

SHORT HISTORY OF OLE HANSEN & FAMILY
IN ATLANTIC COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

-- Written by his son Walter's son Lincoln (Link) --

Ole Hansen was born November 11, 1882, in Feda, Flekkefjord county, Norway. He died Sept. 30, 1952, in Ventnor City, NJ, of heart failure.

He was trained in Norway to be a hide-tanner. His son Walter still possesses a photo of him in his graduating class. Walter also possesses Ole's tanning tools. (Presumably, they didn't get much use after he left Norway.) At age 16, in 1898, he emigrated to America, and settled in Brooklyn, New York.

While he was still a recent arrival, he began to inquire about work. Apparently he was curious about opportunities in other professions here in the Land of Opportunity. He discovered a crew of Norwegian immigrant dockbuilders who assured him that there was ample work for him. They invited him to report to work in the morning, which he did. He joined the New York Dock Builders union, maintaining his membership for many years. He joined Stillman Delahanty & Ferris Co., based in Jersey City. Their market was driving piles for ferry slips on both the NJ and the NY sides of the harbor. Within two years he was supervising six pile-driving crews.

Shortly after Ole's arrival in America, Caroline Josephine Christensen, born 10/31/1885 in Rael, Tonsberg county, Norway, left for the USA. Like Ole, she emigrated at 16, and stayed with her sister Dagny and John Hansen (no relation to Ole) in Jersey City, NJ. She found some work in that same town as housekeeper and nurse for a Doctor. During a Sunday afternoon trip to New York's Chinatown, she met Ole. They married in 1906. They first lived in Jersey City. Eventually, their family came to include:

Eleanore Magdalene, born 1/19/08.
Haubert Joseph, born 8/04/10.
Walter, born 6/04/13.
Mabel, born 1/20/16.7

In 1915, they moved to Bogota, another city in North Jersey. As is evident from comparing the above, Mabel was the only child born in Bogota, as opposed to Jersey City.

After time and promotions, Ole had an opportunity to advance, change companies, and change industries. He became a superintendent with one of the area's leading bridge builders, F. R. Long & W. G. Broadhurst Co. When the company's supply of work slowed down, Ole made an agreement with F. W. Schwiars, Jr. Co. of New York, to become General Superintendent and part owner. Although most of his work had been in North Jersey, his first Schwiars work was building six bridges on what is now known as the White Horse Pike, or Absecon Blvd., leading into Atlantic City. Then it was back to North Jersey for a bridge across Pompton Lakes, a dam in Stillwater near Newton, and a bridge across Lake Hopatcong (all locations in NJ).

As work became slack in North Jersey, Ole and Schwiers again found work in South Jersey. A bonding company hired them to rebuild a new bridge in Anglesea, NJ (County Rd. 585) that had burned down just before it was completed. They stayed down in South Jersey to do jetties in Wildwood Crest and North Wildwood. They then built the Wildwood Boardwalk in 1924, the first concrete boardwalk. It had concrete rolling chair runways, and a fully-concrete structure, except for the walkway deck, which was wooden. Walter keeps an on-site photo of Ole during construction of the Wildwood Boardwalk in 1924. In 1925 the Schwiers Co. built the bascule bridge on Albany Ave. in Atlantic City, NJ. After this they rebuilt the bridges on the old Somers Point-Longport Blvd.

Ole knew that a great deal of Garden State Parkway road and bridge construction was being planned in South Jersey. By this time, Ole was considered by the NJ Highway Dept. (now the Dept. of Transportation or "DOT") to be one of the most knowledgeable experts on bridge foundations and was consulted very often. Ole decided to move closer to the work he anticipated. In 1925, he and the family moved to Ventnor City, NJ, the Absecon Island community adjacent to Atlantic City, Atlantic County, NJ.

1925 also saw a group of Atlantic City businessmen form the Beesley's Point Bridge Commission. Their interests were served by state legislation allowing them to build a bridge across Great Egg Harbor Bay. They wished to connect two stretches of U.S. Highway Route 9 so that motorists would not be compelled to drive into Ocean City and then back to the mainland to continue on the highway. The Schwiers company built the bridge, which opened in 1928.

