

**Chapter 5:**  
**The Courtship Years**  
**1923 to 1927**

## Chapter 5:

### The Courtship Years 1923 to 1927

#### Introduction.

Wilhelm and Marta Besemer were married twice. We'll tell you more about that later. For now, recall that the picture we last saw of Wilhelm was in March of 1922 with his Grandmother Barbara on the family fruit farm in Michigan (page 50). She had been widowed two years before. Wilhelm never met his Grandfather Johannes, but he was still embraced by a very large family of cousins, uncles, and aunts. It was his Tante Marie and her husband Albert Arent who had sponsored his migration from Germany.

Wilhelm would stay with Marie and Albert, working on their farm through the fall harvest, even though he was not a farmer. He had been trained as a machinist, more specifically as a tool and die maker, and he would take up his trade in the fall of 1922 in the nearby industrial city of South Bend, Indiana.

Marta Schehrer, as we noted in the previous chapter, sailed from Germany in late June of 1923, accompanied by her Grand Aunt Christine Sieg, known to us all as *Tante Sieg* ("Seek"). Also on board was Herman Haselbeck, Tante Sieg's son by her first marriage to Franz Haselbeck.<sup>1</sup> Herman was apparently estranged from his wife, Millie, and would shortly divorce. On board was Frieda Erdmann, the woman who would become his second wife and also the life-long friend of the other young émigré, Marta Schehrer (later Besemer).

Marta, directed by Tante Sieg both financially and socially, arrived in South Bend with a job as a maid and nanny waiting for her. Frieda, newly met traveling friend and soon-to-be wife of Marta's cousin Herman, would also work for the family of Miles O'Brien co-owner, with his twin brother John, of the South Bend Lathe Works.<sup>2</sup> Already in the O'Brien household was another young German woman, Lotte Friedrick. Lotte and Frieda would be Marta's closest friends for the balance of her life.

<sup>1</sup> Franz Haselbeck had died in 1905, and Christine had shortly thereafter married Christian Sieg. He was born in Alsace, which was French at the time. Thus, he is listed in the contemporary census as French. However, as with most persons from Alsace-Lorraine at that time, he spoke German. Franz was a brick mason residing in South Bend, Indiana. Christian Sieg would himself die some time between 1920 (when he is listed in the U.S. Census at age 72) and 1922 when Christine made the first of two trips to Germany. It was on the second of these trips, in 1923, that Tante Sieg convinced the Schehrer's to let their 20 year old daughter, Marta, emigrate with her to America.

<sup>2</sup> For a short historical sketch of the Lathe Works, see <http://www.southbendlathe.com/history.htm>.



*Marta in her maid's uniform, in front of the home of the Miles O'Brien family for whom she worked from the time of her arrival in South Bend, Indiana in 1923 until her marriage four years later.*

*The South Bend Turnverein, founded in 1861. The Hall was located on the corner of North Michigan and Marion Streets, South Bend, Indiana. This picture is from 1936.*



## Wilhelm's First Years

In Chapter 3, we reviewed the events that brought Wilhelm from Kirchheim-unter-Teck, in the Swabish hills of southern Germany, to join his grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins in America. Although Wilhelm brought seemingly little with him, it was all that would be required to fulfill his American dream. Due to his training as a machinist in Germany after World War I, he had the skills needed for good employment in the vibrant industrial economy of the American Midwest. Further, he had a work ethic that combined with his technical skills to make him a valuable employee.

