

**David Berenberg:  
From the Russian Army to the St. Joseph Police Force**



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Born on Feb. 22, 1863 in Mitau, Latvia (at that time a province under the control of Russia), David Berenberg was conscripted into the Russian army at the age of 15 (1878) to serve as a corporal in the Russo-Turkey War. He saw action in six battles in the war as a cannon aimer at a rank equivalent to a corporal in the U.S. army. Later, when reflecting on his life for the newspaper at the time of his retirement from the police force in 1931, he remembered how unhappy he was to have been forced to leave school; he had planned to become a teacher like his father. When Berenberg mustered out of the army at the end of the war (he served for 18 months) he returned to his home village only to be told that he would not be permitted to re-enroll in school unless he renounced the Jewish faith and joined the Greek Orthodox church; he would not do that.





*Depiction of a battle in the Russo-Turkey War.*

David then spent about a year wandering around Europe moving from odd job to odd job. He developed a minor reputation as a fresco artist; however, he found the pay insufficient. He began to see the United States as a place of opportunity – so began to save his money to make the passage.

He arrived in New York on November 8, 1879, unable to speak English, with no family or friends here, and very little in his pocket (over the years the stories were 2¢ or 4¢ -- but either way, not much). He was left to wander the streets of NY looking for work and a place to stay. Within a few hours he met up with a policeman who took him to a boarding house run by his sister and the policeman got him a job as a designer for a fancy tinner – he worked at this for about a year making \$7 per week, but a strike broke out and he quit rather than get involved.



*Working class section of New York City, c. 1870*

This left him at age 18, unemployed and with few prospects. In February 1881 he decides to join the army – he served in the Southwest in the so-called Indian Wars until 1891, mustering out at the rank of Sergeant.



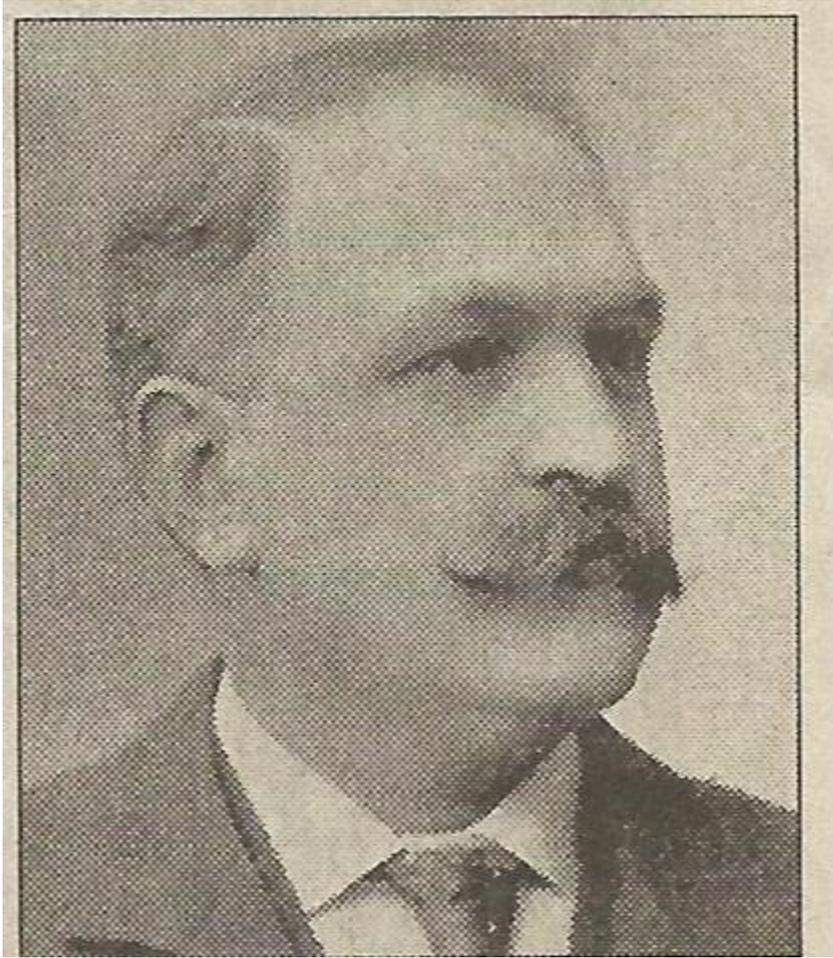
*U.S. soldiers in the Indian Wars of the 1890s*

Meanwhile, David's brother Harry had come to the United States and settled in St. Joseph working as a tailor (he is an interesting story in his own right). So after leaving the army, the young David decided to come to St. Joseph. His first position was as a clerk in a clothing store and he quickly enlisted in the National Guard – quickly promoted to the captaincy.

