

THE GRETSCH DRUM BOOK

by Rob Cook
with John Sheridan

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Chapter 1 1883-1967

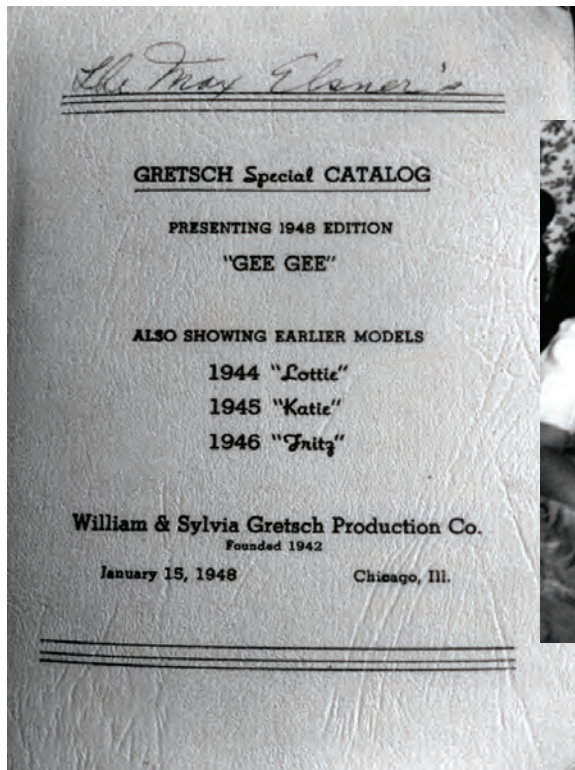
Family history, by Gretchen Elsner-Sommer

For more photos and essays, please visit the site Gretchen has been maintaining since 1986,
<http://lookingoppositely.com>]

Let me introduce myself. I was born Gretchen Gertrude Gretsches on January 15, 1948 in Chicago, Illinois. At the time, my father Bill Gretsches was president of the Fred Gretsches Manufacturing Company. My mother Maxine Elsner, Sylvia, as my father always called her, was from Joplin, Missouri and a graduate of Northwestern University. She was the first Gretsches woman I have discovered who graduated from college. Following Bill Gretsches's example, both of his brothers would also marry college graduates.

To celebrate my birth, my parents held a large christening party at the Dania House on Kedzie Avenue in Chicago not far from where we lived on Palmer Square. The invitations were disguised to look like a letter from the Internal Revenue Service calling each invitee to a meeting...it was a very clever joke.

The "christening" was really a business party, attended by about a hundred music dealers, store owners, musicians and other Chicago music people. Afterwards, a booklet of photos from the event was put together and distributed to all the attendees. The cover of the booklet refers to my parents as the "Bill and Sylvia Gretsches Production Company" and each of their children as new models...Charlotte, March 1944, Katie, April 1945, Fritz (Fred W.), July 1946, and me, "Gee Gee", January 1948.



Katie Gee Gee Fred Charlotte

That was my father, he was a real jokester and he loved the music business, mixing it constantly with family and fun. Unfortunately, my father died just 8 months later. I, of course, have no memory of him, but his absence left me with a strong interest in what is no longer visible.

For years, I have been interested in the women of the Gretsches family: women I never met, women whose names were so infrequently mentioned. I've worked hard to imagine just who these women were, the mothers, the daughters, the sisters and the aunts of all the Fred Gretsches who I always heard so much about. I wondered, too, about my father, Bill Gretsches, whose name was so rarely mentioned. As I grew older, I began researching facts, seeking out family stories and writing things down.

The following essays are born from disappearance, absence, imagination and investigation.

Gretchen Elsner-Sommer, nee Gretsches

I

In 1854, when my great, great grandmother Anna Maria Von Gerichten married William Gretsch in Mannheim in what would later become Germany, she had no idea that her two step-sons, William age 9 and August age 7 and all of her nine “yet to be born children” would follow in her younger brothers’ footsteps and travel to America to seek their fortunes. The young bride probably imagined that her children would follow the path of her new husband and enter the world of business. Business indeed was the choice of all of sons— none of her children stayed in Europe.

The letters which Anna Maria’s brothers sent her from the gold fields of California as they set up their business must have ignited the imagination of her growing family. As her brothers moved from “clerk” and “merchant” to owners of a General Store, a distillery and later a hotel, their progress was watched by the families they left behind. Letters from her husband’s brother Jacob Gretsch, who had settled in Brooklyn, New York, would have only served to broaden her children’s familiarity with the landscape of opportunities America offered.

So, almost twenty years later, when Anna Maria’s oldest son, my great grandfather Fritz Gretsch, arrived in Brooklyn, he was not coming to a land completely foreign to him. Fritz, the founder of what would become the Fred Gretsch Manufacturing Company, arrived in America on his 17th birthday in 1873, just eighteen months after the death of his mother. For all of her children, Anna Maria’s death provided a point of departure from their homeland. Although her two step sons came to America before her death, it was in the 15 years after her death that each of her eight children would make their way to America.

