

Biographical Sketches

Wilhelm Gerber (1834-1892) and Sophie Kühn (1835-1877)

When Wilhelm Gerber and Sophie Kühn were born, there was no country called Germany. Wilhelm grew up in Ihringen, a small wine-growing village in the Grand Duchy of Baden, an independent German-speaking state in southwest Europe with its own government, schools, and army. Sophie was born much farther north in Salzwedel, an old market town in the Kingdom of Prussia, one of the most powerful states in the loose German Confederation. Although both places shared language, religion, and cultural traditions, they were governed separately and shaped by different political systems, but each area led many young people to the same decision—to leave for America.

Despite coming from opposite ends of the German-speaking world, the forces that carried Wilhelm and Sophie across the Atlantic ultimately drew them to the same place. By the mid-nineteenth century, Chicago—especially neighborhoods on the North Side—had become a major destination for German immigrants from both Prussia and southwestern states like Baden. The city offered steady work, affordable housing, and strong German-speaking communities with churches, shops, and social networks that made settlement easier. Skilled tradesmen like Wilhelm were in demand in the fast-growing city. It was entirely natural that a young barber from Ihringen and a young woman from Salzwedel would end up in the same Chicago neighborhood, their separate journeys meeting in a shared new life.

Marriage and Family Life in Chicago

Both Sophie and Wilhelm had grown up in Lutheran towns in Germany, and Chicago's immigrant churches were major gathering places for newcomers trying to find familiar faces, language, and community. It's easy to imagine the two of them meeting at a Sunday service or a church social—a natural crossing point for young people who shared both faith and homeland.

Wilhelm and Sophie married around 1856 and began building their new life in Chicago almost immediately. Their first child, Louise, was born in 1857, and their son Frederick Wilhelm followed two years later. By 1860, the young family was living in Chicago's Ward 4, where Wilhelm worked as a barber—the trade he had carried with him from Baden. His older brother Louis, also a barber, lived with them at the time, which must have made their home a lively mix of family, shared work, and shaving customers.

The Gerbers found their community at First Immanuel Lutheran Church, a congregation founded in 1854 by German immigrants searching for religious freedom and a familiar spiritual home. Although the church is located today at Ashland and Roosevelt, the original building stood elsewhere before the congregation moved and rebuilt in 1888. The church's later history includes a wonderful detail: it stood so close to the Cubs' old West Side ballpark that members could watch the 1907 and 1908 World Series games from the roof.

Economic Stability and Loss

The 1860s were full of change for the Gerber family. In 1861, our direct ancestor, Emil Anthony, was born. Then came four daughters between 1865-1869. Sometime during these years one of their daughters passed away—a heartbreaking but all-too-common loss for families of that era. Around the same time, the family moved into Ward 6, settling into a new neighborhood as their household continued to grow. In 1862, Wilhelm also completed another important milestone: he became a naturalized American citizen.

By 1870, Wilhelm had reinvented himself. That year's census lists him as a saloon keeper, with a personal estate valued at \$500 and real estate worth \$3,000—a solid sign that the Gerbers were establishing themselves in Chicago. That same year, Wilhelm and Sophie, along with their five surviving children, moved to 3036 Archer Avenue, a home that would anchor the family for the next decade.

In 1871, Sophie gave birth to their last child, Harry Herman Gerber. After a short period running a saloon, Wilhelm returned to his trade as a barber, balancing long workdays with life in a bustling household. But in March 1877, tragedy struck: Sophie died, leaving Wilhelm a widower with six children. The family he and Sophie had built was thriving—but now he faced raising them without her and the very real need for a partner to help keep the household together.

Remarriage

Later in 1877, Wilhelm remarried. His second wife was Johanna Albitz, another German immigrant who, like Wilhelm, had come from Baden. Together they welcomed five more children, three of whom survived to adulthood.

As the family expanded, so did their need for space. Before 1880, Wilhelm moved everyone to a better home on Archer Avenue in Ward 5. From 1880 to 1920, the Gerbers lived at 3661 Archer Avenue, a house Wilhelm owned—a remarkable achievement for an immigrant who began life in America as a teenage apprentice.

Later Years and Retirement

Between 1900 and 1910, Wilhelm finally stepped back from his long career as a barber and reported that he was now living on his “own income”—a way of saying he had earned enough over the years to support himself in retirement. But the decade brought sorrow as well. On 17 September 1910, his son, Emil Anthony, also a barber, passed away.¹

Wilhelm lived another ten years, spending his final days living with his wife and two of his children. He died on 2 July 1920 and was laid to rest at Oak Woods Cemetery in Chicago, close to his two wives and his mother—a peaceful ending to a long journey that began in a small wine-growing village in Baden and unfolded into a full life in Chicago.

¹ Edna Mae Jepson said that Emil's barbering tools are in the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.