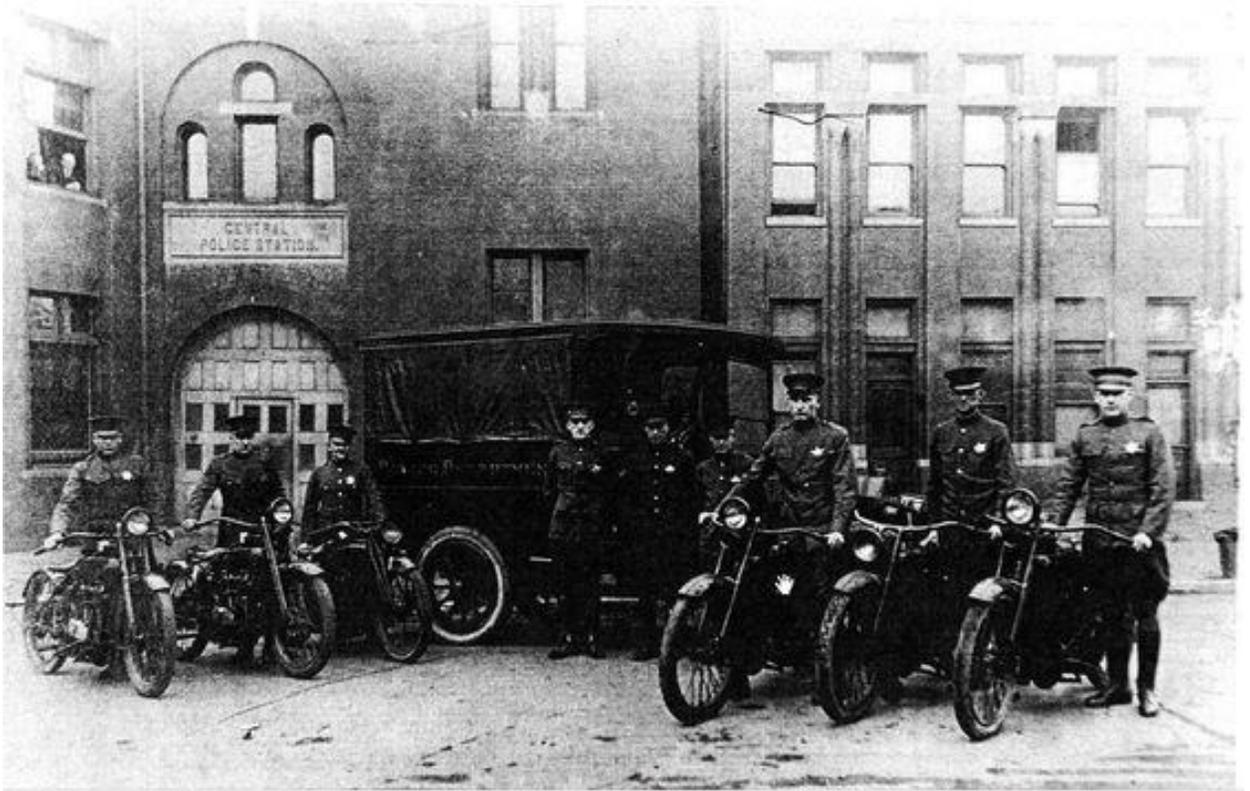


*Retail area of downtown St. Joseph*

His position with the National Guard brought him to the attention of John Donovan, famous as the founder of the St. Joseph Livestock Exchange. Donovan was president of the board of police commissioners and he convinced Berenberg to join the police force – he was commissioned as a patrolman on April 13, 1892. In the early 1900s he became drillmaster for the department.