One cannot fully appreciate the circumstances of German immigrants such as Wilhelm Besemer without knowing a bit about the German-American community into which he readily moved. It was that community which provided the bridge across the two cultures that would be his life. The first wave of Germans to settle in southern Michigan and northern Indiana came in the years after 1848. This emigration was spurred by the political and economic upheavals that broadly disrupted the various states that would in the 1870s unite to form the single nation of Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Political unification, however, did not greatly improve the lot of ordinary people within Germany. Emigration to America continued at a significant level, with peaks in the 1890s and later in the years after World War I. By and large, the Germans who came to America did well. The 1848 wave was not made up of people entirely from the bottom of the economic or educational ladder. A high proportion of those who came to the Midwest became prosperous farmers, much like Georg and Christian Besemer. An even larger portion became tradesmen of various sorts. The population of South Bend by 1900 included people from many countries, but Germans were a large fraction of the retailers, industrialists, and craftsmen. This economic stratum would make easier the entry of the later waves of somewhat less economically advantaged German immigrants.

Further, the large German-American community provided places of worship and recreation for the newcomers – places where they could

### Turnverein

TURNVEREIN , society of a type originated in Prussia by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn . The first hall of such a society was built in 1811 on the Hasenheide athletic grounds, near Berlin. The organization emphasized gymnastic exercises, but it also had important social and patriotic functions. In the beginning it was an effective instrument in organizing opposition to French domination of Germany, and it had official approval and support. Similar societies were at once organized throughout Germany. After the fall of Napoleon, the Turnverein movement began to dissolve because German governments disapproved of the Turnvereins as centers from which liberal ideas might be disseminated. The Turnvereins were supported loyally by their members, and new groups were organized in other countries, including the United States, by members who migrated to those countries. Today the word *Turnverein* is used in German-speaking countries to refer to any gymnasium or similar site of physical recreation. The example of the Turnvereins has encouraged organizations under other names to combine gymnastic exercises with discussion and social pleasures.

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Turnvere.html>

<sup>3</sup> For more detail on South Bend's German immigrants, see Gabrielle Robinson, *German Settlers of South Bend*, (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2003). And for a specific list of Wilhelm and Marta's German friends, along with their occupations, see Appendix 6.2.

feel at home in spite of their lack of English. German language services would be conducted in South Bend's Zion Evangelical and Reformed Church well into the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> As important as the church were the various German social clubs.

When Wilhelm arrived in South Bend, in the fall of 1922, looking for a place to stay, there were three German clubs in the area: The South Bend Männerchor ("Men's Choir"), the German Club, and the South Bend *Turnverein*. The Männerchor and the German Club were strictly local organizations. The *Turnverein*, or "Turners" or "Turner Club" or "Turner Hall", as it was variously called in English, was a long-standing international organization. Founded in the Napoleonic era in Prussia, the network, or *Verein*, was an organization promoting both athleticism and political unification of the various German states and principalities [see the box on page 68].

After the revolutions of 1848, the German organization was sometimes banned. However, the immigrants, many of whom had themselves been revolutionaries, brought the organization with them to America. It quickly established itself throughout the northern part of the country as the pre-eminent German-American organization. The Turners in America did not give up their taste for politics. They became an active part of the movement for the abolition of slavery, up to and through the Civil War,.

For the new immigrants, however, politics took a back seat to athletic and other social activities. The Turners were a major aid to the social adjustment and integration of new German immigrants throughout the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The South Bend Turners had been founded in 1861 and was a large part of Wilhelm's (and later Marta's) entry into America in the 1920s.

We are uncertain exactly how Wilhelm was attracted to South Bend or the specifics of how he got his first job, but the existing German community was very important from the start. South Bend, 35 miles south of the Michigan farm, was a prosperous, thriving regional industrial center, and thus a natural site for Wilhelm to seek employment as a young craftsman. When he left the Michigan family in the fall of 1922 and arrived in South Bend, he immediately took one of the rental rooms on the third floor of the Turner Hall. The majority of the German friendships that he (and later Marta) developed came from association with people in this club.

In all likelihood, someone from the Turner Hall helped steer Wilhelm toward the South Bend Lathe Works, where he obtained his first job. Bear in mind that at this time he had little or no English skills, yet he was able to obtain a good job in an American factory. It is not so surprising, however, when one considers that many of the employees of the Works were also German immigrants.

