Chapter 3:

Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer

Follows His Father's Family to America

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In order to understand how Wilhelm Besemer made the decision to join his grandparents and other family in America, we need to tell a bit more about how his grandparents, uncles and aunts got situated so that they could assist his migration. We presume that, once August reached Michigan, he and the branch of the family already there began to make arrangements for the move of his parents, brothers, and sisters to America in 1893. They would take over a 40-acre farm, which would then remain in the family well into the second half of the next century.

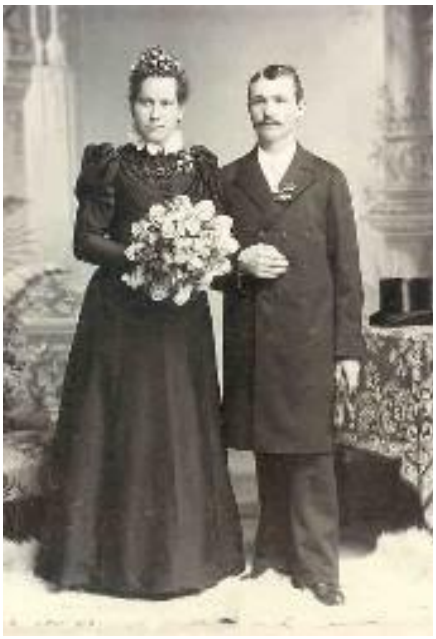
The Children of Johannes and Christiana Barbara Knöll Besemer

Wilhelm Friedrich, 1870-1927
Carl August, 1872-1934 (Bangor, MI)
+ Frederike, Dec. 1873-May, 1874
+ Anna Rosina, June, 1876, May, 1878
Louisa Frederike, 1875-1923 (Bangor, MI)
Johannes, 1877-1905 (North Dakota)
+ Sophie Phillibine, May-June, 1879
+ Carl Christian, June-August, 1880
Maria Barbara, 1882-1965 (Benton Harbor, MI)
Christiana Barbara, 1885-1972 (Coloma, MI)
Christian Friedrich, 1888-1971 (Coloma, MI)
+ Ernst, February-May, 1889

All born and died in Kirkheim unter Teck, Würtemburg, Germany, unless otherwise indicated.

"+" Died in infancy

Johannes and Barbara left behind not much other than sad memories and the graves of five children who had died in infancy. There was an exception, however. They also left behind in good health their oldest son, 23 year old Wilhelm Friedrich, whom they would never see again.



It is told that Wilhelm stayed to be with his betrothed, Emilie Schaup, whom he would marry a couple of years later. (Pictured at left) Wilhelm and Emilie would have two children, Wilhelm Friedrich, and Emma. Emma stayed in Kirchheim, never married, experienced the deprivations of both world wars, and died alone in 1992. But in 1922, twenty-nine years after the family of Johannes and Barbara arrived in Michigan, nearly seventy years after the emigration of his Grand Uncle Georg, and after serving in the Kaiser's army, Wilhelm finished his apprenticeship as a tool and die maker. Thus prepared, he moved from Kirchheim to Michigan.

His trip and settlement were aided by one of his German aunts and her husband in Michigan. After the spring and summer with the German family on their fruit farm, in the fall of 1922, Wilhelm relocated

to South Bend, Indiana where he worked his trade for the following forty-five years. His ties to the uncles, aunts and cousins in Michigan, less than an hour's drive away, would remain with him throughout his life.

This is the story of these two migrations. We shall outline the story of these people as best we can from memory of family experiences and some scant written evidence a century later. The story will be assisted by pictures found in family collections. We shall try to distinguish facts, at least as recalled from family lore, from speculation.

The 1890s Migration

Georg was twenty-one and Christian twenty-two at the time of each of their migrations to America. Both were single. The lost sister, Anna Maria, had been 17. In contrast, Johannes and Barbara were forty-nine when they came to Michigan. They had been married twenty three years. In the first eighteen they had lost five babies.

Early death had been a common part of the lives of these immigrant ancestors. Johannes never remembered his father or mother.[1] One son, Johannes apparently came separately and would die at twenty-eight in North Dakota.[2] While their surviving children generally prospered in America, and most lived to ripe old ages, the family had to share in the crucible of World War I. Barbara and Johannes had grandchildren on opposite sides. Wilhelm (Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer), son of the oldest of Barbara and Johannes's children – the one who stayed behind -- fought in the Kaiser's army. He would later be sponsored by his Tante Marie and Onkle Albert[3] and welcomed to Michigan in the spring of 1922.