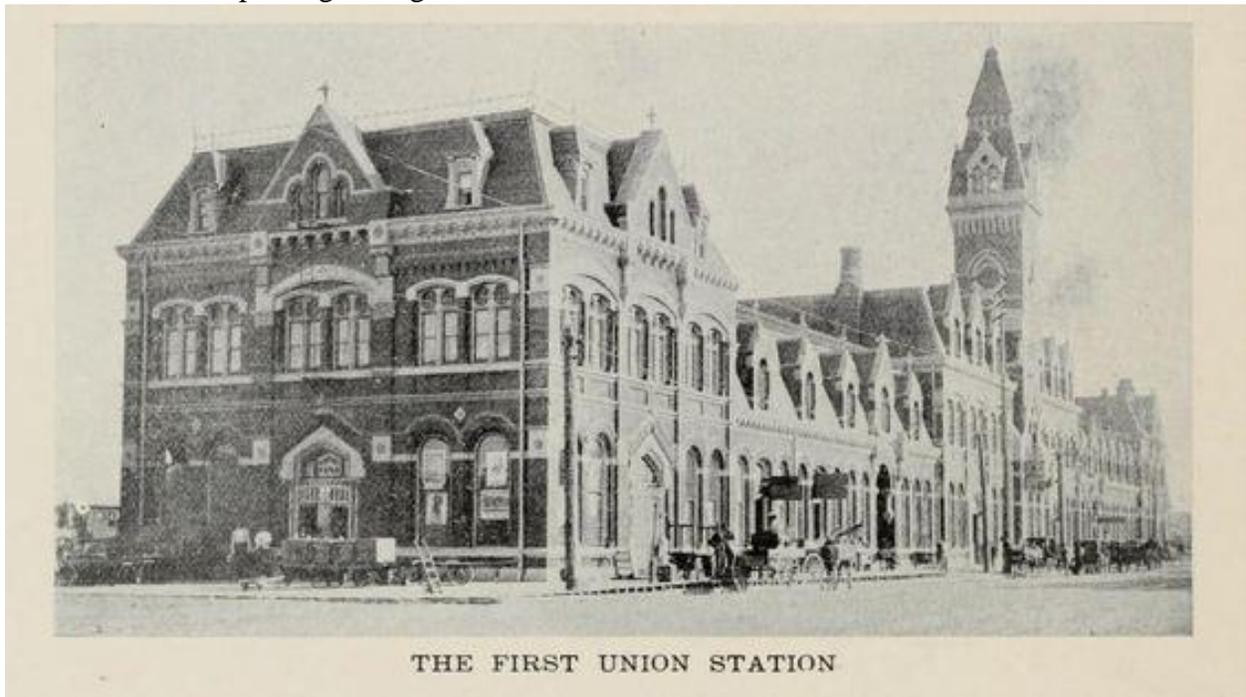


*John Donovan*

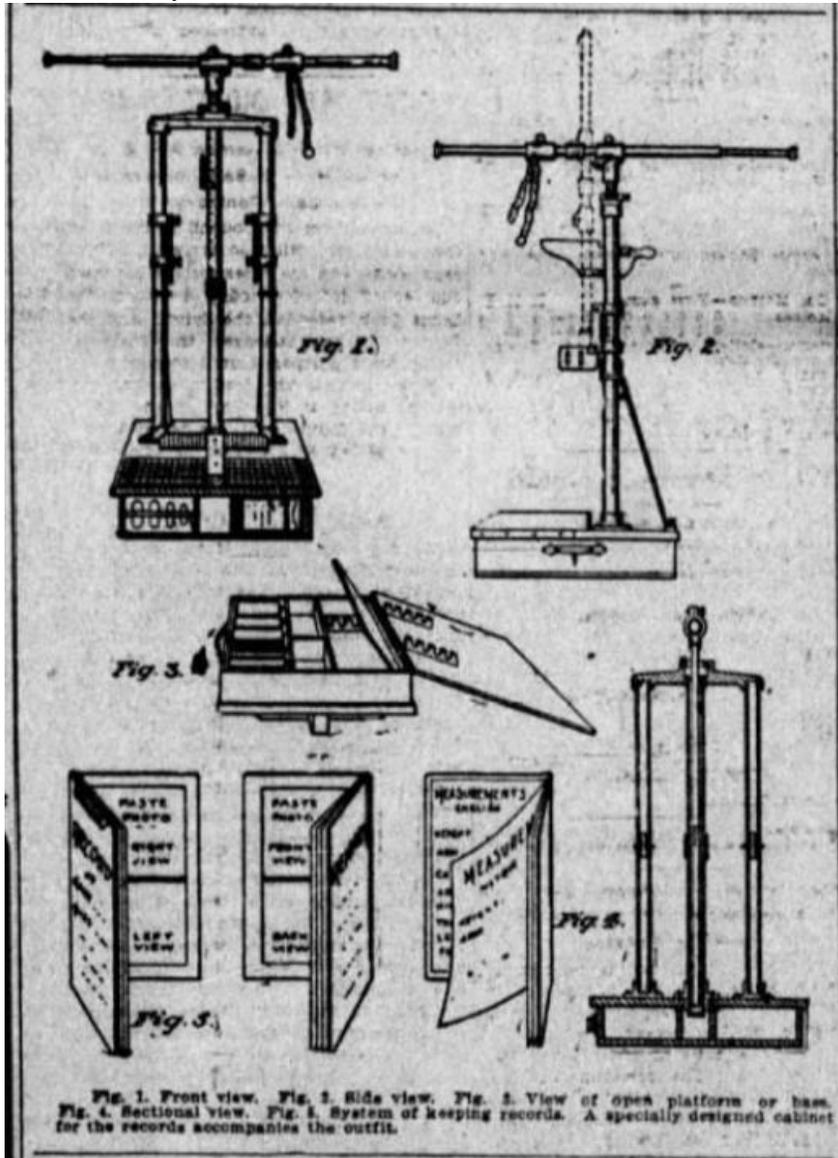


*Police at the Central Police Station, 7<sup>th</sup> & Messanie, c. 1900*

Identification was an important part of Berenberg's work on the force. He spent much of his early career stationed at Union Station, where his ability to recall faces was useful in capturing villains who were passing through.