Family back in Germany could not have been far out of mind for the new immigrants. Most of them, including Wilhelm, had left because of hard times at home. Those hard times continued for the ones staying behind. Typical of the wrenching contrast between the new world and the old is a card Wilhelm received from a young

<sup>4</sup> Stained glass windows in that church to this day have German language inscriptions beneath them.

cousin, probably in August of 1924, about a year after he emigrated. The message is as follows:

*Reutlingen, August 8, 1924 (?)*

*Dear Cousin,*

*I wish you the very best from Reutlingen. Hope that you are quite well, as, thank the Lord, we are. But everything here is terribly expensive. One can hardly get anything, so I kindly beg, dear Cousin, that you send me just a dollar. When you next come over here, we will give it back to you. Dear Cousin, that is my only request. With heartfelt greetings and thanks for the favor.<sup>5</sup>*



Admittedly, a dollar was worth more than now, but still it was not all that much. As we were reviewing the material for this essay, this particular picture card, from that lovely young woman, was the most heart-wrenching item we found. Most of us have studied in school about the German inflation of the 1920s and how it may have created the conditions leading up to World War II. But the human side of history is always more poignant than what we read in textbooks.

Wilhelm's first and most important friendship in South Bend was with a fellow German, Fritz Lehmann, a colleague at the Lathe Works. Fritz and his wife Elizabeth, both German immigrants, were a generation older than the 25 year-old Wilhelm. They took him under their wing and provided him the closest approximation to a home that he would have in America until he and Marta set up their first house in 1927. The friendship was enhanced by the fact that Fritz was not only a fellow employee of the Lathe Works, but also he and Elizabeth were active participants in the social activities of the Turner Club. In his early years in America, Fritz had been a bartender and Elizabeth the short-order cook at the Turners, and they had lived in an apartment over the club.

At the time of Wilhelm's arrival in South Bend, the Lehmanns offered to rent him the room in their home that had been left empty after their son Emil had moved out. Wilhelm readily accepted, moved in, and was treated like a member of the family. He received both room and board from the Lehmanns for a very reasonable rent. Wilhelm would live with the Lehmanns until his wedding five years later.

<sup>5</sup> Reutlingen is in central Baden-Württemberg, near Tübingen. The cousin is probably the daughter of one of Wilhelm's mother's siblings.



*Elizabeth and Friedrich ("Fritz") Lehmann, hosts to Wilhelm in the years after his arrival to the time of his marriage. They remained close friends of Wilhelm and Marta throughout the Lehmann's lifetime. (Picture about 1945)*



*Wilhelm and the Lehmann's dog  
Lehmann's back yard. About 1923*



*Wilhelm with Elizabeth Currey,  
Lehmann's granddaughter*

We emphasize the role of the Lehmanns here, even though they are not technically family, because they not only played a critical role in Wilhelm's entry into America, but because Fritz and Elizabeth would remain family friends until their deaths in the middle of the century. Wilhelm had great respect for the Lehmanns. Elizabeth was always "Mrs. Lehmann," although Fritz was "Fritz."

The Lehmann house was strategically located, as it turned out later. It was at the corner of California Avenue and Riverside Drive, only eight blocks from the Turner Hall. The O'Brien residence, where Marta would take up employment the next summer, was located about half way between the Lehmann house and the Turner Hall.<sup>6</sup>

We sadly must acknowledge an important gap in the story about here. We would be delighted to tell a sweet story of the meeting of Wilhelm Besemer and Marta Schehrer, but, alas, we are lacking key details. In particular, we are not sure *when* they met. As will be clear below, however, we do know *where*.

### **Marta's First Years**

Years later, after she learned about American superstitions, Marta would make light of the fact that she arrived on a Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. Although she worked hard in the early years, she was never disappointed with the decision to come to America. The job at the O'Brien house was waiting for her when she arrived. An Irish Catholic family, the O'Briens had risen in half a century from sometimes scorned day laborers to being founders of the Lathe Works and one of the prominent industrial families of the Midwest. The O'Brien family's success was not typical of immigrants in general, but it was at least an example of what could be attained by a combination of skill, hard work, and probably some luck.