Let us return to the story of Barbara and Johannes Besemer. Only highlights are known to us of Barbara and Johannes' family in the years between arriving in Berrien County, Michigan in 1893 and the time of Wilhelm's arrival twenty-nine years later. But the highlights themselves are interesting.[4]

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[1] As was noted in Chapter 1, Johannes and Christian Friedrich (who migrated in 1864) were the sons of Christian Johannes and his second wife, Christina Rosina, who died when Johannes was 1 1/2 years old. His father died when he was 3, leaving also, in addition to him and Christian Friedrich, half-brother Georg and half-sister Anna Maria -- twin to Johann Ludwig, who died in infancy, from CJ's first wife, Anna Maria. There may have also been another half-brother, Carl Friedrich. Perhaps Anna Margarete, the third wife, who was widowed one month after marrying CJ raised the children from his former marriages after she returned to her family home in Birenbach.

We know nothing of Christiana Barbara Knöll's ancesters, other than the names of her parents: Johann Georg Knöll and Anna Margarethe Bunz.

[2]The retrievable Ellis Island files indicate the arrival together of Johannes (Sr.); Barbara; daughters Louise, Marie Barbara, and Christina Barbara, and son Christian Friedrich. There is no record one way or the other for the son Johannes, but such omissions are common in the remaining immigration records

[3]Within the family, aunts were refered to as Tante and uncles as Onkle.

Our Grandfather Wilhelm stayed behind, and one cannot help but speculate what impact it must have had upon him to bid farewell to his departing family. He did have his training as a file maker, so his employment enabled him to support himself and the family he began with Emilie Schaup three years later. He never again saw his parents, brothers, or sisters. He and Emilie twenty-nine years later said goodbye to their only son, who followed his grandparents to America.

It would be interesting to speculate on the correspondence that must have been sent by Onkle August (Carl August), the young family scout, as it were. If he came over in 1891, he would have been nineteen. He came, no doubt, at the urging of his Michigan uncles, Georg and Christian. August's word and judgment were probably very important in the later decision by his middle aged parents to gather up sons and daughters to join the earlier immigrants to Michigan. Johannes and Barbara had very limited means, so we assume that some arrangement of loans or gifts from the Michigan farming brothers played a key part in their decision and travel plans. Except for the ship and their arrival in Ellis Island how they traveled is unknown to us. We may assume that they took a train from Kirchheim, east of Stuttgart, to the Baltic port of Bremerhaven, from whence they sailed steerage class on the German flag ship Weimar[5] to New York. They carried just three pieces of luggage. From New York, they surely came by train to Michigan.

In tow with Barbara and Johannes were: Louise Friedricke, 17; Maria (Tante Marie) Barbara, 9; Christiana (Tante Nane) Barbara, 8; and Christian (Onkle Christ) Friedrick, 5. In the years to come, the girls husbands seem to have done somewhat better than their brothers and their families. The boys farmed, and the girls married farmers. They raised fruit and children.

As we learned from the previous chapter, Onkle August, the family pathfinder, lived until 1934, married twice and sired seventeen children, six by his first wife Laura Wilson, and eleven by the second, Maria Thompson. Like his brothers and sisters, he spent his days on a Michigan fruit farm.

Louisa, the oldest immigrating daughter (whose occupation on the Ellis Island ship manifest is listed as "servant"), does not seem to figure as large in family lore of

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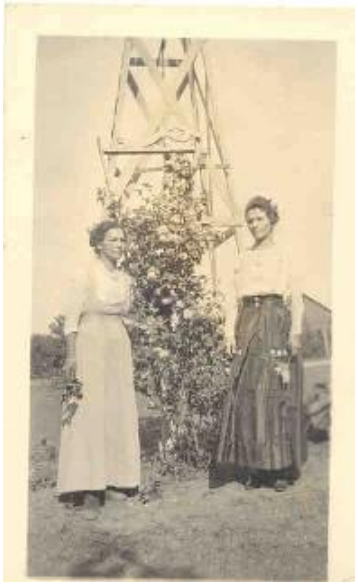
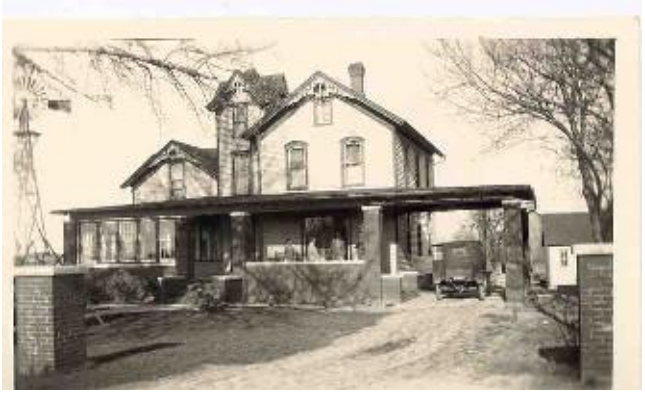
[4] The full list of descendants, with birth, death, and marriage dates is included as Appendix I at the back of this volume.