Berenberg studied fingerprinting and photography. He was always more cerebral than muscle-bound, and in 1906 he invented an identification system that caused great excitement for a time (patented in September 1907). Before DNA and the widespread acceptance of fingerprints<sup>1</sup> authorities had trouble developing a system that permitted them to firmly identify a person – systems centered on the measurements of physical traits – the most common was the Bertillon method (developed in France). In 1906, the St. Joseph PD had no identifying apparatus, so Berenberg set to work developing a system and what he came up was said to be better than those in use. In its report about the invention, the *News Press* stated: “It is a well-known fact that no two persons are of exactly the same size.”



The *News Press* described the apparatus: “One long steel hollow arm rises perpendicularly from a hollow platform with a glass cover. It is held firm by two steel parallel supports. Two telescopic steel arms extend horizontally from the upright bar. These arms are adjustable and have

<sup>1</sup> Fingerprinting came into regular use in around 1915.

measuring appliances attached. The main vertical bar is also telescopic and can be adjusted to any required height. . . . The Bertillon system measures the principal features of the body. Berenberg's apparatus can be adjusted easily to measure any part of the body. . . . With the Bertillon system it is necessary to keep a set of books recording the measurements of criminals. A peculiarly arranged memorandum and picture holder, a great number of which are joined together in the form of a book, enables the criminal's record to be kept under his picture by the Berenberg system."<sup>2</sup> It was expected that the St. Joseph PD would soon adopt Berenberg's system

Berenberg appears to have had a strong personality, and there are several accounts of his conflicts with his coworkers. He only got into serious trouble once; he arrested a man for drunken disorderly and while Berenberg was trying to phone for backup the man continued to kick up a ruckus, so Berenberg hit him a couple of times with his nightstick. The man later filed a charge of cruelty, but David was exonerated.

In 1918 he was promoted to detective and put in charge of the pawnshop reports. The method that he developed for doing this was copied by several police forces around the country.

March 1928, Berenberg retired from the force and served for a time on the pension board.



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<sup>2</sup> "Officer's Invention," St. Joseph News Press, June 30, 1906, pg. 2.

Berenberg was well known for his facility with languages – he spoke eight. In Latvia where he was born the common languages were German and Latvian. He learned Russian and Turkish in the Russian army. Additionally, he spoke Hebrew, French, and Polish and he learned English when he came to the US.



At 2 o'clock this afternoon in the office of the county recorder at the court house, Judge Brown of the County Court pronounced the words that made Miss Etta L. Lane of Newton, Kan., and David Berenberg of the metropolitan police force of St. Joseph, husband and wife. The groom is a Hebrew while the bride is of gentile parentage. The latter, however, has embraced the Jewish faith, she having been under the spiritual guardianship and tutorage of the rabbi of the Jewish synagogue in Kansas City for two months past. Mr. and Mrs. Berenberg have gone to housekeeping at 902 Hickory street.

David married Etta L. Lane on November 2, 1893. The marriage was notable in that he was Jewish and she was not – their wedding announcement stated that she had converted, but it is of note that she is buried at Mt. Mora. They had two children, but one died young; their son Max graduated from Central High School in 1915 (he was the tallest member of his class at 6'6"). He later moved to Omaha where he died in 1966. Etta died in March 1929 of pneumonia complicated by epilepsy; sadly she was a patient at State Hospital #2 at the time.



### *Class Extremes in Height*

Reuel Farber, left, was the shortest member of the class of 1915 of Central High School present for the 50th reunion last night at Hotel Robidoux. Standing with him is Max Berenberg of Omaha, a mere six foot, six inches who was the tallest member of the class. Mr. Farber was chairman of the reunion planning committee. Mr. Berenberg, whose late father, Max Berenberg, was a famed St. Joseph police detective, was one of the most active members of the American Legion here before moving to Omaha a number of years ago.

Following his retirement and Etta's death, David eventually moved into the Milner Hotel, formerly the St. Charles at 301 S. 5<sup>th</sup> Street – it rented furnished rooms. He died in a nursing home and is buried at Adath Joseph Cemetery.



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Sources:  
News articles from local newspapers. Particularly:  
“Retired Detective Came to U.S. With 2 Cents in Pocket.” *St. Joseph News Press* January 21, 1928, pg. 16.  
“Retired Detective Learned to Speak Seven Languages.” *St. Joseph Gazette* February 15, 1931, pg. 15.