The three domestics – Marta Schehrer, Frieda Erdmann, and Lotte Friedman – probably worked in company with a cook and perhaps a butler in the large O'Brien household. Marta would work for the O'Briens until her marriage four years later. She lived and took her meals with the other servants in the household. Her main duty, from which she took great pleasure, was caring for young Johnny O'Brien. One wonders how that relationship must have gone between a small American boy and a newly arrived German-speaking nanny and maid.

Aside from the direct duties of the job, Marta's main concern in the early period was to repay Tante Sieg for the costs of her transportation to America. Tante Sieg was stern in her insistence on that being Marta's first priority. The young immigrant could not forget the harsh circumstances in which her family lived back in Germany. At the first Christmas, five months after her arrival, she sent a small amount of money to the family back home. This angered Tante Sieg and she insisted that repayment of the transport debt came before anything else.

<sup>6</sup> Given the importance of the Lehmanns in this history, we have included in Appendices 5.1 and 5.2 a family tree and small album..



*Frieda Erdmannn, Marta,  
and  
Johnny O'Brien*

*Christine Margarete Ramenstein Hasselbeck  
Sieg, "Tante Sieg,"  
who was responsible for  
arranging Marta Schehrer's  
emigration from Germany to  
America. Tante Sieg is sitting  
in her back yard on Hill St.,  
South Bend, Indiana.  
About 1940*



Tante Sieg would today probably be described as a *gutsy broad*. She was twice widowed, traveled extensively, and generally did things her own way. It is recalled that during World War II she would play *Deutschland über Alles* loudly on her Victrola, with the windows wide open. She worked as a maid herself, although she probably inherited a bit from her second husband, Christian Sieg. She was thrifty, outspoken, and utterly independent. While she had a stern, frugal demeanor, she nevertheless enabled two grandnieces to leave the poor Schehrer household in Faurndau, Germany for greener pastures in America.<sup>7</sup>

America until the mid-20s was a pretty immigrant-friendly place. We are not ignorant of the common prejudices that were inflicted on various groups, but the barriers were few and low. One reason, perhaps, that immigrants were welcomed at that time was that there were few forms of public aid that they could exploit. They were rarely a burden on the native taxpayer. One thing the community did do for them was to provide classes in *Americanism*. In South Bend, the school authorities organized classes to teach English, American history, and the basics for functioning in the host country. We assume that a modest tuition was charged for these classes.

It was in one such class, held at night in Central High School, that Marta made the acquaintance of Wilhelm Besemer. One wonders: Had he seen her walking Johnny on the sidewalks of the neighborhood? Had she spotted him as he walked from the Lehmann's to the Lathe Works or to the Turner Hall? In any event, in the Americanism class they discovered their shared roots. Her village was just about 10 miles from his home town. They shared the Swabian dialect, so often incomprehensible to northern Germans. It could not have been long after that meeting until he invited her to join him for an evening of dancing and socializing at the Turner Hall.

There they would be part of a friendship circle that would last for many years. It was this circle that would surround them during their courtship.

### **The Courtship**

It was hardly a whirlwind courtship. Wilhelm and Marta dated for at least three years. They both worked full time, with not a great many resources of either time or money for exotic activities. The group of German immigrant friends provided the setting for much inexpensive fun and rich memories.

Marta stayed with the O'Briens until 1927. We are not sure how long Wilhelm worked at the Lathe Works, but it was not very long after arriving in South Bend that he took a job in the tool room of the Studebaker Corporation. Well known industries in South Bend, in addition to the Lathe Works, and Studebaker, were O'Brien Paints, Oliver (tractors and agricultural implements), Singer (sewing machines), and Bendix

<sup>7</sup> In the early 30's Marta's younger sister, Julia, would come to America also with Tante Sieg's financial help.

