



www.historicmontevallo.org

540 Shelby Street
Montevallo, AL 35115



FROM MAYRHOFEN TO MONTEVALLO

Submitted by Marty Everse

With all the current restrictions on immigration, George Kroell probably would never have been allowed into the United States, and Montevallo would have been a very different place if that had occurred. But he made the journey in 1866 and what a long, strange trip it was for the 23 year old. He left his hometown of Mayrhofen in the Austrian Alps (just 22 miles as the eagle flies from Innsbruck, the site of the 1976 Winter Olympics) and on May 15th boarded the S.S. Herman at Bremen, Germany. The iron-hulled ship was new, only a year old, 337 feet long, 40 feet wide, with 2 sailing masts, one smokestack, and one propeller with a top speed of 11 knots. He tagged along with a Johann Kroell, 8 years his senior, and booked passage in the steerage deep in the bowels of the ship, a crowded, suffocating, and just plain stinky place. There, 500 people were packed like cattle for the almost 3 week voyage to New York City. Once in the U.S., George wandered from Maryland, to Tennessee, and Minnesota before finally landing in Aldrich in 1867. By 1870, he had an Irish-born wife, a son, and a job as a miner. Sometime over the next few years, he walked out of a cold, dark, and dank coal mine and entered into the dry goods business with another immigrant, German-born Rudolph Ehrmann. Together, they had a store in Montevallo and boasted "a fine and well selected stock" of clothing, and it was during this time that Kroell began coming into his own. He was named a delegate to the Democratic county convention in 1876 and that same year was elected vice-president of the newly organized Montevallo Board of Trade. Four years later, he still had his Irish wife but now 5 kids and his own store after buying Ehrmann's portion of the venture.

Kroell was a master marketer, filling the columns of the local newspaper with tantalizing buys. An often used fall add went, "The Possums have been very thick this year which indicates a cold winter, so you had better provide yourself with good warm clothing, underwear, overcoats, mittens, etc. and the best place to get them is where they keep them. We've got them. - Geo. Kroell." At Christmas, Santa Claus would emerge from Kroell's store riding in a dog cart and distributing presents to his customers with



George Kroell's granddaughter, Dionetta, snapped this image of her "Grandpa."

the accompaniment of trailing musicians. His success transformed the face of the town. In 1897, he built the 20 room St. George Hotel. The following year he constructed what the *Montevallo News* declared was his "magnificent new brick store," 50 feet by 120 feet. To top it all off, in 1900 he unveiled his awe inspiring new home, Owl's Cove, the finest example of Victorian architecture ever erected in Montevallo. Sadly, nothing remains today. The hotel was demolished in 1963. The store burned in 1946, and the house was razed in 1967. Today, no visible evidence remains that George Kroell ever trod the streets of Montevallo except for a small sign at a small Main Street park where Owl's Cove once stood.