[5] "Built for North German Lloyd, German flag, in 1891 and named Weimar, Bremerhaven-New York service. Sold to Lloyd del Pacifico, Italian flag, in 1908 and renamed Santiago. Sold to Chilean owners, in 1909 and renamed Armonia, Genoa to New York service. Torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine in the Mediterranean on February 15, 1918." Noted under Ellis Island web entry for Johann Besemer, http://www.ellisisland.org. The ship manifest, accessible from that source, lists the occupations, accommodations, pieces of luggage, port of embarkation (Bremen), and U.S. state of destination of the passengers. They departed Bremerhaven on August 9, 1893 and arrived in New York City on the 23rd.

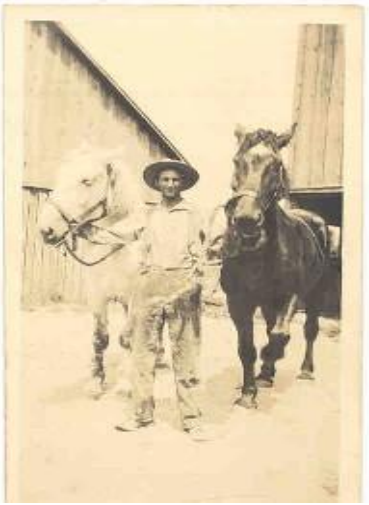
Maria and Christiana



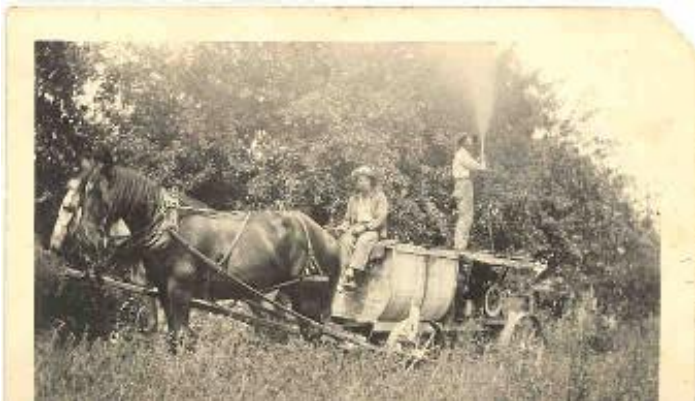
Home of Albert and Maria Besemer Arent



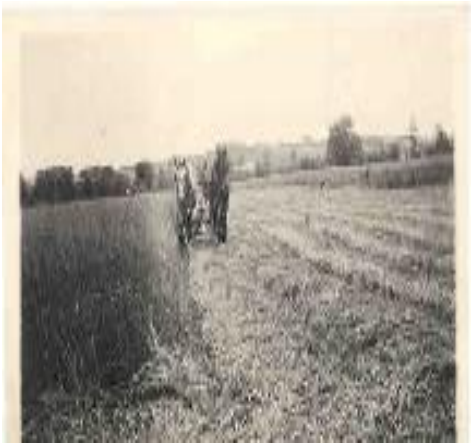
Albert Arent and Team of Workhorses



Wilhelm Besemer and Albert Arent Spraying Orchard



Albert and Team Haying



our generation as do her brothers and sisters. She married Paul Walmer, with whom she had four children between 1900 and 1911. Unfortunately, Tante Louisa died in 1923, at age 51, and was not familiar to our generation, in contrast to most of her sisters and brothers.[6]

Great-grandfather Johannes died in 1920, at age 74. Barbara lived to bury seven of her twelve children, before herself dying in 1934 at 91.

The two sisters, Maria and Christiana ("Nane") married two brothers: Albert and Irving Arent. The girls were beautiful and must have swept the Arent boys off their feet. Onkle Albert and Tante Marie had three children (Charles, Florence, and Ruth). The brothers and their families worked hard and effectively, though their conditions would seem primitive by contemporary farming practices. As attested by the pictures on the previous page, Albert kept his animals in fine form. Although somewhat patrician, he was a genuine yeoman farmer, never shirking a hard days work. The fertility of Michigan's soil, as with the rest of the Midwest, was a source of continuing amazement to the new arrivals.

