

# Past lessons

## 100 years ago, Belleville alderman was kicked off city council for being undocumented

By Heidi Wiechert

After living in the United States for almost 70 years, Christian Knebelkamp, of Belleville, was told this was not his homeland. His political opponents said he was no longer qualified for the Belleville City Council seat he held for 20 years. The people he had known his entire life called him “an enemy alien.”

Though this could have occurred in 2018, Knebelkamp lived in 1918.

Like many of the DACA “dreamers” of today, Knebelkamp immigrated to the United States at the age of 7 along with his father. The two came from Germany, and Knebelkamp’s father never obtained naturalization papers for his son.

Unaware of this, Knebelkamp had been living and working illegally in Southern Illinois for nearly his entire life. Knebelkamp discovered he had no naturalization papers at the age of 76.

Back then, the undocumented German immigrants were called “enemy aliens” because the country was in the midst of World War I.

World War I took place from July 28, 1914, to Nov. 11, 1918. The United States, France, British Empire and Russia and more Allies were at war with the Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary.

### Knebelkamp’s descendants

In a recent interview, Dorothy Knebelkamp and her daughter, Beth Rund, shared extensive genealogical and family research on Christ Knebelkamp.

In 1948, Dorothy married Adolph Knebelkamp Jr., the great-grandson of Christ Knebelkamp. Rund is the great-great granddaughter of Christ Knebelkamp.

Dorothy Knebelkamp said, “I’ve been trying to get my kids interested in all of this (family history). When you’re my age, somehow those roots become important to you.” She is 89 years old and has lived in her Belleville home for the past 55 years.



Christian Knebelkamp

She said, by 1918, Christ Knebelkamp owned a successful construction business and had served for 20 years as alderman of Ward 7 on the Belleville City Council.

Dorothy Knebelkamp said, “I was thinking about Christ with the big to-do about the (DACA dreamers.) They’ve gone to school here, have businesses and families. And no one knows what’s going to happen to them.”

Christ Knebelkamp was removed from public office and told he did not qualify to serve. “It’s what’s happening

in Washington right now,” she said.

The recent, brief government shutdown was partially caused because the government can’t agree on what to do with expiring protections against deportation for young, undocumented immigrants.

### No naturalization documents

Christ Knebelkamp’s troubles began when the United States Department of Justice, in early 1918, began a national registration push in order to document unnaturalized Germans residing in the United States.

The government began collecting detailed information from these immigrants including personal habits, business contacts, photographs and fingerprints. Because of World War I, the country feared internal sabotage by the undocumented immigrants from Germany.

“He didn’t know anything about being naturalized,” Dorothy Knebelkamp said. “Those days, I guess they didn’t push it. His parents weren’t naturalized.”

Rund said, “You’re looking at a 7-year-old who comes over from Germany. My own granddaughter wouldn’t know she was a citizen ... unless it was a big deal and it doesn’t sound like it was. It sounds like it was put on the back burner and he honestly didn’t know if he was a citizen.”

The *Belleville News-Democrat* reported in 1918: “Every German must go to the office of the registrar and make out triplicate affidavit information blanks and furnish four photographs of himself — one for each of the blanks and one for his certificate.”

Instructions from the Department of Justice about the registration process instructed officials to be friendly. “Registrants are not to be treated as persons of evil disposition and the registration officers are urged to deal with them in a courteous and friendly manner,” read the documents.

### German heritage of Belleville

Judy Belleville, of the Belleville Labor and Industry Museum, said many of the residents of Belleville — and most of St. Clair County — were German immigrants themselves or were of German descent.

Some of the local newspapers were printed in German, churches services were conducted in German and school children were instructed in their native language — German. All of that changed with the advent of World War I.

“All of St. Clair County was German. Cities like St. Libory and Marissa were just like Belleville. Germans came here because they wanted land and they wanted to own property,” Belleville said.

“People spoke German in their homes. They celebrated on Sunday like Germans do in Germany — by partying and having a beer and a gathering,” Belleville said. “There’s nothing boring about Sunday biergartens.”

Suddenly, everyone wanted to distance themselves from their German heritage because they didn’t want to be perceived as the enemy.

