

# **Augustus “Gus” & Edith Belt Classroom Resource Packet**

1. Student Biographies of Gus and Edith Belt
2. Vocabulary List
  - a. Vocabulary words are pulled from the student biography, the actors’ scripts, and the Character Information portion of our Guide Script. Words are organized alphabetically.
3. Supplemental Resources
  - a. “Newsletters evoke Steak ’n Shake's Bloomington-Normal roots” by Bill Kemp (November 13, 2022)
  - b. “Prohibition’s end marked ‘wet’ period for ‘dry’ Normal” by Bill Kemp (June 1, 2014)

**Augustus “Gus” Hamilton Belt** was born on January 14, 1895, to John and Margaret (McReynolds) Belt in Jerseyville, Illinois. He had one older brother, named Vernel. The family moved to Springfield, Illinois when Gus was a child. By the time he was 15 years old, he was working as a newspaper boy in 1910. The next year, Gus began working as an **assembler** at the Sangamon Co. Electric Company. The family moved homes as often as his dad, John, changed jobs.

**Edith Pressler** was born to Jacob and Susie (Goldfuss) Pressler on February 9, 1896. A German family from Chatham, Illinois, the Presslers had seven children, with Edith being the youngest. Jacob was originally from Germany and became a **naturalized** citizen. By 1910, the family was living in Girard, Illinois and Jacob worked as a coal miner.

Gus and Edith were married on January 1, 1913, in Lincoln, Illinois at the ages of 17 and 16 respectively. It is likely that the two met in Springfield, but there is little detail on the Belts’ relationship prior to their marriage.

The Belts’ lived for time in Muncie, Indiana where Gus developed a successful business: the Factory Tire Store, located at 123 West Adams Street. He was the manager of the Muncie location. According to the *Muncie Evening Press*, Gus’s success in the field could be attributed to his twelve-year involvement in the tire industry. He worked in a tire factory, where he learned how to make a high-quality tire. The Factory Tire Store cut out the **middleman**, purchasing its tire stock directly from a New Castle, Indiana factory in high volume and doing its business only in cash, never on **credit**. This meant lower prices for customers and immediate returns for the Belts.

By 1926, Gus, Edith, and their son William, lived in Normal, Illinois. That same year, they opened Belt’s Better Tire Service at 201 South Center Street in Bloomington, Illinois. Known for its low prices and **impeccable** service, Belt’s Better Tire Service benefitted from Gus’s previous experience in tire sales in Indiana. The business was successful, and after two years, Gus opened a new, bigger, and better location at the corner of Washington and Prairie Streets. Belt’s Better Tire Service touted it was “A Good Tire Dealer Offering More Than Just a Tire Service.” They followed the “**Golden Rule**,” and “pledge[d] to each and every **motorist** that [drove]” into their tire service that they would have “a **top-notch** experience.”

Even while the nation was in the **grips** of the **Great Depression**, the Belts decided to expand and invested in a number of service stations by 1931. One location was a gas station and restaurant, as well as the future home of the first Steak n’ Shake, located at 1219 S. Main Street in Normal. Known as the “Shell Inn,” Gus pumped gasoline and sold tires out of one side of the building, and Edith fried and served fish, turtle, and chicken from the other side of the remodeled shop.

However, most likely due to the continued economic decline during the Great Depression, Gus and Edith either sold off or lost the other service stations they operated and were down to just one location, The Shell Inn, by 1934. It was then that Gus decided to “stake everything on a plan he had been **mulling** several months. He would open a short order restaurant combining two features—good food and fast service.” He took that Shell Inn, closed the **service station** portion, and went strictly to being a **short-order** restaurant that served good food and beer at low prices.

Because the Town of Normal outlawed alcohol sales in 1935, the Belts needed to change their business model since they could no longer serve beer. Gus and Edith focused on quickly prepared items such as jumbo shakes, chili, and steak hamburgers on a toasted bun. They began

offering steak hamburgers in January 1934, but since then, they had made many improvements. From perfecting their toasted buns to slicing their pickles the long way to cover the entire burger, the Belts were making strides towards becoming fast food legends that set them apart from everyone else in the field. They also continued to offer **curb service**, allowing customers the opportunity to get food without ever entering the **premises**.