Although an in-law from the Besemer viewpoint, Onkle Albert was, in many respects, a sort of family patriarch in later years. He was unquestionably the most prosperous of the family, as may be seen in the home that he and Tante Marie bought and remodeled extensively on their farm outside Coloma [above, top right].

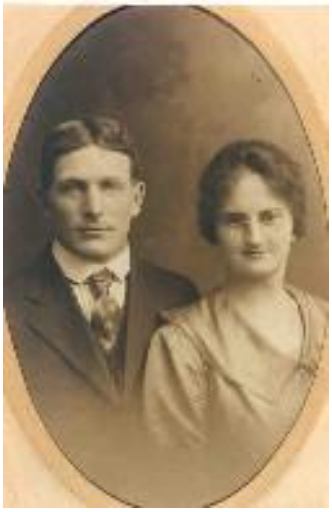
Albert's and Marie's generosity and dedication to the family was demonstrated by the fact that they sponsored young Wilhelm from Germany in 1922, and it was with them that he lived that transitional summer. His later recollections were of complete joy at his new surroundings. He came to know and love a newly-met extended family, having had no close Besemer relatives at home beyond his parents and little sister, Emma. Never had he had the opportunity to see, let alone eat, so much fresh fruit. Not to put too sharp a point on it, but his years prior to coming to America had seen more famine than feast. The condition of post-World War I Europe is a tale often told and never without a sense of tragedy, but the Arents provided the wherewithal for Wilhelm to start his new life in America.

Wilhelm never forgot the generosity of his Onkle Albert and Tante Marie. He was proud of how they included him in their hearts and homes. He did work hard on the farm that summer, but we doubt that he was at all disturbed by the rigors of farm life. The habits he acquired in the summer of 1922, working with his uncles, and especially with Onkle Albert [see picture of Wilhelm and Albert spraying fruit trees, above] were to be a major part of his life. Well into his 80s Wilhelm raised fine fruits and vegetables on his four acre plot of ground in Granger, Indiana that he bought in the 1930s.

[6] Recently, however, her great grandson, Dennis Hessey, of South Haven, Michigan, has supplied us with considerable information on this branch of the family. See Appendix I.

Yet, as the years passed, Albert and Marie's life together became a sad story. Some time in the 1930s she began, around age fifty, to show signs of mental imbalance, which often led her to such strange behaviors as wandering the fields in her nightgown. She had begun a gradual disconnection from reality that would last in varying degrees until her death in 1965. This deterioration of his lovely, vivacious bride must have been devastating for Albert and is generally credited as the motivation for his taking his own life in 1937, shortly before his 65th birthday. The death of his beloved Onkle Albert was to weigh on Wilhelm's soul for the balance of his days.

Johannes and Barbara's youngest, Onkle Christ (rhymes with "wrist" - Christian Friedrich) was to live the longest and was, from the standpoint of our generation, the most well-known in the family. He married Selma Knopf in 1921. [They are pictured here, at the time of their wedding.] Having no children, they lived with his parents and took care of them on the 40 acre fruit farm. After the parents died, Christ and Selma continued to live on the farm for the rest of their own lives. Onkle Christ was the last survivor of the original Besemer immigrants. He died in 1972 at the ripe old age of 83. Selma followed him in 1974. James and Rosemarie Besemer (Christ's grand nephew and niece) always considered a visit with Christ and Selma to be a special treat.[7]



There are scores of Arent descendants, most of whom trace their roots to Irving and Christiana Arent, brother and sister of Onkle Albert and Tante Marie. Irving and Nane produced nine children (Francis James, Isadora Hazel (Saurbier), Harvey Leroy, Lester Harold, Raymond Charles, Helen Bertha (Kreitner), Bertrand Besemer, Nelson, and Alice Nelda (Mixter). As with their parents, those who have died are buried in Berrien County, Michigan (most in the Coloma Cemetry).[8]

There remain a few pictures of the extended family from those days in the early 20s. The one on the next page was taken in the spring of 1923 at Tante Louise's farm. She numbered each person in the picture and provided an index on the back. Onkle Albert (Albert Arent) is seated as a patriarch in the front. Behind his left shoulder is Paul Walmer, Tante Louise's husband. Tante Marie is third from the left, with Tante Louise to her left. Partially hidden behind Louise is Edward Hessey, Louise's son-in-law (daughter Evaline's husband). To his left is Evaline, and in front of her and a bit to her left is Grandmother Barbara. The handsome blond gentleman to Grandmother's

