

Nice Gamms

Stories from the lives of five generations of some extraordinary people

Mark A. Jeske

Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Strelitz in the early 1800s were grand-duchies--Germany would not be a united nation until 1871. Conditions for rural people in the north were terribly hard. The terrain is flat and peaty. The soil was perhaps the least productive of all the regions of Germany, and thus the people who lived there were the poorest. Mecklenburg avoided being annexed to Prussia, its rapidly expanding neighbor to the east, but it had a reputation as the German backwater. Prussian Chancellor Bismarck is said to have remarked, "If one day the world will be destroyed, I'll move to Mecklenburg because there everything happens at least a hundred years later."

The grand-dukes owned half the arable farmland, and it was almost impossible for a farm worker ever to acquire his own land. The dukes controlled many aspects of the lives of the Mecklenburgers, including the right to marry, emigrate, or even the right of claiming Mecklenburg as one's homeland (*Häusung*). Many Mecklenburgers spoke Low German.



The abolition of serfdom in 1820 might be thought of as a great leap forward, but the actual effect was that the nobility now had no social obligations for the care of their many thousands of agricultural workers. The failed democratic revolution of 1848 further caused despair among both intellectuals and working people. The old regime held onto its power for another generation.

Between 1850 and 1890, Mecklenburg with a population of only 420,000 people had some 148,000 people emigrate, the majority to the

United States. Most of these emigrants were peasants, struggling in poverty, looking for opportunities for a better life. The Gamm family was among them.

First Generation: Jochim Hinrich Christopher Gamm b.1798 d.1869
Hanna Magdalena Dorothea (Kaeckenmeister) Gamm b.1803 d.1873

Jochim Gamm married a woman named Hanna Kaeckenmeister, daughter of Jürgen and Anna Kaeckenmeister, in 1826 in Alt Gaarz. They lived in Mechelsdorf, a tiny town near the Baltic seacoast. They had four boys (that we know of): August, Johann, George, and Joachim. August married Sophie Blievernicht in 1852, and the day after the wedding the two of them (possibly with Sophie's father Daniel) set off for America. They arrived at the port of Quebec and headed for Wisconsin, choosing to settle in the small but growing town of Watertown. A year later, encouraged by August, Jochim, Hanna, George, and Joachim also came to America through the port of New York and settled in Watertown.

Second Generation: August Johann Carl Friedrich Gamm b.1827 d.1906
Sophie (Blievernicht or Bliefernicht) Gamm b.1829 d.1913
The Grand-dukes of Mecklenburg-Schwerin



Groszherzog Friedrich Franz I r.1785-1837



Groszherzog Friedrich Franz II r. 1842-1883



Groszherzog Paul Friedrich r.1837-1842



Groszherzog Friedrich Franz III r.1883-1897



Großherzog Friedrich Franz IV r.1897-1918

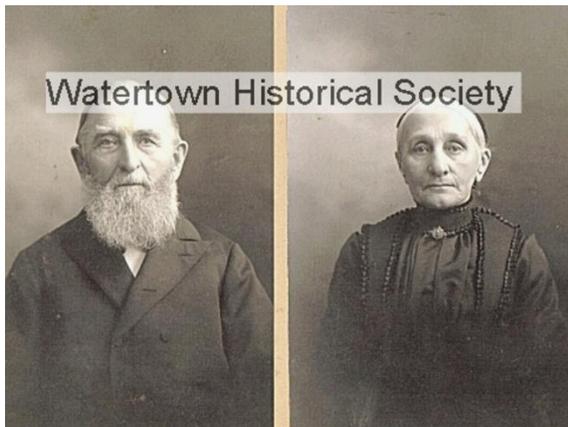


*Großherzogin Alexandra
von Mecklenburg-Schwerin*

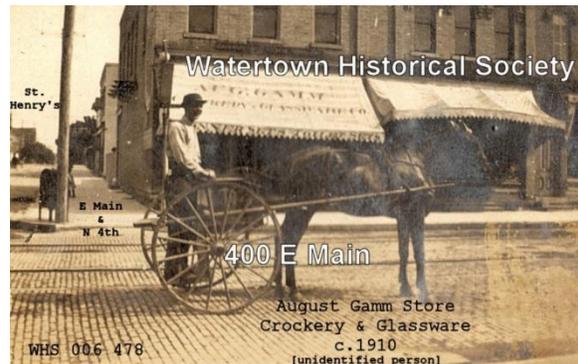


Schloss Schwerin in 1900, official residence of the grand-dukes

August found work in Watertown building the Milwaukee Road's line from Milwaukee to Madison. When George arrived they got into the flour and feed business together. In 1860 they opened a store on 4th & Main St. called "A. and G. Gamm." The business did well and August and Sophie built a beautiful brick home on South Sixth St. It is still standing today.