In 1936, Gus and Edith opened their second restaurant, a walk-in location in Downtown Bloomington. The building had eleven stools and came to be known as “The White House Steak-n-Shake.” The next year, the company got an official **charter** to “run a general restaurant business in Bloomington.” Once Steak-n-Shake Corp. existed, it started to spread, expanding into Decatur, then Champaign, in February and April of 1938 respectively. They then **solidified** their branding by registering trademarks for “Steak Hamburger,” “Jumbo-Shakes,” “Cheeseburger,” and “Steak-N-Shake.” Again, pulling from Gus’s experience as a tire salesman, Steak-n-Shake purchased products at a higher volume, getting better deals on their steak and **pasteurized** milk. These assurances of high-quality food were proven to visitors by cooking their meals right in sight. In 1939, the Steak-n-Shake at Main and Virginia expanded on the new drive-in option. Customers could get the same quick-but-polite service without getting out of their car. According to a 1955 article, friends recalled after Gus’s death that people thought this idea would be a massive **flop**. At the time, cars had spotty heating, no air conditioning, and bad radio signals. Who would want to eat in their cars? Clearly, the **naysayers** were wrong.

As if surviving the Great Depression had not been enough, Steak-n-Shake also found its way through World War II. The corporation was still very successful during the United States’s time in the war, adding stores in Illinois, and moving into Indiana and Arkansas. Still, their services and practices had to change. In 1942, one of Steak-n-Shake’s drive-ins was closed until the following spring due to “the **armed forces** taking most of [their] employees the past year.” “We **assure** you that we will be first to give you prompt, efficient service when victory is won,” the advertisement promised. In 1945, despite **rationing** efforts, a severe meat shortage hit the U.S. markets. Due to this, the entire Steak n’ Shake chain stopped serving meat on Thursdays to support national war efforts, urging people to come in for a grilled cheese or a milkshake. After World War II, Steak-n-Shake began a **managerial** job training program that hired veterans at a starting salary of up to \$200 a month.

Steak-n-Shake employees clearly become a community of their own. This is visible in the Steak-n-Shake **newsletters**, *Steak n Shake News*, sent out monthly starting in January 1945 to update employees on important events, food shortages, food and labor costs, changes to policy, and the opening of new locations across the country. However, most of the newsletters focused on the employees themselves. They crowned a Manager of the Month, released exciting news from various locations, announced new marriages and the birth of company babies, and highlighted their veteran employees in the **wake** of World War II.

Steak-n-Shake also had their own private airplane. This plane was piloted by John Percy and was used both for the company and as a private plane for Gus Belt. In the fall of 1947, the aircraft averaged over two hours of flying per day. It was meant to be used for “key personnel and for emergency shipments,” which included transporting meat to its new location in Daytona Beach, Florida in January 1951, to ensure that the newest location would open on time.

Gus’s health began to decline in 1953. According to Robert Cronin, who was president from Steak n Shake from 1971-1981, Gus had asked to see a physician in St. Louis and after that visit, Edith had him flown to Bloomington in the company airplane. It was while he was in Bloomington that Gus passed away on August 20, 1954, at the age of 59. He died in

Bloomington from a “heart ailment he had had for two years.” Despite Gus and Edith having moved to Saint Louis around 1949, his funeral was held the following Monday at Beck Memorial Home in Bloomington, and he was buried at East Lawn Memorial Gardens and Cemetery. At the time of Gus’s death, Steak-n-Shake had 33 locations in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Florida.

Following Gus’s death, Edith was elected the Chairman of the Board at Steak-n-Shake Inc. on September 30, 1954. Their daughter, Wanda, was voted onto the Board of Directors to fill a vacancy left with Edith’s **promotion**. It was decided that the company would continue Gus’s expansion plan. This plan was one reason he had **delegated** direct management of his stores to other businessmen, and it had not failed them yet. They rolled out more restaurants in more states and continued to grow their customer base. In 1954, Steak-n-Shake topped \$6 million in sales, and grew to \$6.5 million by 1955.

Although Edith was living in St. Louis, since Steak-n-Shake started in Bloomington, the headquarters remained there. They remained **devoted** to the Bloomington-Normal community as they continued to grow. In 1956, the company donated playground equipment to several parks in Bloomington., and in 1957, they participated in celebrating the 100th anniversary of Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University).

By its 25th anniversary, Steak-n-Shake had 39 drive-ins in 5 states, and sales peaked to \$8 million that year. The massive growth of the company even impacted the very footprint of the community around it. In 1957 and 1958, the Normal Town Council argued over whether to include a left turn arrow at Main Street and Virginia Avenue to deal with traffic jams created by patrons waiting to turn into the Steak-n-Shake parking lot. To some, this idea was a **no-brainer**.