[7] When Jim Besemer and Betty Stewart, who would be his first wife and mother of his three children, were courting they found walks through Onkle Christ's orchards and along his creek provided a fine opportunity for such intimacy as was considered proper at the time. A few years later, the same retreat would be employed to similar purpose by Rosemarie and her future husband Richard Hofferbert

[8] The Arent branch is extensively documented in Charles Christian Arent Family of Berrien County, Michigan, compiled by Fame Arent, 1592 Agnes Glen Circle, DeWitt, MI 48820

left, in the back, is Clarence Walmer, Louise's son. Slightly in front and to his left is Selma, Christ's wife. To her left is Lillian (Whiteman) Walmer, Clarence's wife. Selma's mother stands to Lillian Walmer's left. A frequent guest at family gatherings was Selma's sister Edith, third from the right. Between her and her mother is Elsie Walmer, Louise's third child. Louise's youngest, Harold Walmer, is second from the right. And proudly anchoring the picture to the right is the newly arrived Wilhelm Besemer, twenty-five and full of hope for a future that would, by and large, justify his dreams.

Back in Germany

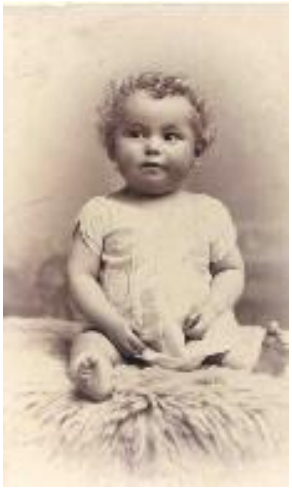
How hard was the decision, in 1893, for Wilhelm (the elder) to stay in Kirchheim when the rest of his family left for America? So many people were emigrating. So many stories must have been told in Germany about the Land des unbegrenzte Möglichkeit – the land of unbounded opportunity. But that opportunity came at high risk – the risk of many unknown elements. When one's rather large family is leaving, however, there are also risks of staying behind. The risk of loneliness was one, although there would certainly be compensations in the small town where Wilhelm grew up. He had the solace of his sweetheart, Emilie. Decades later, they left a modest house to their son (by then in America) and daughter. We can speculate that Wilhelm purchased that house from his own earnings.[9] It is probable that his parents liquidated all of their assets to sponsor the move to America in 1893. Whatever Wilhelm, the son who stayed behind, was to acquire, he probably acquired by the sweat of his own brow.

[9] The house was located in Kirchheim unter Teck where currently stands the fine little Hotel zum Fuchs. The hotel's builder bought the family property in the 1960s for a sufficient sum to enable Emma and Bill to buy the house at Lindenstrasse 10, where Emma spent the balance of her days. Upon her death in 1992, that house was sold to a physician, who modernized it and, at last report, was living there with his family.

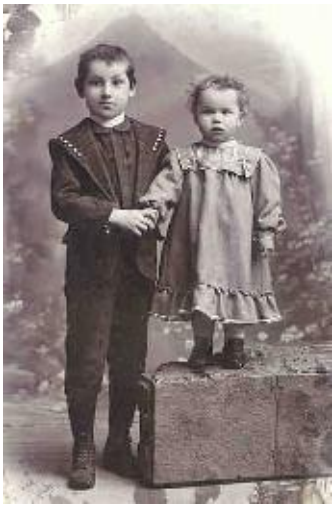
Sweat he indeed did. File-making was a strenuous, unhealthy occupation. At the young age of 57, Wilhelm was to die of a lung disorder, almost certainly brought on by years of inhaling iron filings. He had made the most of his circumstances during his life.

He did marry Emilie Schaup. On page 38, they are pictured on their wedding day, June 5, 1896. She was a local girl. She outlived Wilhelm by a few years. We are challenged by Grandmother Emilie, in terms of writing family history, for we know very little of her background or life, other than as wife of Wilhelm and mother of Wilhelm (Later "Bill") and Emma.

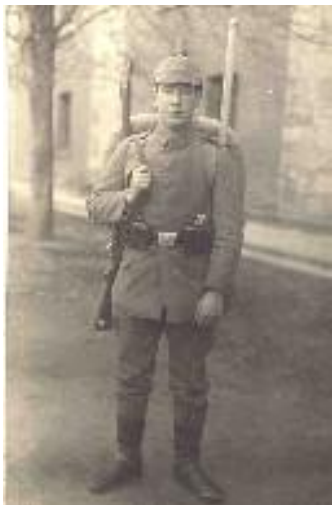
What little we do know suggests that their life was not easy. They seem to have been sufficiently proud of their little family, however, to record them in expensive photographs at several points in their lives. An early picture of little Emma is seen here, below left.