“It was totally unacceptable,” Belleville said. “We were in a war with Germany, and Germany was the bad guy.”

Belleville said Christ Knebelkamp built many historic homes in the city of Belleville and commercial developments including the Central Power Station at Winstanley Park. “You had to be quite a contractor to get a bid on something like (the Central Power Station),” Belleville said.

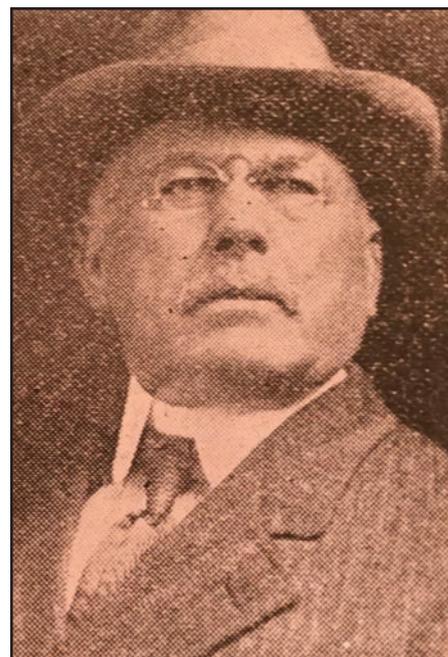
Knebelkamp was no stranger to officials at the courthouse. Besides serving on the City Council for two decades, he would have gone there numerous times to obtain building permits for his construction business.

Belleville said, “He must just have assumed he was citizen because his parents were here. He must have been absolutely shocked out of his mind when someone told him he wasn’t a citizen.”

### City leader with a ‘fighting disposition’

On Feb. 1, 1918, the front page of the *Belleville News Democrat* read: “Local alderman, an enemy alien, must resign from council.” The alderman was Christ Knebelkamp.

County and city officials broke the news about Christ Knebelkamp’s enemy alien status to the newspaper after he had gone to police headquarters to register as a German alien.



**Christian Knebelkamp's German immigrant heritage and his citizenship status made him an “enemy alien” in Belleville in 1918.**

When they told him filling out the papers would mean his automatic removal from the Belleville City Council, Knebelkamp withdrew his request.

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Dorothy Knebelkamp said, “It made him angry, very angry.” She joked that this temper is a Knebelkamp family trait.

Rund quipped, “I have his temperament and you don’t want to meet my sister.”

Prior to the discovery that he was an undocumented immigrant, the fiery alderman was already known for his disposition.

Four years before the citizenship scandal, the *Belleville News Democrat* reported Belleville Mayor R.E. Duvall took Christ Knebelkamp to court for “disturbing the peace of a chief executive at caucus meeting.” According to the paper, the mayor interrupted Knebelkamp during a speech he was making at a caucus meeting about Duvall improperly firing a city employee. The mayor said to Knebelkamp, “It was the beer talking.”



**Knebelkamp's home in Belleville, where he died on June 18, 1922, nine months after he officially became a U.S. citizen.**

Christ Knebelkamp reportedly replied, "Anyone who says I am drunk is a liar." Then, he repeated his statement and used a four-letter word for emphasis, shocking the turn-of-the-century sensibilities of everyone in the room.

Duvall issued a warrant that said: "The Councilman had referred to him in a very ungentlemanly manner by using the little word of four letters which questioned the veracity and truthfulness of the chief executive of the city."

The first disturbing-the-peace trial ended when jurors failed to reach an agreement. The second trial was dismissed after Knebelkamp issued a personal apology to the mayor and then another apology to the entire City Council.

"Assistant City Attorney P.K. Johnson asked that the case be dismissed, as the two gentlemen involved in the legal battle had buried the hatchet, smoked the pipe of peace and decided to forget the past," the *Belleville News Democrat* reported.

### Removed from Belleville City Council

The past caught up to Christ Knebelkamp in 1918 when he discovered he had no naturalization papers.

Dorothy Knebelkamp said, "He made a lot of enemies along the way with his business and his politics and his temperament."

When *Belleville News Democrat* reporters approached Christ Knebelkamp for a comment about his citizenship status, he asked them to drop their inquiry, saying the matter "had enough publicity."

