

Chapter 2:

Carl August Besemer

1872 to 1934

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By the late 19th Century, Germany was the largest single source of immigrants in the United States. As we noted earlier, several factors drove that exodus. In the middle 1800s, a combination of religious persecution, revolutions and their aftermaths, and economic hardship were major factors. By the latter decades of the century, to these motivations must be added the draw of a network of relatives and former neighbors who had successfully settled in various parts of the U.S.



Christina Barbara Knöll Besemer, born in Württemberg (Germany), 1843; died in Coloma, Michigan, 1934. Johannes Besemer, born in Berkheim, Württemberg (Germany), 1844; died in Coloma, Michigan, 1920. Picture from about 1915

In 1891 or 92, 19 year-old Carl August Besemer, the second son of Johannes and Barbara, had made his way to Michigan. With the exception of his Aunt Anna Maria, who seems to have disappeared in New York City upon arrival in 1854, the earlier Besemer immigrants had established themselves as successful farmers in southern Michigan. *August*, as he preferred to be called, would provide a solid link to the parents and their other children who would arrive in August of 1893.

He was born in Denkendorf, Germany (near Kirchheim) in 1872. In 1891, he joined the crew of a westward-bound ship. After docking in Canada, he departed the ship. Whether he signed for a one-way job or whether he jumped ship, we do not know. We also do not know where he landed in Canada nor what route he took from there to the relatives in southern Michigan. We suspect, however, that he traveled across Canada to northern Michigan, observing along the way the lumber industry activity before proceeding southward. Our reason for this suspicion is that several years later, he

and his new bride Laura Wilson, would relocate northward from the homesteads of their parents to the logging camps in the Kingsley, Michigan area.

In 1893 the bulk of the family arrived via the newly opened immigration center at Ellis Island. They then joined their son August seven hundred miles westward, eventually settling on a farm northwest of the Coloma area, on Bundy Road in Hager Township.



Laura Wilson Besemer, born in Michigan, 1875; died in Berrien County, Michigan, 1909. Carl August Besemer, born in Denkendorf, Württemberg (Germany), 1872; died in Bangor, Michigan, 1934. Picture about 1898

No one in the family recalls August's talking of his first seven years in America, so much must be left to conjecture. We know he departed Germany about 1891. He must have joined and been assisted by the family that had preceded him to southern Michigan. We know his parents, brothers and sisters arrived in 1893. And we know that he met the John Wilson family in Bangor Township and fell in love with their beautiful daughter, Laura. In 1898, August and Laura were married in Benton Harbor.¹

Carl August Besemer (with pipe) and co-workers in a northern Michigan logging site.



For a time they resided in the Berrien County area. In March of 1899, Laura gave birth to their first child, Helen. Alas, the baby died within a month of her birth.

She is buried in a plot in the Harris Cemetery near Riverside.

¹ The wedding was in Benton Harbor, Michigan on January 4, 1898, witnessed by Cora Kimball and Fred Blenken.

We presume that August had bought a burial plot prior to becoming a lumberman a hundred and fifty miles northward. Ultimately, August and part of his family would all be buried in that same cemetery.

From Berrien County, they moved to Summit City, Michigan, near Kingsley and south of today's popular tourist destination, Traverse City. They rented a cabin on Baxter Bridge Road in Summit City. August obtained employment as a lumberman. Trees were cut year round, but in winter, they were stored in stacks above the bank of the Manistee River, two hundred feet below. Once the river thawed, the logs were allowed to roll down the *high bank rollaway*, as it was called, in order to float to the mills located further along the river westward toward Lake Michigan.²

Ralph, Mabel, and Roy Besemer
About 1908

In the early years of the 20th century, Laura would present August with three more children – Ralph, Mabel, and Roy, pictured here. All would live to produce families of their own.