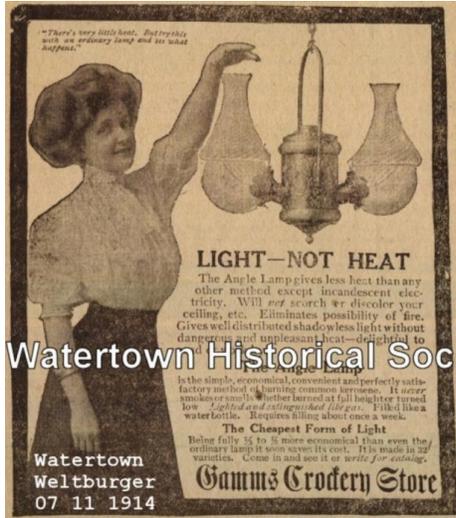


August and Sophie (Blievernicht) Gamm



The Gamm Crockery Store on Main St., 1910

Ads from 1914 and 1916



Watertown Historical Soc



August and Sophie's 1860 home on S. 6th St.



St. Mark's Watertown 1855 church

August and George were founders and pillars of St. Mark's Lutheran Church; August was one of five elders elected in the chartering meeting of 1854. He also served as custodian. They helped erect the first sanctuary in 1855.

The brothers also became very active in the establishment and growth of the new Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin (founded 1850). In 1863 the synod's convention was engaged in vigorous debate as to where to locate a college and seminary. The Gamms were great champions of Watertown as the location, and their guarantee of \$2,000 for the project helped to sway the delegates to vote 45-19 in favor of Watertown. The seminary was launched later that year in a house on 4th St. August's son, August J., was one of the first students enrolled, even though he had no plans to become a pastor. The college was begun in 1865 on five acres along Western Avenue and a handsome Italianate building with cupola (the "Kaffeemühle") was constructed for around \$20,000, roughly double its budget.

In 1868 the college had a chance to purchase 30 acres of land to the north of its original campus for \$6,475, even though it had no money and absolutely no idea how to pay for it. The Gamm brothers were instrumental in helping the synod acquire and hold onto that valuable acreage. Their names were among those on the deed, so they personally were on the hook for the debt. When the college struggled badly to develop a sustainable revenue stream, the directors hired August in 1869 for \$1,000 a year to go around the state and make collections.

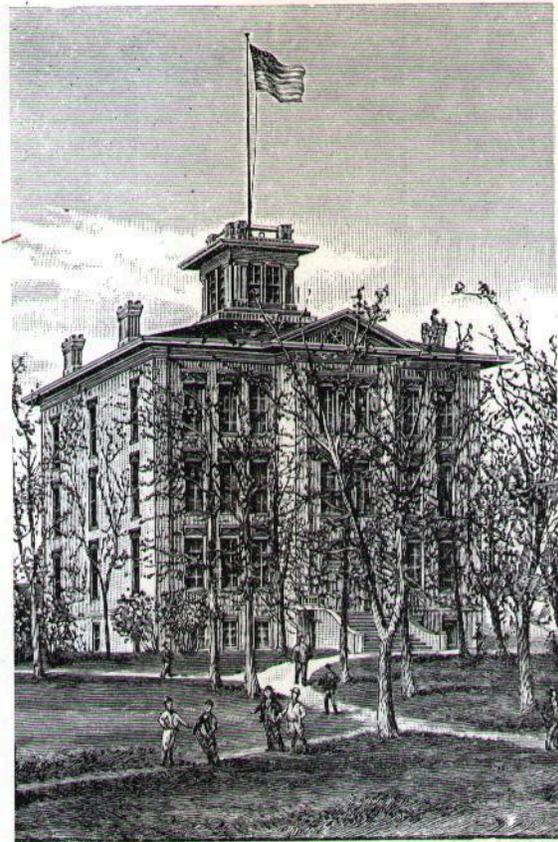
August and Sophie had ten children:

- **August J.**, 1853-1930, married Elizabeth Miller (or Mueller)
- **Maria**, 1855-1925, married Rev. Adolph **Toepel**
- **Christian**, 1857-1877
- **Heinrich** (Henry), 1859-1887
- Johann (**John**) G., 1860-1945, married Emma Klein
- **Sophia**, 1863-1941, dressmaker, married a man named **Elsa**
- **Pauline**, 1865-1866
- Friedrich (**Fred**), 1867-1935, married Dora Sprehn, then Hedwig Schlimpf
- **Herman**, 1869-1949, married Hulda Alberts
- **Julius**, 1871-1951, married Barbara Dressendoerfer

I have a personal story here. Papa August must have kept strong ties with the railroad and apparently moonlighted as an agent for the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul. When my great-great-grandmother, Bertha Lohff Pieper, became a widow in Karwitz, Pomerania, she packed up four of her boys and emigrated to America. Hearing of opportunities for Germans in Wisconsin and a Lutheran school in Watertown, she arrived there in 1870. Who should meet her at the train station but August Gamm, and he helped her find temporary lodging with Julius Voss, one of the teachers at St. Mark's Lutheran School in town.