*Elizabeth ("Lisel") Thierer and Marta, abt. 1924  
(Picture taken and formatted by Eugene Mützl)*



*Wilhelm and friends*



*Marta with Eugene Mützl*

automobile starters and brake systems). We suspect that it was not at all uncommon for ambitious young men to move from one of these companies to another.

The three women from the O'Brien house paired up with their boyfriends: Frieda Erdmann with Herman Haselbeck, whom, we should recall, she met on the boat coming over; Lotte Friedman with her tailor boyfriend, Emil Wagner, whom she probably met at the Männerchor; and Marta Schehrer with Wilhelm Besemer, who had met in Americanism class. Herman did not join the Turners, and was not generally as socially inclined as the rest of the group. Most, but not all, of the friends in the circle were of Schwabian heritage. None of them had much money, so dates often were simple walks along the St. Joseph River to parks nearby.

There was by then an inter-urban train that went north to Benton Harbor on Lake Michigan. A similar train could be taken cheaply to the beaches in Michigan City, to the west. Like nearly everyone else, Wilhelm bought a Model T, which broadened the range of their excursions. Trips with friends were made to Weko Beach, near Bridgman, Michigan, a common destination of German young people.

Evidence of the close attachment between Marta and Frieda is this picture (below), at the christening of Virginia Haselbeck, for which Marta and her fiancé served as godparents.



*Christening of Virginia Haselbeck (infant). (Adults) Frieda Erdmann Haselbeck, Herman Haselbeck, Marta Schehrer, Wilhelm Besemer. (Late 1926)*

Marta was, of course, introduced to the extended Besemer clan around Coloma. They visited the farms of Albert and Mary Arent, Irving and Nane Arent, Christ (*Crīst*) and Selma Besemer, and occasionally the farm of Onkle August in Covert. Lotte and Emil would sometimes join them for visits to Christ and Selma's. Recall that Christ and Selma lived on his parents' 40 acre homestead in Coloma, Michigan.



*Wilhelm, Marta, Lotte Friedman,  
and Emil Wagner*



*Lotte & Emil*

1925



*Wilhelm*



*Marta*



*Four Men and a Horseless Carriage*



*Marta Poses in Wilhelm's First Car, a 1924 Model T*

*Wilhelm, Lotte, Marta,  
Emil, and dog at Christ and Selma Besemer's  
Farm near Coloma*



*Selma and  
Marta at the farm*



*Marta Schehrer and Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer on the occasion of their betrothal*



The Turner Hall at the center of their lives. Dances were held on Saturday nights. Wilhelm and Marta loved to dance to the German waltzes and polkas played in the Ratskeller by a classic *oompa* band. A number of friendships sprang up quickly around these events. The young couple grew closer together until he finally proposed and they became engaged. Our guess is that the engagement probably took place in 1925 or '26. (See picture, bottom of page 79)