A similar group then formed with the intent of building four bridges and the necessary causeway to connect Margate City, on Absecon Island, to Northfield, on the mainland. Ole was a member of this group, but he dissented on this venture. He felt that such a move was ten years premature. Nonetheless, Schwiers had no misgivings. He accepted the contract and began construction in 1928.

It turned out to be a tricky time for beginning formidable projects! During the last week of October, 1929, America's Roaring Twenties economy suddenly ground to a crunching halt. The Margate Bridge partnership had been preparing to sell bonds or stock in the venture. Construction was 90% complete. Since very little stock had been sold, the Schwiers company and Hill Dredging Co. wound up holding a new highway-and-bridge causeway, at the cost of most of the Schwiers capital plus money borrowed from the Seashore Trust Co., a local bank. In 1930, the Schwiers company strategy was to take smaller jobs to rebuild their profits. One of these jobs was across the Passaic River, just above the Falls at Paterson, NJ. However, these jobs were not profitable enough - the Schwiers company filed for bankruptcy.

Ole got approval from the U.S. Marshall to take construction equipment (crane, boiler, steamhammer, compressor and smaller tools) in lieu of the money owed him by Schwiers. He took the big leap by starting his own company in 1932. He got pre-qualification from the NJ State Highway Dept. for up to \$33,000. His first job in connection with that was a small bridge over Little Timber Creek on Route 551 between Gloucester & Brooklawn.

In summer, 1934, when the Gloucester job was nearing completion, a transportation disaster occurred. Above Bridgeton, the Cohansey River dam had burst. This destroyed the three bridges connecting the town. The State Highway Dept. turned to Ole for emergency help. In less than a week, and 6 hours before the National Guard completed a pontoon bridge, he built a two-lane bridge plus pedestrian walk. After this success, the highway dept. gave him the job of removing the wreckage of the former bridges. This was a tremendous financial boost. His next pre-qualification limit was \$250,000. He made an agreement for work with the Pittsburg-Des Moines Tank Co., to build approximately nine tanks along the Jersey shore under Public Works Administration.

I would not be able to record this history if not for the details provided by my father Walter. He graduated from Rutgers University in 1936 with a degree in civil and silicate engineering. During his first position, with the insulation manufacturer Johns Manville, he began to notice some annoying health problems. Although none seemed critical, he consulted a doctor. Fortunately, the doctor was both perceptive and frank. He announced that Walter was developing silicosis, and that if he wanted to protect his health, he had better find another industry without delay. Thus during that same year he joined Ole's firm. (See separate section for a short biography.)

In 1936 the firm took two bridge jobs for Cumberland County, Sharp St. and Sherman Ave. in Millville. In 1937 he built the Weymouth-Da Costa bridge over the Pennsylvania Railroad and the bridge now known as Route 73 under the Reading Seashore Lines at Cedar Brook and Blue Anchor. "Ole Hansen & Son" also built a number of bridges in Camden County over the Cooper River.

In 1937 the firm was low bidder on an underpass under the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad at Deans, near New Brunswick. The trap rock under the railroad had to be blasted out. The two tracks on each side were constructed on rollers. After all the rock was blasted out and the abutments for the new bridge were built, the new bridge was to be rolled in the two Eastbound tracks one day and the Westbound tracks the next day - in four hours each. This job was completed without mishap, without delay. Walter recalls that the job had at least fifty dockbuilders, thirty ironworkers and about two hundred track men on the job. When this job was almost finished, in 1938, Ole and Caroline went home to Norway to see their mothers, whom they hadn't seen in more than 25 years.

In 1939 the firm built the foundations for the new bridge for truck traffic on U.S. Route 1, across the Passaic River, next to the Pulaski Skyway. (Trucks were not allowed on the Skyway.) The next job was the new overpass and pedestrian walkway-underpass at the Central Railroad in Bogota. Suddenly, the Highway Dept. called Ole to come down to Woodstown. A gas holding-sphere had washed down against a bridge, and the bridge washed away during a flash flood. In 1939 the U.S. Navy offered a "cost-plus", which was a fixed-fee job at the U.S. Naval Station in Cape May, to design and build seven jetties on their beachfront. This arrangement occupied Ole until the end of the War, in August, 1945. The results of this period included:

Seven groins at Cape May;
Rehabilitation of six Cape May Base buildings;
Rebuilding two new piers at Cape May.