George Gamm b.1833 d.1914
Henriette Pauline (Baeslau) Gamm b. 1844 d.1907

George Gamm was only 21 when he, his parents, and his brother came to America. He found work at first in a cooperage and then went into business with August. After a fire in their store the



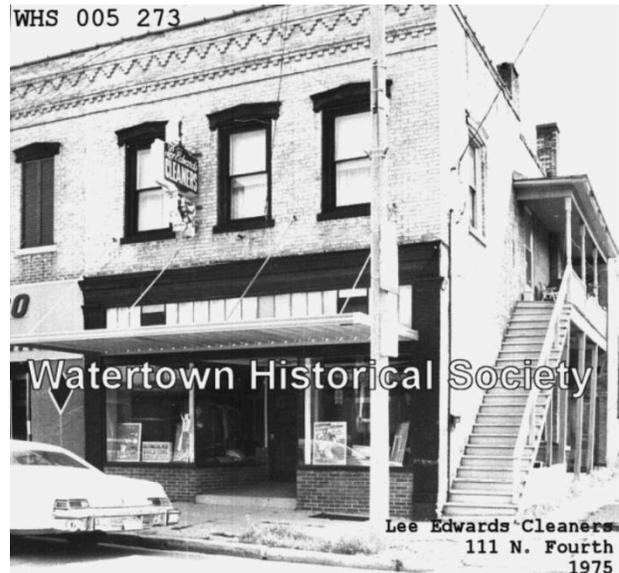
Northwestern College, Watertown, Wis.
 Das erste Anstaltsgebäude,
 am 4. September 1865 eingeweiht.

August and George Gamm were instrumental in persuading the Wisconsin Synod to locate its college in Watertown. The 1865 “coffee mill” building burned in 1894.



NWC, with 1875 dormitory, refectory, and “Coffee

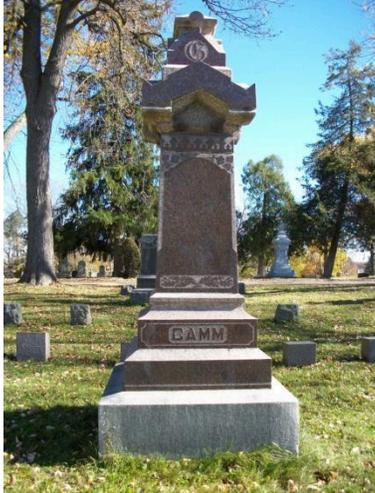
Mill”



George’s store as it looked in 1975



George Gamm’s Oak Hill Cemetery grave



brothers split up—in 1883 August, a stonecutter by trade, began a crockery store (“Gamm Crockery”) and George stayed in the grocery business. His store was at 111 N. 4th St. He served as a Watertown alderman in 1890.

George was also very active in synodical affairs, serving as synod treasurer in the late 1860s. It was a frustrating job, however. George’s report to the 1868 synod convention was pretty gloomy: “In handing over the report before you, the undersigned treasurer takes the liberty to request the Hon. Synod most urgently to bear sufficient concern, in that the treasurer has been put into the position also to meet the demands being placed upon him in regard to the payment of monies, in default of which he sees himself obliged to resign the office conferred upon him. At present the treasury is in such a state that the undersigned is in the position to be able to pay neither the one-fourth of the building costs due according to the contract, nor the salaries of the teachers, nor the household expenses. Geo. Gamm, treasurer.” He still served as a synodical delegate in 1872.

Papa Jochim died in 1869, the year August agreed to travel around Wisconsin raising money for the college. George and Paulina lived on 6th & Cady, across the street from the double Lutheran cathedrals of St. John’s and St. Mark’s. They had six known children:

- **Charles**, 1865-1943, married Dorothea Winkenwerder
- **Minnie**, 1867-1937, married Henry Vogel; as widow married Charles Bensene
- **William**, 1870-1914; the 1887 Watertown directory lists him as a watchmaker
- **Ida**, 1873-1928, married Oscar Kurzweg in 1904
- **Benjamin**, 1879-1904
- **daughter?**, became Mrs. Robert Hinze, Riverdale, California

Third Generation: Charles A. Gamm, 1865-1943
Dorothea (Winkenwerder) Gamm, 1865-1936

George’s oldest son Charles married Dorothea Winkenwerder, whose brother was of one of Watertown’s leading hardware merchants; she was the daughter of Sophia Kusel, a member of another well-known hardware family. Sophia’s father Daniel had been Watertown’s mayor at one point and was another major founder and contributor to Northwestern College. Charles didn’t go into the family business but struck out on his own and became a druggist. His store was at 103 Main

St.; the building is still there on the S.E. corner of First and Main. The city's infant telephone exchange was housed upstairs. He and Dorothea lived at 413 N. Washington St.