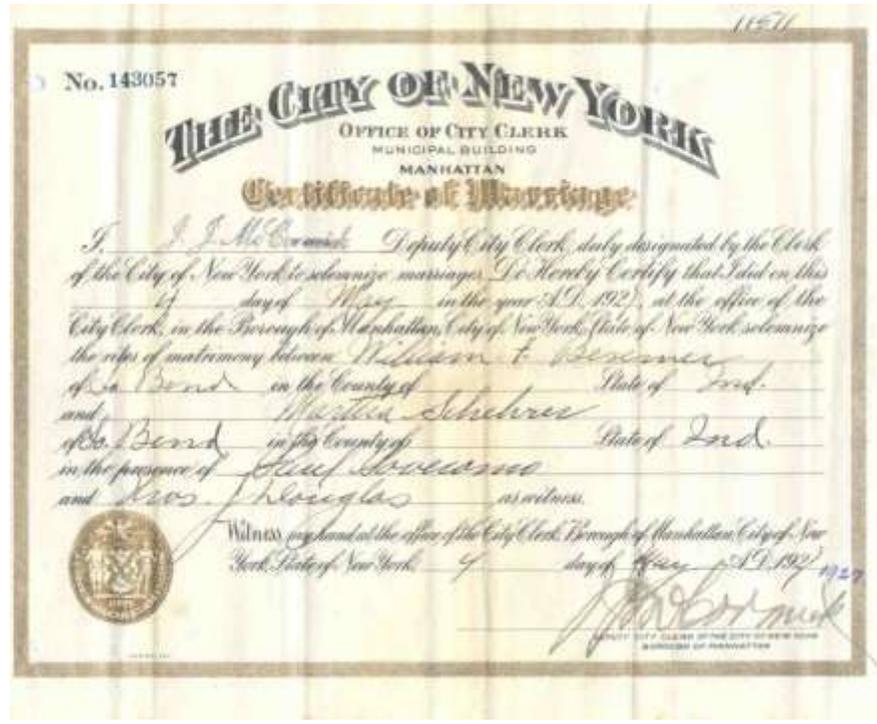
It is worth noting that other couples among their friends were taking the same step. These people were good friends and remained loyal to each other for many years. It was only in 1947, when Martha (as she was by then called) adopted a severe fundamental religion, that the circle was loosened, although contact never was entirely broken off. However, that is a story for another time. For now, we must consider the matter of Wilhelm and Marta being married twice.

### **The Two Weddings**

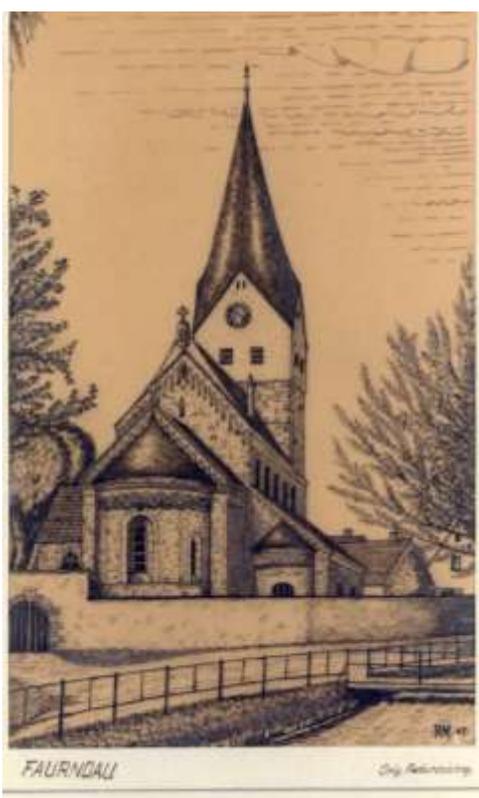
One day early in May, 1927, Wilhelm and Marta embarked on a happy journey. When they had left their families back in Germany they had expected never to see them again. Yet now they were underway to be married, and to have a joyful reunion with the family back home. And, of course, the wedding had to be held in Marta's girlhood church in Faurndau. America was their new home. They were good citizens. However, America held no tradition for them to match that nearly 700 year old edifice. Marta's family had worshiped there for generations. She and her sisters had been baptized and confirmed there. The wedding had to be in Faurndau.

We need to keep in mind that this all took place in 1927. It was one thing to drink a bit of beer and to dance in the Turner Hall. It was another matter entirely for a young unmarried couple to travel together a good bit of the way around the world. On arrival in New York, Marta asked Wilhelm what sort of accommodations he had booked on the boat. He said he had a stateroom. Her response was: "Well, where are you going to sleep?"

Marta insisted that they be legally married before embarking from New York City. So, on May 4 – the day before boarding the boat – Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer and Marta Schehrer visited City Hall in New York, leaving the building, legally, as William and Martha Besemer. He would henceforth be *Bill* to his friends and acquaintances, and *Willy* to his wife. She would be *Martha* to everyone in America.