One might speculate that the absence of the father's family perhaps drew Wilhelm and Emilie close to their children. Here they are pictured [right] with little Wilhelm when he was about four. A bit later, his picture [below left] was taken with his little sister, Emma, whom Wilhelm loved greatly and would attempt to protect throughout his life. To be sure, that was difficult from across the sea, but the correspondence was regular (except during the terrible interruption caused by World War II). Wilhelm (the younger) provided financial relief in emergencies, although he kept close control over his own budget all his life.

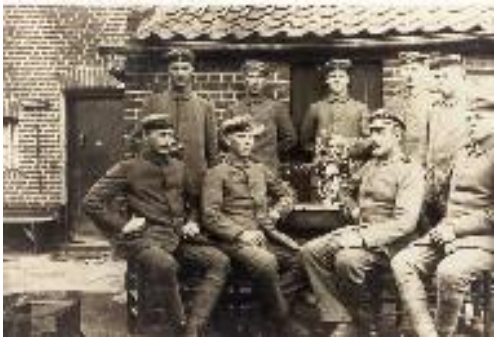


We do not know a great deal about Wilhelm's and Emma's childhood. The family lived without any luxuries, and often had to struggle for the basics. Both Wilhelm and Emma suffered from a chronic rough, prickly skin irritation, which affected their arms and legs. This did not improve Emma's opportunities, especially in the romance department, and it well may have reinforced her shyness and somewhat other-worldly piety. In any event, she never married. Such, of course, was the fate of many young women of her generation, given the loss of young male population during the war.



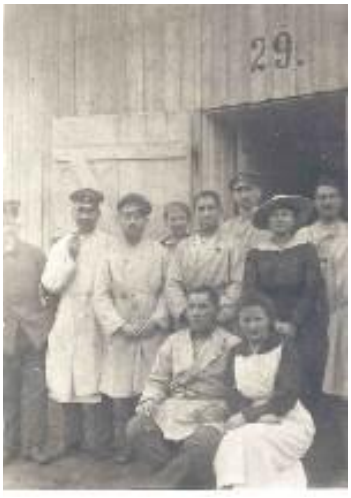
Uncharacteristically for a son of a modest craftsman, Wilhelm was able to attend the Kirchheim Gymnasium, obtaining the foundation of an advanced education. His gymnasium education stayed with him in the form of a dedication to reading and a curiosity about the world. The Abitur, or Gymnasium graduation examination, might have provided the impetus for a university education, were it not for the intervention of what later came to be called World War I. Wilhelm finished Gymnasium in 1916, entering the Kaiser's army with the rank of Pioneer shortly thereafter.

From his own wartime experiences, Pioneer Besemer, were he of a literary bent, could have written All Quiet on the Western Front as well as Erich Maria Remarque. Above, left, he is pictured after basic training, ready to depart for the field in November, 1916. He would spend most of the next two years in the trenches in Belgium and France. It was a time of unspeakable horror. Somehow, he survived.



War has been described as extended periods of absolute boredom, punctuated at rare intervals by sheer terror. One of those periods of boredom was used by Pioneer Besemer and colleagues in his unit to have their picture taken, as seen here [right, Wilhelm second from left, top row.].

Death and destruction were a constant presence on the battlefronts of World War I, whether in Flanders fields (where poppies grow, 'neath the crosses, row by row) or in the trenches of France. The battle of the Somme, which young Besemer missed by a few weeks, set the stage for his own entry into the war. The first three days of that battle, in July, 1916, were the bloodiest three days in the history of warfare. The battle produced 500,000 German casualties, 417,000 British, and 200,000 French.

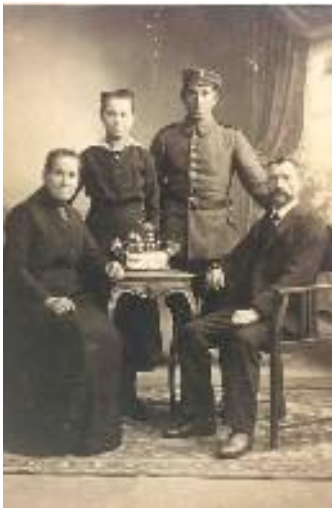


Pioneer Besemer did, to the best of our recollection, fight in the third battle of Ypres (Flanders – Belgium) at the end of July, 1917. Each side suffered a quarter of a million casualties.