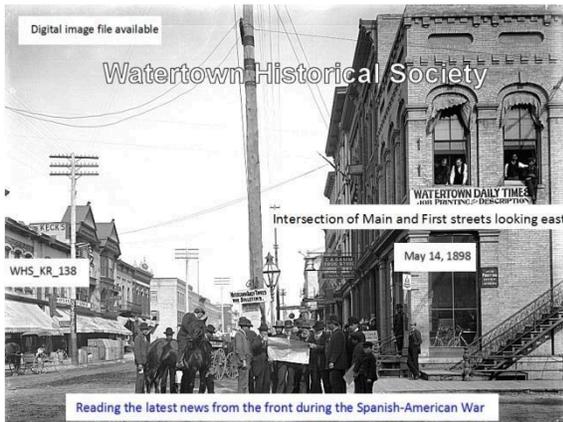
Around 8:00 p.m. the evening of September 23, 1910, a gigantic explosion blew out the plate glass street windows of the drug store, bulged out the west wall, and tore the main floor into splinters. Mercifully no one was killed, but a clerk working in the basement was injured. Charles himself was working in the back and appeared dazed for a while. The explosion and subsequent fire were thought to have come from a gas tank under the sidewalk, or possibly chemicals in the basement. The fire department was quick to arrive and "worked like beavers." Charles was insured and so was able to rebuild. He sold his interest to Paul Behlke in 1915.



Charles and Dorothea Gamm with baby Irvin

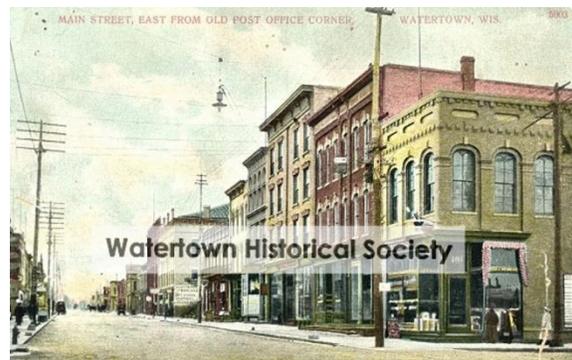


Charles A. Gamm



Men are standing in front of the Charles Gamm Drug Store, also the home of the *Watertown Daily Times* and the post office. The men in this image are:
 In the windows (left to right): Eugene Killian, E.J. Schoolcraft, J. W. Cruger, unknown;
 In front (left to right): Paul Schoechert, Herman (Dutch) Jahнке, Emil (Nitz) Neumann (on horse), next three unknown, Conrad Hendrich (employed by the city), J. Reinhard, Dr. William C. Spaulding, George Reinhard, Charles Roth (mason), Jacob Eiffier, unknown.
 Standing in front of the post office entrance is John Callahan.

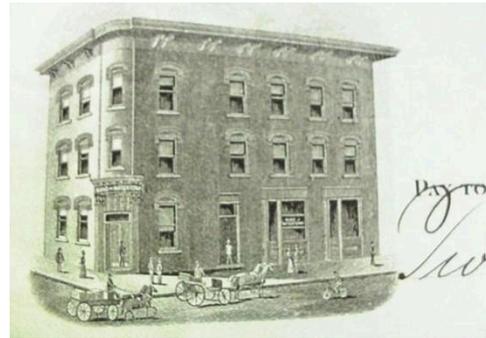
Gamm Drug in 1898



Gamm Drug



Charles and Dorothea Gamm



Bank of Watertown, 1901

Friedrich William Adolph “Fred” Gamm, 1867-1935

Dora (Sprehn) Gamm, 1867-1894

Hedwig (Schlimpf) Gamm, 1877-1952

Back to August’s family. August and Sophie’s fifth child Fred (“don’t call me Friedrich”) was quite an achiever. He worked for the family business for a while and inherited all the Gamm business smarts, serving as vice-president of Gamm Crockery. He then went to work for the Bank of Watertown and rose through the ranks to become chief cashier and sat on its board of directors. He and Dora lived at 600 Clyman St.

Dora gave him two beautiful children, Theodore and Clara, but Clara’s birth must have been difficult—Dora died a few days after Clara’s birth. Fred was married again, to Hedwig Schlimpf, and she bore him another seven children. Clara died when she was 18—how did that not break her father’s heart all over again!