Sales records only increased throughout the 1960s under Edith’s watchful eyes, going from \$11 million in 1964 to \$18 million in 1968. Additionally, the number of Steak-n-Shake locations had grown to 50 in four states by this time. In 1968 the Belt family sold the restaurant chain to Longchamps, a New York-based restaurant chain with \$55 million in sales in 1969. Lawrence Ellman, president of Longchamps, purchased 53% of the Steak-n-Shake Inc. **shares** from Edith, who remained **chairman of the board**. In fact, she was re-elected for the position in December 1968. William Belt remained a “**principal agent** for the company” until the sale of the company that year.

On July 22, 1972, Edith Belt passed away at the age of 76. She died at Barnes Hospital in St Louis, Missouri, though her funeral was held in Bloomington at Beck Memorial Home. She was buried in East Lawn Memorial Garden and Cemetery alongside her husband, Gus.

Now, Steak-n-Shake still exists, but in a very different way. In 2008, the struggling Steak-n-Shake corporation was purchased by the Texas-based company, Biglari Holdings. Steak-n-Shake’s headquarters has been in Indianapolis since the purchase of the company. Biglari instituted changes with the hope of increasing business, like the “4 meals for \$4” menu. For a time, it seemed the company was doing fairly well, peaking with 626 restaurants in 2018. However, since that time, the restaurant has been in a moderate decline, which was not helped by the Covid 19 Pandemic in 2020. In 2021, the company decided to cut **waitstaff** at most locations across the country, leading to a massive shift in the operation of the company. Now, rather than a personal diner experience, Steak-n-Shake operates on a model that highlights self-service **kiosks** and drive-thru sales.

Whether you agree with this new model or not, it is easy to see the **legacy** that Gus and Edith Belt left with Steak-n-Shake, and the impact it made in fast **casual** dining and the community where it began, right here in McLean County.

## Vocabulary

**Armed forces (noun):** a country's military forces, especially its army, navy, and air force

**Assembler (noun):** one that assembles

**Assure (verb):** to inform positively

**Casual (adjective):** informal, natural

**Chairman of the board (noun):** the highest-ranking figure on a company's board of directors

**Charter (noun):** a written instrument that creates and defines the franchises of a city, educational institution, or corporation

**Credit (noun):** the provision of money, goods, or services with the expectation of future payment

**Curb service (noun):** An exchange, such as ordering and delivery of fast food, which occurs when a worker comes outside to interact with a customer who remains within his or her stopped vehicle

**Delegated (verb):** to entrust to another

**Devoted (adjective):** characterized by loyalty and devotion

**Flop (noun):** a complete failure

**Golden Rule (noun):** the biblical rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matt. 7:12)

**Great Depression (historical event, noun):** a severe global economic downturn that affected many countries across the world between 1929-1939. It became evident after a sharp decline in stock prices in the United States, the largest economy in the world at the time, leading to a period of economic depression.

**Grips (adverb):** mental grasp

**Impeccable (adjective):** free from fault or blame: flawless

**Kiosks (noun):** a small stand-alone device providing information and services on a computer screen

**Legacy (noun):** something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past

**Managerial (adjective):** of, relating to, or characteristic of management (as of a business) or a manager

**Middleman (noun):** an intermediary or agent between two parties

**Motorist (noun):** a person who travels by automobile

**Mulling (verb):** to consider at length: ponder

**Naturalized (verb):** to introduce into common use or into the vernacular

**Newsletters (noun):** a small publication (such as a leaflet or newspaper) containing news of interest chiefly to a special group

**No-brainer (noun):** something that requires a minimum of thought

**Pasteurized (adjective):** to subject to pasteurization

**Premises (noun):** a building or part of a building usually with its appurtenances (such as grounds)

**Principal agent (noun):** A person designated to act on behalf of a company or another party (person) in matters of business.

**Promotion (noun):** the act of furthering the growth or development of something

**Rationing (verb):** a share especially as determined by supply

**Service station (noun):** a gas station, typically one having the facilities to provide automotive repairs and maintenance

**Short-order (adjective):** preparing or serving food that can be cooked quickly to a customer's order

**Solidified (verb):** to make secure, substantial, or firmly fixed

**Top-notch (adjective):** of the highest quality: first-rate

**Venture (noun):** to proceed especially in the face of danger

**Waitstaff (noun):** the staff of servers at a restaurant

**Wake (noun):** aftermath



*This image is from the April 1945 issue of the Steak 'n Shake company newsletter.*

## Newsletters evoke Steak 'n Shake's Bloomington-Normal roots

By Bill Kemp, November 13, 2022

Hometown pride being what it is, most newcomers to the Twin Cities will be reminded again and again that the Steak 'n Shake hamburger chain got its start in Normal. And unlike some oft-told tales of local legend and lore, this one happens to be true!