Fritz and his siblings had uncles and aunts on both coasts of the American continent and many American-born cousins: Gretsch cousins on their father’s side and Von Gerichten cousins on their mother’s. From the store on Markplatz in Mannheim which Wilhelm Gretsch operated to the successful California business endeavors which their von Gerichten uncles initiated, the world of business was well-known to these Gretsch children from Mannheim. Coming to America, they had paths to follow and connections to make.

Saving family letters was not a Gretsch trait; there are no family letters from this period and very few from subsequent generations. However, family letters and daily newspapers were certainly helpful in familiarizing Fritz and his siblings with the business and cultural landscape which awaited them in America. Two older half brothers, August Gretsch, who had served in the American Civil War, and William Gretsch, the oldest of the Mannheim children, had come to Brooklyn in 1868 and played a part in helping their younger siblings get situated. There was also a large female family presence here in America to welcome Fritz and his siblings. In 1872, the year before Fritz left Mannheim for America, his cousin Pauline Gretsch arrived in Brooklyn. The home of their uncle, Jacob Gretsch in Brooklyn would serve as a gathering point for all the Gretsch cousins from Germany as they arrived through the 1870s and 1880s from Mannheim. Pauline had come no doubt to help out in her uncle’s household. When Paulina arrived, Jacob’s second wife Anna was ill and their young daughter, Wilhelmina needed watching after. Jacob’s older daughter, Emilie was beginning her teaching career so Pauline, it seems, would be a great help to Anna. Unfortunately, little is known about Pauline and her time in America. We do know



**Dora, Bertha, Emilie, and Wilhelmini Gretsch
Brooklyn, New York circa 1890**

that she was the daughter of Carl Gretsche, a younger brother of Jacob and William. And we know that she was the first Gretsche woman of her generation to come to America. Pauline was no doubt an inspiration and a catalyst to all her girl cousins who would soon follow her. In the late 1870s, after the death of Jacob's second wife, his remarriage and the birth of three more children, Fritz's three sisters came to America following Pauline's, and of course their brothers' lead.

Despite the lack of existing family letters, it can be assumed that Fritz's older half brother William came to work with his step-mother's brothers in California. From passport papers and city directories we know that William worked in San Francisco with Conrad von Gerichten in his distillery business. Later, William set up his own wine business in Manhattan. This east coast business was just getting underway when his younger brother Fritz arrived from Mannheim in 1873. By 1875, "William Gretsche wines" can be found in the city directories. It is interesting to note that in the same year in which William Gretsche opened his wine store in Manhattan, his father Wilhelm Gretsche died in Mannheim. Soon afterwards, the family store which had operated for fifteen years on Markplatz, the center of Mannheim, was closed.

Perhaps what brought Fritz across the Atlantic was the assumption that he would work with William in his new business. It is a common immigrant experience that one family member settles in a land, sets up a business and other relatives come to work in that same business. William, after all, had come to America and joined in the business of his California uncles. Fritz, however, never took to that family business. (But his younger brother Louie who followed Fritz to America did work for William.) Although there is no record of Fritz's earliest years in America, it is clear that although family played a big part in Fritz's getting settled and making his own way in America, he branched off to begin his own business. On his arrival in Brooklyn, Fritz was welcomed in 1873 by his father's brother Jacob who had come to America in the early 1850s. He was also welcomed by his American born cousins, Emilie (Mil) Gretsche born in Brooklyn in 1854, and her half sister, Wilhelmina (Min) born in 1864. Pauline Gretsche, the cousin from Germany was also living with Jacob's family. Emilie was already teaching schools in the Brooklyn Public School system and would continue to teach there for 42 years, retiring in 1912. In 1916, Emilie, the oldest of Jacob's children wrote a chapter on the Gretsche family in Schlegel's *German-American Families in the United States*. This book was published in New York in 1916 by the American Historical Society. Here, Emilie chronicles the early rise of the Gretsche music business but interestingly leaves out any trace of the aforementioned wine business and the California von Gerichten connections.

When Fritz arrived in Brooklyn in 1873, there was already quite a comfortable home situation awaiting him. For almost 20 years, Jacob Gretsche had made his residence in Brooklyn. In the intervening years, Jacob was widowed and remarried and now had two daughters, so the young Fritz found himself surrounded by the comforts of a family home. Jacob's oldest daughter Emilie, along with her sister Wilhelmina, never married and the sisters lived together in a house they jointly purchased in the early 1890s. After Fritz's death, Aunt Min and Aunt Mil were very close to Fritz's children. They filled, I imagine, a grandmotherly role.

In 1875, just two years after Fritz's arrival in America, his father died in Mannheim. Now, all of Fritz's remaining siblings--Louis, Katie, Pauline, Philippine, Jacob, Philip and Carl made their way to Brooklyn. Little is known about Fritz's oldest sister, Anna Maria. It is assumed that she too came around this time; we do know that by the late 1890's she was a widow, living in New York with her only child, Wilhelmina. We do know for certain that the three younger Gretsche girls, Katie, Paulina, and Philippine, all came to New York in the late 1870s. Katie went on to California and lived for a while near her mother's brother's family in San Diego. There she married and had a daughter, Helma von Hellerman. Unlike her siblings, Katie later returned to Germany. She lived for years in Dresden near some of her Von Gerichten cousins. These cousins were born in California but chose to return to Germany with their German born-parents.