However, that was not the marriage that stayed in their hearts. The marriage that mattered was held some weeks later in the ancient Faurndau Kirch before God, family, and all the neighbors and friends in the old country. W. James Besemer would be conceived in Germany but born in America.



**Appendix 5.1**  
**Descendants of Friedrich Karl and Elizabeth Kopper Lehmann**

- 1 Friedrich Karl Lehman b 11-6-1871; d 12-1950, m 9-8-1897  
+ Elizabeth August Martha Kopper b 10-16-1874, d 9-?1967
- 2 Emil Lehman b 2-9-1903, d 2-9-1983  
+ May ?  
+ Tillie ?
- 2 Florence Emma Elizabeth Lehman b 6-29-1898, m 6-14-1921, d 6-9-1982  
+ David Graham Currey b 12-13-1983 d 11-17-1971
- 3 Elizabeth Currey b 12-14-1923 m 8-30-1947  
+ Rudolph "Rudy" Altgelt b 2-18-1924
- 4 Mary Altgelt b 12-14-1948, m 3-1-1996, d 1-19-2003  
+ Terry Vestal, b 3-10-1955
- 4 Mark Altgelt b 4-19-1951
- 4 John Altgelt b 1-3-1954 , m 3-5-1979  
Camille Happy, b 5-9-?
- 5 Jacob David Altgelt, b 1981
- 5 Adam James Altgelt, b 1985
- 3 Barbara Graham Currey b 8-20-27, m 3-6-1954  
+ Alexander "Al" Lysohir b 7-20-1918
- 4 Rebecca Lysohir b 10-5-1954
- 4 Daniel Alexander Lysohir b 5-26-1956
- 3 Carolyn Currey b 1-1-29, m 2-20-1954  
+ Gerald Edward Rogers b 5-16-1928
- 4 Kathrine Marie Rogers b 12-31-55, m 10-15-1983  
+ John W. Brown, b 7-7-1959
- 5 William Rogers Brown b 4-27-1985
- 5 Martha Currey Brown b 9-25-1989
- 5 Margaret Lehman Brown b 1-18-1991
- 4 Thomas Currey Rogers b 4-11-1958, m 8-17-1985  
+ Kimberly Jones b 6-19-1961
- 5 Courtney Sue Rogers b 5-2-1987
- 5 Heather Albright Rogers b 6-19-1989
- 5 Thomas Currey Rogers b 1-2-1992
- 4 Graham Dillingham Rogers b 3-29-65, m 8-25-1990  
+ Roselein O'Brien b 7-17-1964
- 5 Shannon Rose Rogers b 5-18-1999
- 5 Haley Elizabeth Rogers b 12-11-2000

**Appendix 5.2**  
**The Lehmann Family: Welcoming Hosts and Lifelong Friends**



Fall, 1955

**Back Row:**

Gerald Edward Rogers (grandson-in-law), Elizabeth Ann Currey Altgeld (grand daughter), Rudolph Altgeld (grandson-in-law), Mary Elizabeth Altgeld (great granddaughter), Barbara Graham Currey Lysohir (granddaughter), Alexander Lysohir (grandson-in-law)

**Front Row:**

Katherine Marie Rogers (great granddaughter), Carolyn Jane Currey Rogers (granddaughter), Thomas Currey Rogers (great grandson), (standing) John David Altgeld (great grandson), **Elizabeth Augusta Martha Kopper Lehmann**, Daniel Alexander Lysohir (great grandson), Florence Emma Elizabeth Lehmann Currey (daughter), David Graham Currey (son-in-law), Regecca Lysohir (great granddaughter)



Wedding of Fredrich Karl Lehmann and Elizabeth Agusta Martha Kopper, September 8, 1907



Emil and Florence Lehman Currey (brother & sister), 1945