The German army was the first to use poison gas (mustard gas, in most cases) in the battlefield. It is a bitter irony that, in the spring of 1918, Pioneer Besemer would be caught by a shift in wind carrying mustard gas from German cylinders lobbed from behind and over him and his comrades. He had no warning. Fortunately, in the nick of time, a buddy carried Wilhelm to treatment. He spent

several weeks in the hospital while his painful lungs slowly recovered. Wilhelm Besemer, however, was not one to wallow in maudlin self-doubt or to pity himself. He got innocent fun where it could be had, as seen in the picture on the previous page of him with the nurses in Barracks 29 of the field hospital where he was treated for the gassing. On the back of the picture, is written: "To my dear genuine Schwab, love ever, Betty." Then, as now, Swabians were the common target of easy joshing for their peculiar dialect and generally cheerful demeanor. That humor probably carried Wilhelm through this wretched experience, and was likely infectious for those around him.[10]

A minor benefit of the gassing was that, after leaving the hospital, in the summer of 1918, Wilhelm received a few weeks furlough for convalescence . He is pictured here [below, left] with his parents and sister Emma during that time. He was, however, returned to the front before the armistice the next November. He was seriously but not grievously wounded by shrapnel, returning once again to a field hospital.



He carried home a second picture of nurses from that experience. On the back of the picture, one wrote: Zur ewigen Erinnerung an Ihr "kleines" [Unclear but appears to be] Pfifferlinge, Babbete Ehrlichen – "In memory forever of your little mushroom. Babbette Ehrlichen." Wartime nurses then as now tried so very hard innocently to ease the horrors that brought the men under their care.

Wilhelm's lungs recovered very slowly, with some effect still felt long after he left the army. The shrapnel wounds healed more quickly. He was still hospitalized when the armistice took effect at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918.

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[10] Some of his "war stories" which he would tell years later carried along both the humor and the horror of the war. One story regards a keg of wine that he and colleagues either found or confiscated, which they precariously brought in a baby buggy back to the trenches. When lifting it down, however, it fell and broke. Wilhelm loved to describe his colleagues lapping up the spilled wine.

Another concerns a French inn-keeper whose facilities were occupied by members of Wilhelm's company. He haughtily refused their entreaties for a bucket of coal to warm their cold room. They responded by gift-wrapping a package of their own excrement and leaving it for the inn-keeper. As they marched from town, he stood beside the road with the still wrapped package and waved smilingly at them, gesturing his gratitude for the as-yet-unidentified memento.

Yet another tale has been told in varying forms by many veterans of World War I, and probably occurred at many points along the trenches. It was Christmas eve, 1917. One side or the other began singing Christmas carols. The other side, perhaps a hundred yards away, joined in. A young soldier came out of Wilhelm's trench and stood to direct the singing / cease-fire. Wilhelm told the story often, but only in his years later did he tell us that, when the singing ended, the conductor was shot.

Wilhelm also told of a mule and his driver who served as their supply system. Late in the war, there was no food. It was proposed that the mule be butchered and eaten. The driver tearfully refused to allow it. He was later shot and killed by the enemy. The mule then became dinner.

Some weeks after the armistice, he left the hospital and walked back to his unit. The battles were over. The Germans had lost the war, but the army had to be officially disbanded. It was a tedious process. Meanwhile, however, Germany was overrun by a short-lived socialist revolution. The Kaiser had abdicated and departed for his sad rural residence in the south of the Netherlands. When Wilhelm Besemer reached his former camp, a red flag was flying where the imperial eagle had formerly waved. His company sergeant was standing before a boisterous crowd of soldiers caught in the throes of the socialist revolution and probably irritated by the bureaucratic delays in their official discharges. They were taunting the sergeant, who was trying to recruit a clean-up crew to tidy the camp grounds. The sergeant was in tears. Wilhelm was mortified at the humiliation of a man whose battlefield bravery he had witnessed many times. Wilhelm simply turned and walked the long trip home to Kirchheim.

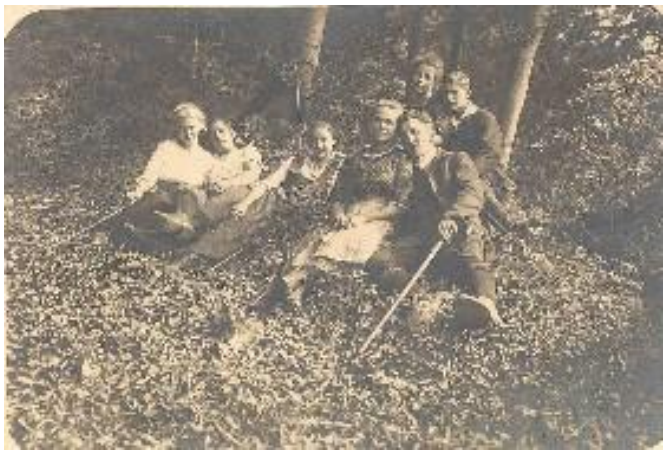
Thus did young Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer muster out of the Kaiser's army.