Like his dad, Fred was very active in using his business acumen to serve the church. He was a trustee of Northwestern College for many years, serving on its executive committee as treasurer, and he served as the treasurer of Bethesda Lutheran Home, originally called the “Bethesda Home for the Feeble-Minded.” He also sold insurance on the side.

Johann (John) G. Gamm, 1860-1941

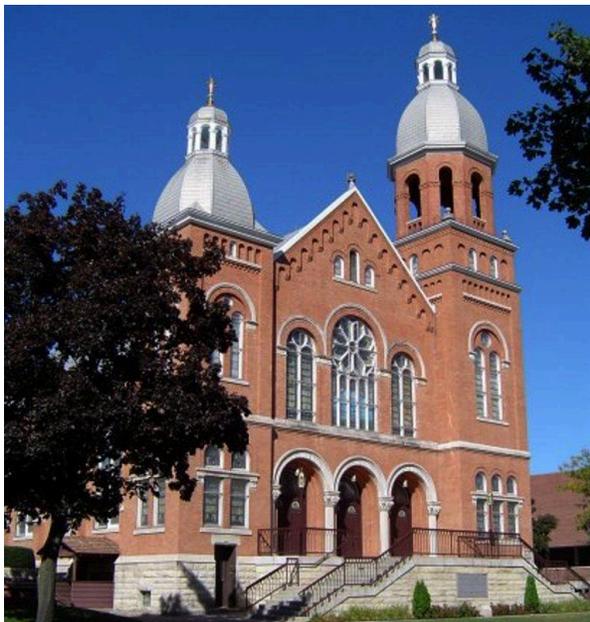
Emma (Klein) Gamm, 1865-1942

John seems to have been the only brother interested in staying with his father's crockery business. Fred worked for the store for a while but then got busy with the bank. In the 1960s his nephew Martin's daughter asked one of her aunts where she got her collection of beautiful dishes. "Oh, from the crockery store when it was going out of business in the Depression," she was told. The family was asked to buy as much of the inventory as they could in order to pay off creditors. Did John have the sad task of closing it down? The building is still there.

Marie Sophia Charlotte (Gamm) Toepel, 1855-1925
Rev. Friedrich William Adolph Toepel, 1846-1923

Marie married Adolph Toepel in 1875 when she was 20 and bore him 15 children. Adolph had been born in Neustadt, Saxony, and emigrated to West Bend in 1866. He sent for his mother in 1869, but she lived only a year in this country. Rev. Carl Gausewitz performed her funeral and encouraged the young man to study for the ministry. He did. Since the Wisconsin Synod had suspended seminary operations in 1870 and was sending its candidates to the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis for a while, that's where young Adolph went in 1871.

Since he was a little older than the other first-year students, they put him in the "practical department," which usually meant less brutal language study. He graduated in 1874 and was sent to Zion, Peshtigo, Wisconsin, where he organized preaching stations in Beaver Creek, Little River, Peshtigo River, Stiles, and Menominee, Michigan. From 1880-1887 he served parishes in Reedsville and Brillion, Wis., and then from 1887 to the year of his death in 1923 "Zum Kripplein Christi" Lutheran Church ("At Christ's Little Cradle"), a congregation in the country near Iron Ridge, Wis.



First Lutheran, La Crosse, Wis.



*Zum Kripplein Christi Lutheran Church,
Iron Ridge, Wis., above & below*



The Building Committee
Upper Row: August Miller, George Zeisler, Fred Dittman
Lower Row: Rev. J. Gamm, Fred Techmer, Adam Kroner

Rev. Julius Gamm is seated at left



Fred Gamm's house in Watertown on Clyman St.



Northwestern College's new gymnasium, built while Fred Gamm was on the board of trustees

Rev. Julius T. Gamm, 1871-1951
Barbara (Dressendoerfer) Gamm b. 1874 d. ?

Julius, August and Sophie's "baby," was enrolled at Northwestern College, but unlike his brothers he actually aimed for the pastoral ministry. He graduated from NWC in 1890 and went to Milwaukee to the restarted Wisconsin Synod Seminary on 13th & Vine. In his final year the campus moved to 60th & Lloyd in Wauwatosa and he graduated there in 1893. His first charge was the Lutheran Church in Waukegan, Ill., but at the tender age of 23 he was called back to Watertown to serve on the college faculty. To teach which subjects? Well, remember that he was a Gamm. He taught English and Business. He served till 1902.