In 1942, Haubert ("Haubie"), a graduate of Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, also joined the firm. Ole Hansen & Sons, Inc. was formally incorporated as a New Jersey corporation in 1946.

This is a good moment to emphasize that Ole did make his mark in areas other than marine-related construction. He became interested in the financial "challenges" presented by his adopted town, Ventnor City. He was elected President of the City Council in 1942 and served until his death in 1952. He brought the city to the best financial condition of any in South Jersey, with one of the lowest tax rates in South Jersey. The addresses of their residences: 118 N. Martindale Ave; then 19 N. Baltimore Ave; then 7215 Atlantic Ave., between Washington and Swarthmore. All of these homes are still in use as residences as of the time of this writing.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF WALTER HANSEN

Walter was born 6/4/13 in Jersey City, NJ. At the time, Ole was a Foreman, and the family resided at 224 Summit Ave. Walter attended elementary and junior high schools in Bogota, NJ, followed by Atlantic City High School. He was away from high school for one year while visiting Norway.

He attended Rutgers University from 1932-1936, receiving a B.S. He belonged to the rowing team, and the D.K.E. fraternity. He was manager of the swimming team, for which he received a letter. He was an R.O.T.C. graduate, commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, Infantry.

Upon graduation, he joined Johns-Manville from '36-'38. He joined his father's firm in '38.

He was called up for service in 1941. He began in California, but relocated to Alabama, back to the East Coast, then to London, to Scotland, and Texas. While in Scotland, he received O.S.S. training. The Allies were training a force to liberate Norway from the German occupation. While on covert night maneuvers in the Scottish countryside, Walter had a motorcycle accident which injured his back sufficiently to lead to his honorable discharge. He had attained the rank of Major.

On 3/13/48 he married Charlotte L. Wixon. They resided in East Orange, then in Lakewood. On 12/7/50, Jonathan Lincoln was born. In April '50, the family moved to 4 North Thurlow Avenue, Margate City, NJ (two blocks from the ocean beach). On 3/31/52, Melissa Caroline was born. In '55, the family moved to a grand house in Linwood, at 1150 Woodlynne Blvd. In '72, Walter and Charlotte moved several blocks down Woodlynne Blvd., to a smaller, more manageable house, which they had built to their specifications.

Like Ole, Walter also participated in civic organizations. He was appointed to the Mainland Regional (High School) Board of Education on 2/14/58. In '59 he was elected President, and served in that capacity until he resigned in '67. He was a regular Little League sponsor, of a team that was always a contender for the league championship. (The author writes from first-hand experience, as pitcher and second-baseman.)

Finally, as one of those miscellaneous achievements that looms larger as nostalgia grows, Walter and Charlotte were winners in the annual Christmas lighting contest, from '55 to '60.

OVERVIEW OF THE HANSEN FIRM'S LEGACY

The following are some of the better-known bridges built by Ole Hansen & Sons, Inc. (Note that these may not conform to the chronological order that has been followed prior to here.) If any readers of this history have any familiarity with the South Jersey "Shore", they will probably recognize these place-names.

Route 30 (Absecon Blvd.) bridges into Atlantic City (1921);
Route 40 (Albany Ave.) bridges into Atlantic City (1925; being rebuilt by Hansen in summer of '89);
Beesley's Point (1928);
Margate-Northfield Toll bridges;
for U.S. Navy during World War II, Cape May Naval Base and Philadelphia Naval Base;
New York shipyard, Camden.

These bridges date from the postwar period:

Passaic River in Newark;
Garden State Parkway bridges in Union, Essex, Passaic and Bergen Counties;
Route 37 over Barnegat Bay;
Shrewsbury River in Sea Bright, Rumson, etc.

Since its incorporation in 1946, one could make the following generalizations about the companies' business focus, by decade:

1950s - Walter and Haubie took over upon Ole's death; much Garden State Parkway work; much real estate purchased in Atlantic County;

1960s - continued bridges but added pipelines, outfalls, jetties;

1970s - Walter and Haubie retired and Haubie's son Roger took over; since highway construction had diminished, increased business in water treatment and contracts for sewage authorities;

1980s - expanded operations to include PA, MD and DE