A statement released to the *Belleville News Democrat* by Knebelkamp's attorney, Justice L.E. Wangelin, said: "Alderman Knebelkamp is a victim of the neglect of his father to take out citizenship papers, and came to a knowledge of the fatal consequences of this omission when it was too late to do him any good."

Wangelin also said, "It is an unfortunate occurrence. Knebelkamp is practically a better citizen than many a native-born American here."

As for Christ Knebelkamp's posi-



tion on the City Council, Wangelin advised Christ Knebelkamp to "stand pat" until the next election and then to not enter again as a candidate. He also instructed the 20-year alderman to vote "present" on all questions and to not express an opinion on anything.

This solution was apparently unacceptable to the other members of the council. When Christ Knebelkamp went to the City Council meeting on the night of Feb. 18, 1918, they had prepared a resolution to throw him out.

At the meeting, one of the aldermen suggested giving Christ Knebelkamp three minutes to make up his mind to resign from the council rather than being thrown off. Christ Knebelkamp replied he could not make up his mind in three minutes and repeated to the council the advice of his attorney.

The vote to oust Christ Knebelkamp was unanimous except for Alderman Knebelkamp who voted "present." Christ Knebelkamp's reaction to the loss of his seat was: "Knebelkamp gulped back a lump in his throat, gave a despairing look, and then seemed to shrink into his chair."

Not content with only taking away

Knebelkamp's position, Mayor Duvall also wanted the "enemy alien" to pay back to the City Treasury the money he had received since he discovered his "lack of qualifications for holding his position."

Duvall said, "He promised me that if it proved he was not a citizen he would resign." He said Belleville was making itself liable for a lawsuit by having an enemy alien serving on the City Council.

It is an unfortunate occurrence. Knebelkamp is practically a better citizen than many a native-born American here.

Alderman Henry Baumgarten also claimed to have met with Knebelkamp and secured his promise to resign if it was proved he wasn't an American citizen. Baumgarten was so incensed by Knebelkamp's refusal to resign from the council that "he felt Knebelkamp owed him, as an American citizen, an apology."

The City Council meeting ended without an apology from Christ Knebelkamp.

The *Belleville News Democrat's* last words about the Knebelkamp citizen-

ship scandal were: “His (Christ Knebelkamp’s) fighting disposition has been ever ready for an argument or crusade. In spite of this disposition, however, the majority of Belleville citizens will agree that he has been a good citizen and has served his constituents to the best of his ability.”

**‘But, he died an American citizen.’**

Dorothy Knebelkamp said, “After that all came up and they threw him off of the City Council, he applied for naturalization. Then, he died nine months later. But, he died an American citizen.”

The Knebelkamp family record from the Zion Lutheran Church shows Christ Knebelkamp died on June 18, 1922, of a paralytic stroke at his home,

211 Abend St., Belleville. The date on his naturalization certificate is Sept. 12, 1921.

The Knebelkamp family stayed in the area, worked, went to church and raised their families. Of her husband, Adolph Knebelkamp Jr., Dorothy Knebelkamp said, “He carried on the German tradition.” Adolph Knebelkamp graduated from Belleville High School in 1942 and went into the navy after graduation. Adolph Jr. Knebelkamp died on Feb. 18, 1987. “He was, upon his death, assistant to the supervisor of the gas department at the Illinois Power Company, which is now Ameren,” Dorothy Knebelkamp said. “The people that have worked with him said they admired him because he was a hard worker just like his great-



grandfather Christ.”

“I said my three children must get their work ethics from him because they didn’t get them from me,” Dorothy Knebelkamp joked.

In addition to their daughter Beth Rund, who works as a nurse at Anderson Hospital, Dorothy and Adolph Jr. Knebelkamp have a daughter named Barbara and a son named Kent. Barbara Swantner is a physical therapist who provides home care for patients. Kent Knebelkamp works in the Chicago area as a real estate developer.

When asked if she has any inklings to serve in local government like her relative, Rund said, “Very much so. I’d be interested in helping Belleville. I just love Belleville and I am concerned about some of the things that are going on.”

Christ Knebelkamp is buried at Walnut Hill Cemetery in Belleville. 

*Heidi Wiechert is an editorial assistant and columnist for the Belleville News-Democrat, where this article first appeared.*

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