While clearly not by any means affluent, even by the standards of the time, the family seems to have done fairly well until June, 1909, when tragedy struck. Laura delivered twin boys, Elmer and Ellsworth, and then died shortly after childbirth. Upon learning of his wife's death, August assumed it was due to the incompetence of the attending doctor. He seized his gun and declared that he was going to kill the doctor. Fortunately, neighbors and friends restrained him. The tragedy continued in the days to come, however. Elmer died when only three months old, and Ellsworth followed him from this earth when he was a bit over two, in November 1911. August successfully sued the physician, L.J. Peterson M.D., for malpractice and with the money thus obtained purchased a farm in Bangor Township. We suspect that he also used a portion of the money to purchase the grave monument for Laura and the twins. (Next page)

² See Appendix 2.1 for documents from August's later life, as well as pictures of contemporary family members. There, also, are pictures of the *high bank rollaway*.



All of the Besemers had been farmers in Germany, but August, unlike his father, uncles, and brothers, for a time would take up a different trade – logging. However, at some point after Laura’s death, he returned to farming. His economic circumstances never rose above the meager, which could have been the result of family size. However, they survived.

Clearly, a widower with several small children and a farm to run needed help. So, some time shortly after Laura’s death, August hired a fellow German immigrant as housekeeper. Marie Thomsen Arnold was herself a widow of only a few months and brought to the home her small son, Walter. We can try, but without success, to read the minds of these poor people, nearly a century ago. Surely they were desperate, each in their own way. A few months after her employment, Marie and August were married. Her son assumed the Besemer name, although he was never officially adopted. He

was reputed to be a bit of a trouble maker, but it could not have been caused by loneliness.



Marie Thompson Arnold Besemer, born in Flinsberg, Germany, 1884; died, Van Buren County, Michigan, 1952. Carl August Besemer.

Between 1914 and 1928, August and Marie produced an additional eleven children. A son, Ernest, was stillborn in 1922. All the rest survived to adulthood. In all, August would sire 17 children. He and Marie became naturalized American citizens in 1915. On the next page, from about 1921, are pictured the parents and a portion of the progeny.

Standing: Roy, Carl August, Ralph, Marie, baby Christian, and Walter.
Seated: Esther, Dorothy, August Carl, Louise, and Marie.



Farming was difficult and tiresome work, and the family was not well off. August's

eldest son, Roy (by Laura), made no secret of his dislike for farming – and probably for his stepmother and the expanding brood. He left when he was 18 years old. The oldest surviving daughter, Mabel, got married a year later.

Another picture of a somewhat different collection of children, from about 1924, is presented here.



Left to right, back row: August, Marie, daughter Marie, and Ralph; front, Christian, August, and Dorothy.

When August died, probably of heart failure, in 1934, there were still 10 children at home, ranging in age from 4 to 17 years. This was the beginning of even more difficult times for Marie. She is recalled as being a stout disciplinarian

with a rough personality; however, she deserves much credit for raising her children on her own.

It is not widely known within the family, but in the 1930s, Martha Besemer (herself an immigrant and wife to Wilhelm Friedrich) offered to adopt Marie and August's daughter, Rosella. August's sister, Christine ("Tante Nane") Arent volunteered to raise two more of the girls. But Marie would have none of that.



Martha Schehrer Besemer (Mrs. Wilhelm Besemer) with Carl August's daughters Marie, Dorothy, Esther, and son August Carl in front of the West Brick School, about 1929.

Marie was obliged to sell the farm after two years. She and the children became tenant farmers, barely eking out an existence, but united as a family.

Daughter Marie says that the older children could not eat any of the scarce bread until lunches were prepared for the kids still in school. She further tells of a time when she and Augie (brother August Carl) found a dime. They bought a loaf of bread, which they ate themselves.

Regardless of her perhaps coarser traits, one cannot help but hold the mother, Marie, in great respect. She was a devoted parent through terribly difficult circumstances. It is said that when Robert, her youngest, was killed in the Korean War, she lost much of her interest in life. She is pictured here (left) receiving the posthumous citation and Silver Star earned by Robert for valor in combat during that conflict.



She was not beautiful, as was August's first wife Laura. And, perhaps, she never prevailed over the memory of Laura in August's heart. But she lived her life with courage and determination.