Founded in 1934 by A.H. “Gus” Belt, the first restaurant—located at the corner of Main and Virginia streets in Normal—is now the site of a Monical’s Pizza.

Not surprisingly, the collections of the McLean County Museum of History include objects and papers relating to Steak 'n Shake. In the museum’s “Working for a Living” exhibit, for instance, one will find on display a carhop serving tray and an order pad—with the latter highlighting instructions to motorists, such as, “For service, turn lights on,” and the all-important, “Remain parked until tray is removed.”

The museum’s archives also contains a collection on the iconic restaurant chain, including newspaper clippings, menus, and a binder of franchise papers, 1954-1969, including incorporation and organization documents, franchise agreements and stock information.

As a not-for-profit cultural institution, the museum relies mainly on donations, and so this archive collection and the objects on display were acquired through a series of gifts made over time—many by everyday folk who just so happen to appreciate local history. Without their support, there simply would be no museum to visit!

Although the existing archive collection is an invaluable record of Steak 'n Shake, museum staff are always on the lookout to add new material to help better tell the story of this cherished hometown business.

And lo and behold, in late September of this year, Twin Cities resident and loyal museum supporter and volunteer Amy Miller donated some sixty issues of Steak 'n Shake News, the company's employee newsletter. The generous gift included the very first issue, January 1945, and continued into the 1950s. During the past decade or more, Amy has made some wonderful donations to the museum, but this one might top them all!

Some of the newsletters are addressed to employee Marie Meadows, a remarkable woman who worked at Steak 'n Shake for just a few years, 1949-1951. While there, she edited the newsletter and was secretary to President Arthur S. "Babe" Smith.

During World War II—before her time at Steak 'n Shake—Marie served as a yeoman second class in the SPARs, the U.S. Coast Guard Women's Reserve. She was also a classical guitarist, and for a few years in the late 1930s, she had a music program that aired Sunday evenings on WJBC AM 1230.

Eventually moving to Washington, D.C., Marie worked for the National Advertising Council, and was active in a national classical guitar society, serving as D.C. president. She passed away in 1978.

Marie Meadows was the aunt of donor Amy Miller, which explains how many of these newsletters came to be held by Amy. Warren Miller, Amy's father, also worked for Steak 'n Shake—he started out in the late 1940s as a delivery driver and retired in the early 1970s as director of purchasing.

One can track the Steak 'n Shake careers of Marie Meadows and her brother Warren Miller through the pages of this newsletter—as one could do for any number of employees.



## BOY SCOUTS MEET AT NORMAL DRIVE-IN



Forty Boy Scouts of the Corn Belt Council assembled at the Steak n Shake Drive-In, Normal, Illinois, on Sunday, June 25th, to board a special bus bound for the Boy Scout Jamboree at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The boys are pictured above enjoying a "Steak n Shake" before departing. The Scouts were gone approximately two weeks, with side visits to Philadelphia, New York and other interesting cities. Steak n Shake was very happy and proud to play a minor role in the departure of these fine young men on a trip that will be remembered throughout the years.

*This photograph from the August 1950 Steak 'n Shake company newsletter shows local Boy Scouts stopping at the original Steak 'n Shake in Normal before heading to a jamboree in Pennsylvania. The caption noted the hamburger chain played "a minor role" in making the trip possible.*

Generally speaking, the newsletters came to the museum in surprisingly good shape—thanks to the tender loving care given to them by donor Amy Miller. The oldest newsletters were printed on highly acidic paper, so rough handling is certain to chip or crack pages.

These most- endangered issues were placed in archival clear sleeves to better ensure their long-term integrity. In addition, all the donated newsletters were inventoried, placed in acid-free folders, and then incorporated into the existing Steak 'n Shake Collection, which is housed in the museum's climate-controlled archives.

The newsletters themselves are a fantastic resource for former employees, genealogists, students, researchers, or the simply curious. Each issue—numbering four or more pages—is chockablock with photographs of company restaurants (exteriors and interiors), as well messages from the home office, updates from restaurants and photos of employees—from carhops to cooks and night waitresses to fountain operators.

The July 1949 issue commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of the opening of the Normal drive-in. The cover of this issue includes portraits of Gus and Edith Belt, with Gus listed as chairman of the board of directors, and Edith as "food consultant."

At the time, Steak 'n Shake boasted 26 restaurants in four states—Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Arkansas.