He married Barbara Dressendoerfer in 1897. In 1902 he accepted the position of pastor of First Lutheran Church in La Crosse, a booming congregation in a booming river town. The congregation had outgrown its facilities and Julius threw himself into the planning of a large and stunning new sanctuary. He laid the cornerstone in 1904 and the splendid new \$60,000 edifice was dedicated in 1905. He retired in 1939 and headed for California. He was buried in San Jose in 1951.

August Johann Ludwig Heinrich Gamm, 1853-1930
Elizabeth (Mueller or Miller) Gamm, 1862-1943

Back to August's firstborn, whom I will call August J. to keep him separate from his illustrious father. As mentioned above, he was in the first group of boys enrolled in the new school in Watertown. He must have been a bright boy, because the young St. Mark's Lutheran School in Watertown called him to teach when he was only 17. He stayed three years, from 1870-73. Like his dad he then went to work for the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul (usually called the Milwaukee Road), first as a bill clerk, then operating the telegraph and one of those newfangled telephones. Working in La Crosse he met and married Elizabeth Miller in 1882 (or 1881?); she was from Barre Mills. The newlyweds decided to move to Milwaukee.

The 1888 Milwaukee City Directory lists him as a "clerk," working for the C, M, & St. P RR. They built a big duplex on 2nd St. just north of Meinecke Ave. (alas, the home was demolished years ago) which became "Gamm Central" in Milwaukee for many decades. It had a huge lot—100'x150' and after a later addition had 14 rooms. The dining room table could be expanded to 16 ft. They joined St. Marcus Lutheran Church, as did his younger brother Herman, who also moved to Milwaukee. He could play the piano. My great-grandfather August Pieper was his pastor for a decade, and my great-grandfather Reinhold Jeske and Walter Seeger built his immense five-car garage in 1916. For a while they had a chicken coop too. He worked for the Milwaukee Road for 57 years, retiring as chief clerk to the general superintendent of the Milwaukee Depot.

August J. and Elizabeth had eleven children:

- **Leonore**, 1882-1980.
- **Ella**, 1883-?
- **Emma**, 1884-1982
- **Elizabeth**, 1886-1988.
- **Magdalena**, 1887-?
- **Otto**, 1888-1978, married Elizabeth Dahlmann
- **Adolph**, 1888-1888
- **Dorothea**, 1891-1978
- **Martin**, 1893-1969, married Hilda Kellerman, then Emily Schaefer. Had four girls. St. Marcus church council secretary in 1917
- **Antonia**, 1902-1994 , married William "Billy" Mett
- **John J.**, dates unknown

Ella, Magdalena, and John's names are not given in later family lists. Infant mortality was horrific in those days—perhaps they did not survive childhood.

Fourth Generation: Otto Friedrich Gamm, 1888-1978
Elizabeth (Dahlmann) Gamm, 1887-1979

Otto was a twin, but his twin brother Adolph did not survive infancy. He enjoyed playing the violin and canoeing. He found work, as had so many Gamms, as a clerk for the Milwaukee Road. Otto served St. Marcus as its council secretary from 1918-1923. In 1920 he bought a knitting business on

Booth St. and operated it until the Depression in 1933. They lived upstairs. He then went back to work in the railroad shops, though he was able to keep the house. They transferred to Jerusalem Lutheran Church in 1965. Dangerous infections in both feet in later years necessitated a double amputation, and both Otto and Elizabeth moved to the Mequon Care Center in 1974. They had only one child, Richard.

The Gamm Girls

Only one of Otto's sisters got married—"Toni" married Billy Mett. The older four (surviving) daughters remained unmarried, and this became their platform for lives of extraordinary service. Around St. Marcus Church they were known as "The Gamm Girls." Elizabeth, called "Lily" by her family and "Betty" at St. Marcus, and Emma were lifelong church members. Lily worked for the railroad (no surprise) and the courthouse and held a variety of other office jobs.

Dorothea (she anglicized her name to Dorothy or sometimes Dora) was called to teach at St. Marcus School when she was only 20, and she stayed for her entire career. She began the kindergarten in 1911, and then brought her oldest sister Leonore ("Lollie") onto the faculty and turned the kindergarten over to her while she then worked in the primary grades. Their astonishingly long careers paralleled that of Pastor Ernst Dornfeld, who served as St. Marcus' senior pastor from 1911-1955. The sisters retired the next year, in 1956.

It was my privilege personally to visit and commune Leonore, Emma, and Elizabeth in their senior years when they needed assisted living at the Lutheran Home for the Aging and to preside over their funerals. I cherish their memories and appreciate their service.