Surely that was the low point of Wilhelm's life. Young Germans could honorably mourn their lost cause. World War I was not tainted with anything near the shame of World War II, with the hideous shadow Nazism would cast across the German landscape and psyche. The first war was exponentially more bloody and tragic than any before it, but in principle it was not out of line with the generations old pattern of European balance-of-power politics. War was, as Clauswitz described it: "merely the continuation of politics by other means." It was not dishonorable to have served in the Kaiser's army. However, the consequences were nonetheless tragic for all involved.

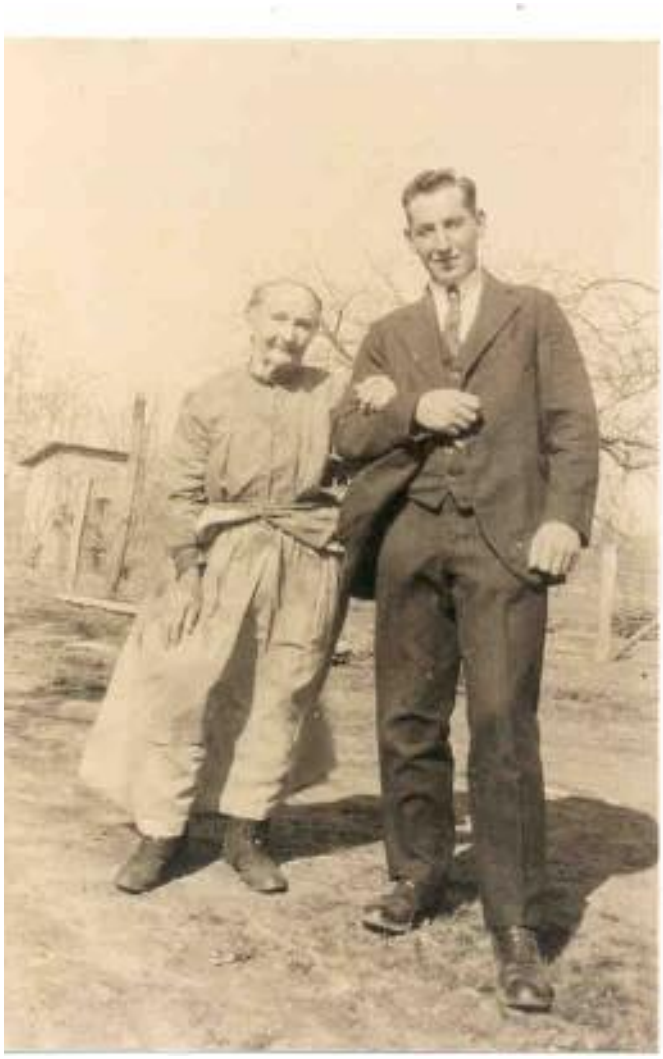
If there was ever a university option for Wilhelm, it did not survive the war. The country was bankrupt. The family was living on the edge of survival. Soon after he returned home, he entered an apprenticeship to become a tool and die maker. It would be hard work, but it ensured him a lifetime of solid, respectable employment.

Not all of Wilhelm Besemer's time in the immediate post-war years, however, was spent in work. To be sure, life in those years was hard. Food was far from plentiful; the early wave of hyperinflation was passing over the country. Anyone who ever knew Wilhelm Besemer knows that he had a sense of humor and a love of life that allowed him to make the very best of any situation. He always had a group of lively and fun-loving friends, even into his old age. That spirit is evident in the pleasant times he spent hiking with friends in the hills around his home town, and especially climbing to the Teck Schloss after which Kirchheim unter Teck is named. Here we see him with an especially lovely blond friend [right], who did, from time to time, briefly come up in conversations in later years. They and their other friends would sing as they hiked. Wilhelm was

fond of that special genre of German folk songs, the Wanderliede – or hiking songs. Here we see the group of them enjoying a fine day in the woods.



As soon as he finished his apprenticeship, he caught the boat for America to join the previous generations of Besemers in far-away Michigan. There, in the spring of 1922, Wilhelm met for the first time, his grandmother, Barbara Besemer, and her still large and growing family.



Christiana Barbara (Knöll) Besemer, 1843 to 1934
and
Wilhelm Friedrich (later William Frederick) Besemer, 1897 to 1983

March 1922