

# SILENT SENTINELS

## A Forgotten Depression-era History

By Aileen Gronewold

From the road, one only notices the impressive, rustic barn on the property for sale at Seventh Street and Duquesne Road in Joplin, Missouri. But behind the barn, a vine-covered water tower and a 50-foot concrete smokestack stand sentinel to the property's long-forgotten history. These intriguing relics pre-date the barn by nearly 100 years. They were constructed by Adolph "Ad" Lyscio, a German immigrant, in the operation of his vegetable "truck farm," known as Lyscio Gardens and Greenhouse.

Ad Lyscio bought this 30-acre parcel of land from Charles Schifferdecker in 1904 for \$3,000. According to Lyscio, he saved enough money to buy the property, then borrowed \$3,000 from the bank to start the business. He was able to repay the loan a year later, then promptly borrowed another \$3,000. He repaid the second loan the following year, after which he had sufficient cash flow to operate the business without loans.



### Innovations at the Largest Truck Farm in the Area

By 1915, Lyscio Gardens was the largest truck farm in Southwest Missouri. Lyscio reported his annual sales as \$12,000, of which \$6,000 was profit.

In the early years, Lyscio's two horse-drawn teams started their local delivery routes at 2 a.m., traveling as far as Picher, Oklahoma, to make deliveries. It took all day. Once motorized vehicles were available, Lyscio wasted no time swapping his horse-drawn wagons for trucks, an innovation that allowed him to delay the start of his day to 5 a.m.

In addition to hard work, Lyscio's penchant for innovation





contributed greatly to his success. At first, he ran water through ditches to irrigate his fields, but he realized too much of the water was being absorbed into the ground around the ditches. To improve water efficiency, he developed a system of overhead irrigation using one-inch diameter pipe. Small nozzles at four-inch intervals released a light spray over the rows of plants, similar to a gentle rain. He even warmed the water in a tank before running it through the pipes.

Lyscio constructed a massive greenhouse to start his plants, then transplanted them to the fields. At one point, the greenhouse spanned an entire acre, and the smokestack generated heat to help the plants thrive.

As with any business, Lyscio faced setbacks and challenges. In 1912, the greenhouse was completely destroyed by hail "the size of hen eggs." Two years later, he suffered a \$2,000 crop loss due to flooding. He blamed the Southwest Missouri Railroad Company for the flooding loss, claiming in a lawsuit that the rail line running on the

south edge of his property inhibited natural drainage, causing flooding on his property. His suit was dismissed for lack of evidence.

He also faced challenges of the bovine variety. His neighbor's cow developed a fondness for garden produce and frequently wandered over for a snack. After repeated warnings to the neighbor, Lyscio confined the gluttonous cow to a pen, holding it ransom for payment for lost crops. When the neighbor refused to compensate him for damages, the conflict came to blows. Facing off mano a mano, the neighbor wielded a knife and Lyscio a club. Lyscio won the brawl but lost in the court of public opinion.

#### **A Vineyard During Prohibition**

In 1922, Lyscio allocated a portion of his gardens to a vineyard. Generous with his expertise, he held demonstrations for other farmers

interested in starting vineyards. Students from Duquesne school happily took a field trip to learn all about grape production.

The ultimate success of the vineyard is unknown, except that it came with one significant downside. Grape production naturally led to wine production, which in turn led to several arrests during Prohibition. A 1928 raid of Lyscio's basement stash yielded 35 gallons of wine and 54 bottles of home brew.

When Ad Lyscio died in December 1941, he had lived in Joplin for more than 40 years. No telling how many tons of vegetables nourished his neighbors during his remarkably successful career. He left a wife, two sons, four daughters and a host of friends to mourn his loss. One daughter in particular, Mary, was especially proud of the role her family played in feeding people through the Great Depression.

#### **An Uncertain Future**

Someday soon, the deed for this historic property will transfer to a new owner, likely for an apartment complex or a commercial enterprise. Almost certainly, the new owner's first order of business will be to bulldoze the water tower, smokestack and outbuildings, hauling the debris to a landfill. With the loss of these proud sentinels, the last vestiges of a great American success story will be lost to history.

Ad Lyscio is one of thousands of immigrants who, through back-breaking labor and savvy innovation, built the America we enjoy today. The silent sentinels of Lyscio Gardens may soon disappear, but Ad Lyscio's legacy – his family and the families he once fed – will continue to flourish in Southwest Missouri for generations to come.