Fifth Generation: Richard Martin Gamm, August 29, 1917-February 15, 2012
Lydia (Daubert) Gamm, August 24, 1923-March 3, 2015

Richard received the washing of Holy Baptism at St. Marcus on September 23, 1917, a day in which a German submarine sank a British destroyer in the English Channel, for which there were only 50 survivors. He was confirmed as a member on Palm Sunday, March 29, 1931, and graduated from St. Marcus Lutheran School later that spring. He took piano lessons from his aunt Lollie. He attended

St. Mark's 1888 church interior

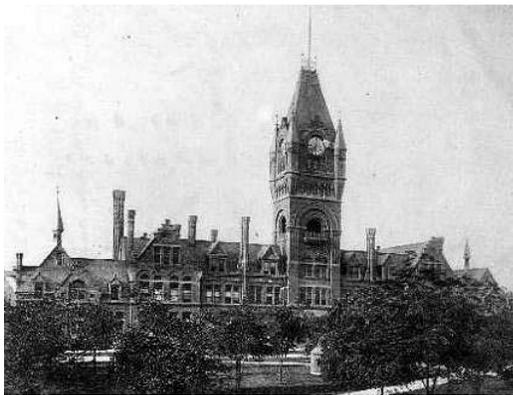




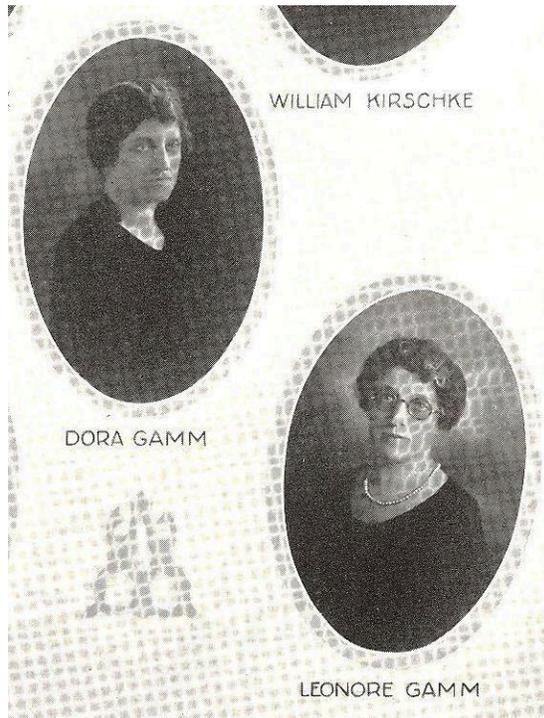
Leonore and Emma Gamm, 1959



St. Marcus, Milwaukee, 1881 frame church and 1894 brick school



Milwaukee Road Station



Leonore and Dorothea (Dora) on the St. Marcus

faculty in 1925

the Lutheran high school on 13th & Vine, graduating in 1935. He had two years of college education at the Wisconsin Commercial Academy. He then worked at the Hercules Powder Company, a DuPont spinoff with plants all over the country. Hercules was a major provider of gunpowder and explosives for the military. He decided to join St. Marcus officially as an adult in January of 1940.

With war looming Richard enlisted in the Army on October 16, 1941, at the age of 24, and received his basic training at Ft. Sheridan just north of Chicago, between Lake Forest and Highwood. Ft. Sheridan was an interesting place. Named for Union cavalry general Phil Sheridan, it was commissioned in 1886, partially to provide security for the city. Shaken city and state officials were still reeling from the Haymarket riots of 1877 and wanted armed troops nearby as a hedge against future labor unrest.

The “barracks” were designed by the noted Chicago architectural firm of Holabird & Roche. During WWII that base alone processed over 500,000 men and women for service. Though an enlisted man, Richard was a warrant officer, which meant that he had special skills or training, probably derived from his experience with explosives at Hercules.

He served in Europe with the 666th Field Artillery Battalion. The 666th (“Triple Sixes”) was a 155 mm howitzer unit that was sent across the Channel late in 1944 to support the Allies’ right flank in the Battle of the Bulge. They spent weeks in constant movement and under constant fire pushing the Nazis out of Belgium. Richard received the Bronze Star, which recognizes heroic or meritorious achievement or service in a combat zone. (Note: another source claimed he served with the 223rd Field Artillery, also using 155mm guns). He was honorably discharged on January 19, 1946, and went back to work at Hercules.

After the war Richard met a wonderful young woman at work named Lydia Daubert. They were married in 1947 at Zion Lutheran Church on 21st & North by Rev. Henry Tesch. Lydia had been born in Milwaukee to Jacob Daubert, a Russian-born German, and Gertha née Freiheit, a Polish-born German, and so Lydia was fluently bilingual in English and German from young on, as was Richard.

They lived in the upper flat at the Gamm family place on 2nd St. at first, then moved to Fox Point in 1957, Waverly Place on the east side in 1977, and then Shorewood. After retirement they would winter in Carefree, Arizona, and “summer” at the Village at Manor Park in West Allis. Richard and Lydia had no children. And although Richard dropped out of active church participation, complaining that he was turned off by the politicking, he continued to read his Bible and stayed a Christian believer.