After the death of Jacob's second wife and his remarriage, Pauline and Philippine, sisters of Fritz, came from Germany to live with their uncle and to help raise Jacob's growing family, William born in 1877, Dora born in 1878 and Ralph born in 1879. Another brother of Fritz, Philip, stayed for awhile in Brooklyn but then went to San Francisco where he worked for a time with his uncles.

By 1884, the Gretsche family of Mannheim had completed its migration to America. Fritz stayed close to his siblings as they settled in America as can be seen by his signature as witness at his sister Pauline's wedding in 1878.

In 1879, amidst all of this family activity, Fritz married Rosa Behman Schnapauff, an American born woman of German descent. Rosa's parents had died in the cholera epidemic in New York in the 1850s and she was adopted as a baby by a childless couple, Caroline and Adolph Schnapauff. Together, Fritz and Rosa would have seven children. Today only two small pictures of Rosa survive and none of her letters or papers have been saved. The stories told by her grandchildren have kept her memory alive. Ted Clauss, the son of Rosa's oldest daughter Elsa, remembers that he was his grandmother's favorite grandchild. Marion Gretsches Wells, daughter of Rosa's third son Louis enlarges Rosa's story by remembering that when Rosa died each of her children felt that he or she was she favorite child. These memories of her grandchildren have keep alive Rosa's genius for seeing each of her children's worth and supporting each of their individual talents. Her young husband Fritz, as he struggled to start a new business in a foreign country in a foreign language was no doubt an early recipient of Rosa's keen insights and unfailing support.

As a testament to Fritz's enterprising spirit, three different documents from this period— his wedding certificate (1879), the US Census (1880) and the birth certificate of his first son (1880)— each give Fritz a different occupation. Fritz is listed as a “colorizer” in his marriage certificate, as a wholesale grocer in the birth record of his first child, and finally, in the census, as a bookkeeper in a music store. This was probably the beginning of his work with Albert Houdlett and Company. Rosa's father was also listed as a “colorizer” in the 1880 census, so perhaps this is how Rosa and Fritz first met.

The 1880 Census shows the newlyweds living in the same building as Rosa's parents. This building would be torn down in the years to come to sustain the footing of the Williamsburg Bridge. In 1883, after the birth of his second son and soon after the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge, Fritz began his own business.

More children quickly followed as the family grew right alongside Fritz's musical instrument business: first, three sons: Fred (1880), Walter (1882), Louie (1883); then Elsa (1885), Helene (Oct 1887), Hertha (November, 1887); and finally Herbert (November 1891).

In February, 1890, Fritz and Rosa purchased a house on Hart Street, a neighborhood of new two story, single family homes. The builder of the homes and his family lived just a few blocks down from the Gretsches family. In this same period, Fritz continued to buy property around his business on Middleton Avenue. In 1893, when he saw that there were plans in the works for a bridge to connect Manhattan to Williamsburg, he began buying property on South Fourth Street, near the proposed footing of that bridge. This area held many memories for Fritz and Rosa. The building of the bridge demolished the apartment home where Rosa and Fritz had lived as newlyweds, the same building where their first son was born. The area reached not only into their past but also into their unknowable future. The footing of the bridge on the Brooklyn side, the same site of their newlywed apartment, was also just a stone throw away from the site of several buildings that would soon house the growing Gretsches business first on South Fourth street and then in years to come on Broadway itself. Pictures from this time show the family at Sea Cliff, Long Island enjoying a day at what was at that time a favorite spot for family fun. Steamships made daily round trips from New York to Sea Cliff. Other ships up the Hudson River made the Catskill mountains another place where Jacob Gretsches's children and Fritz's children would vacation together.

The mid-1890s was a time of growth for the business and a time of imagining a bright future. In the spring of 1895, a very dynamic Fritz planned his first trip back to his homeland. He was now a determined American businessman. Most likely, he no longer called himself Fritz.

William, Fritz's older step brother, having left his American wine and liquor business in the hands of Fritz's younger brother Louis, was now living in Heidelberg and would meet Fritz in Hamburg. Together, they would travel to Mannheim to visit relatives. Perhaps, plans were even made for Fritz to travel to Markneukirchen. There, Fritz could make arrangements to distribute in America the fine handmade instruments for which Markneukirchen was famous. Dresden, where Fritz's sister Katie, now lived with many of their von Gerichten cousins, was not too far from Markneukirchen. Perhaps, a visit there was also planned.

The day before he left, Fritz signed a will witnessed by his neighbors. The closeness of the date to his departure and the nearness of the witnesses to his family home, suggest a hurried action. It was a last minute thought to write that will, a thought that was quickly executed.

Perhaps in the midst of all the plans for the journey, the cholera scare that had instigated the quarantine of many ships in New York harbor just three years earlier was recalled. The “Furest Bismark” was one of those ships quarantined in 1892 and the “Furest Bismark” was the ship on which Fritz sailed to Hamburg on April 11,