At the time of this writing, all of August's sons have passed away, and only daughters remain with us: Esther, Helena and Rosella. Through the course of preparing this family history, they have been very kind and helpful.³

³ [WJB notes:] Through the course of preparing this family history, I have met many "lost" relatives. They have all treated me kindly, without exception, and I will continue to visit and embrace them as long as the Lord gives me life.

Appendix 2.1
Special Documents & Contemporary Pictures
Concerning the Life and Legacy of Carl August Besemer



Carl August Besemer's Confirmation Certificate



Carl August Besemer's Naturalization Certification



Site of Laura and Carl August Besemer's log cabin, Baxter Bridge Road, Summit City, Michigan. No physical evidence of the cabin remains (2005)



Site from which logs were rolled down hill into the Manistee River – “High Bank Rollaway” (Picture taken 8-05)



HEROISM, OUTSTANDING DEVOTION

Sgt. E. G. Rector, Cpl. Besemer Win Bronze, Silver Star Medals

Two South Havenites have distinguished themselves on the field of battle in Korea. One, Cpl. Robert L. Besemer, who has been reported missing in action since July 25, 1950, has been awarded the Silver Star Medal. The other, Sgt. Edward G. Rector has received the Bronze Star Medal. He already holds the Distinguished Service Cross, won during previous action in Korea.

WITH THE FIRST CAVALRY Division in Korea—SGT. RECTOR son of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Rector, 351 Jones Avenue, has been awarded the Bronze Star Medal for passing through enemy lines twice to make possible the safe evacuation of his platoon from an enemy trap.

He was awarded this decoration for heroism in action against the enemy on Nov. 28, 1950, near Suncheon, Korea, while a member of the U. S. First Cavalry Division.

While Sgt. Rector's mortar platoon was firing in support of an infantry battalion in the process of reducing an enemy road block, according to the citation accompanying the decoration, they were surrounded and besieged by a numerically superior enemy force.

"Disregarding his own safety, the South Havenite volunteered to break through the enemy ranks to reach and secure aid from friendly units and any information which might assist his platoon in forming



CPL. BESEMER

reads in part. "After securing the information," states the citation, "he again fought his way through enemy lines constantly exposed to heavy enemy mortar, automatic weapons and hand grenade fire, and led his platoon to safety of friendly lines."

The citation tells of how his

selfless behavior and courageous action made possible the safe withdrawal of the mortar platoon.

"Sergeant Rector's heroism reflects great credit upon himself and the military service," the citation concluded.

Cpl. Besemer, son of Mrs. Marie Besemer, rural route three, South Haven, has been awarded the Silver Star Medal for his selfless courage and outstanding devotion to his fellow soldiers during an engagement with the enemy.

He was awarded this decoration for gallantry displayed in action July 25, 1950, near Yongdong, Korea, while a member of the U. S. First Cavalry Division.

The citation accompanying the decoration reads in part:

"Cpl. Besemer, observing several of his comrades lying wounded in an open field forward of his position, although covered with extremely heavy enemy automatic weapons fire, left his position of comparative safety and moved over open terrain, exposing himself to the heavy enemy fire, to assist his wounded comrades."

The citation went on to say "Cpl. Besemer was last seen bending over his fallen comrades administering first aid. Cpl. Besemer's outstanding devotion to his fellow soldiers, selfless courage and gallantry in action reflect great credit upon himself and the military service."

Five Sisters: 1995

Dorothy Besemer Pittsley
Marie Barbara Besemer Gnuwech
Helena Besmer Hudson
Esther Besemer O'Neil
Rosella Besemer Niffenegger Nichols



Family of Helena Besemer Hudson, Potluck, Kingsley, Michigan, August 7, 2005



Family Members at the Overlook of the “High Bank Rollaway” (from where logs were rolled down to the Manistee River):

Lorrie Besemer
Helena Hudson
Dona Hudson
Terry Hudson
Rosella Nichols

