous decade.

In the Sydney "Daily Mirror" of 28 March 1973, columnist Jim Macdougall had this to say:

"The pity of it is that Oscar Edwards cannot be persuaded to have an exhibition of his own, for he has an artistic talent unmatched in this country. In a way, the sadness is that Oscar is in comfortable circumstances otherwise there might be greater public enjoyment of his work. He prefers to remain an amateur"

Macdougall followed with this further tribute in his column on 11 November 1973:

"Oscar Edwards is the greatest artist in Australia and one of the best in the world, in the medium of the collage. Last year one of his collages, *The Leprechaun Ship*, was taken by the Soviet's Pushkin Museum of Western Art which houses an enviable (from Western viewpoint) collection of Picassos, Matisses, Van Goghs, Cezannes, Monenets, etc. etc. Oscar has joined them".

Oscar Edwards' art has received notable attention from British and American collectors. And the Trustees of the Queensland Art Gallery have accepted gifts of his own and others' work from the Edwards' Collection, for hanging in the Gallery at Brisbane.

That last is a fitting touch to the rounding of this story, for it brings it back to his native city where it all began — with a gold sovereign melted into a wedding ring, and an eminently successful enterprise founded on a bag of sugar and a sack of flour!