In 1952 Richard and some friends founded the Milport Chemical Co., located at first on Oregon St. and later on Virginia St. He sold his interest in the 1990s, and from the proceeds set up the Richard and Lydia Gamm Living Trust. St. Marcus Lutheran Church is honored to be a beneficiary of that trust.

Richard and Lydia were intensely private people. They loved to travel, had a circle of close friends, and were very generous. Dick loved animals and would let his back yard grow wild to provide a



habitat for them. Lydia was a stylish dresser and into health food; she was making her own yogurt long before it was popular. In death they were as quiet as in life—Richard’s published obituary had



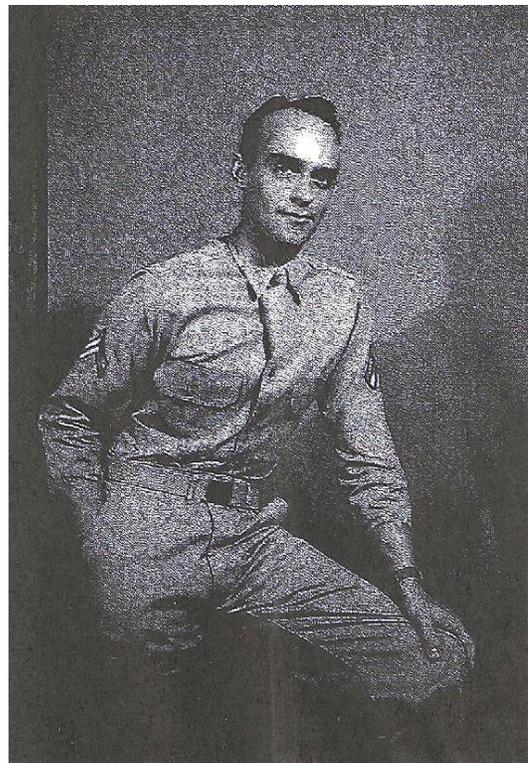
Richard Gamm in 1935



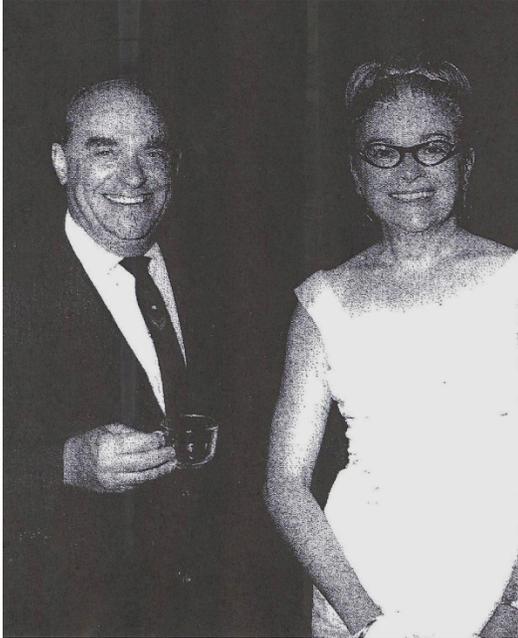
Elizabeth “Lily” Gamm on her 100th birthday



Fort Sheridan, Ill.



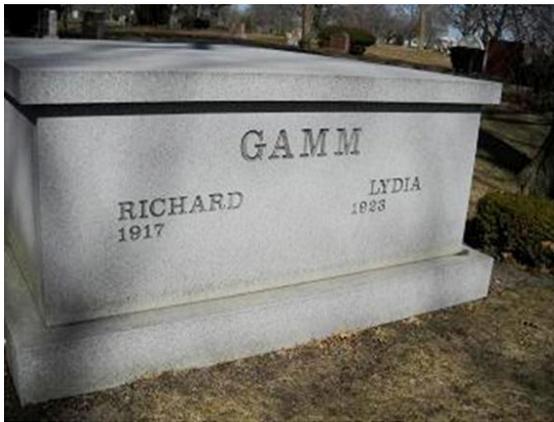
*Warrant officer Richard M. Gamm
Serial number 36226617*



Richard and Lydia Gamm in 1965

only two lines and Lydia had none at all. Blessed with the longevity of so many of the earlier Gamms, Richard passed away in 2012 at the age of 94 and Lydia in 2015 at the age of 91.

Thank you, Lord, for all the gifts brought by the Gamm family.



Forest Home Cemetery, Milwaukee



St. Mark's, Watertown (narthex a later addition)



Gamm Crockery building 2015



Gamm Crockery commemorative NWC plate



Gamm Drug building in 2015