“In one year,” noted the July 1949 issue, the company processed more than 1 million pounds of beef, “ground in our own commissary;” 160,000 gallons of ice cream, “made in our own freezers;” and 140,000 gallons of pasteurized milk. The ice cream and milk, of course, went into making the restaurants celebrated milkshakes.

Each newsletter itself is a window into a lost world. The May 1951 issue, for instance, showcased the six Steak ’n Shakes in the Chicago area, though at this time all were in the working-class south suburbs—Blue Island, Chicago Heights and Harvey—or Northwest Indiana—two in Hammond and one in Whiting.

This issue also includes a two-page spread featuring Normal “Steak ’n Shakers” (as employees were called), including Frances Zimmerman, assistant curb captain, along with “curbies” Guy Bandeko, Gerry Fedrigon and Buddy Houk—all sporting their new white-striped curb jackets.

Each issue also includes news and gossip from various restaurants. The May 1951 update for the Steak ’n Shake at 113 E. Monroe St. in Bloomington (this at a time when the company had several small “storefront” restaurants downtown) includes this gem: “We extend a big welcome to the new girls on the night crew—Mary Vogel, Margaret Bair and Lorraine Woosley. Hope to have them with us a long time!”

One also learns this: “We were happy to see Don Hefler when he was home on furlough a couple weeks ago, and we were sorry to see him leave again, as he was on his way overseas. By the time you read this, Don will be in Korea.”

Gus Belt died in 1954, and his wife Edith ran the company until 1969. After her passing, Steak ’n Shake was sold to an out-of-state corporation. Today, the chain is part of a San Antonio, Tex.-based holding company, with restaurants throughout much of the United States and as far away as the Middle East.

Safeguarding the historical treasures from our shared past is serious business. And preserving for generations to come these Steak ’n Shake’s newsletters and the rich, personal stories they tell is the business of the McLean County Museum of History.



*During the lead-up to the February 1973 advisory referendum on liquor sales, the Committee for a Dry Normal placed this sign in front of University Heights Church of God, 213 S. Grove St., Normal.*

## Prohibition's end marked 'wet' period for 'dry' Normal By Bill Kemp, June 1, 2014

It was 80 years ago this spring that the Town of Normal found itself establishing rules for beer and liquor sales. At issue was the end of National Prohibition and with it Normal's own long-standing ban against the sale, consumption and even possession of alcohol.

Normal's prohibition history dates to its earliest years. The collections of the McLean County Museum of History include a November 1866 petition signed by more than 900 Normal residents calling for a total ban on liquor within town limits, a stance championed by town founder Jesse Fell. The spirit of this petition was then incorporated into the 1867 town charter, which, among other things, prohibited Normalites from possessing liquor in their "cellar, dwelling, outhouse or in any other place in town."

Flash forward a half century later to January 1920 and National Prohibition, established by way of the 18th Amendment and enforced through the Volstead Act. Of course, Prohibition never led to widespread abstinence, even in staid and (supposedly) sober Normal. In the week leading up to New Year's Eve 1927, for instance, Police Magistrate Fred W. Goff and City Marshall Enos Lantner dumped some 110 gallons of liquor from town "bootleggers and booze makers" in front of city hall, then located at 128 East Beaufort Street.

Prohibition came to an end in late 1933. The following March, Illinois Attorney General Otto Kerner, Sr. (father to the future governor) ruled null and void all local dry laws in conflict with the 21st Amendment (which repealed Prohibition) and the state's new liquor

control law. In other words, with local charters and ordinances relating to liquor abrogated by state fiat, the Town of Normal, for the first time in its history, was truly wet!

Communities wishing to reclaim dry status were required to hold a local option vote. Yet in Normal's case, the next local election was not scheduled until March 1935, meaning dry advocates had little choice but to bide their time until spring

Since it could no longer prohibit liquor, Normal now set about to regulate it. At its May 14, 1934 meeting, the town council established two classes of liquor licenses, the first limited to beer sales, the second for the sale of packaged liquor at drug stores only (complicating matters somewhat in recounting Normal's wet interregnum was the fact that low-alcohol "3.2" beer had been sold in Normal as early as April 1933).

Although accounts vary, it appears there were several Normal businesses that sold beer during this period, including Gus Belt's Shell Inn at the corner of Main Street and Virginia Avenue (the forerunner to Steak 'n Shake). No hard liquor licenses were issued to drug stores, which in a way made Normal's beer-only wet months more "damp" than "wet."

Leading the campaign to restore the town's dry status was the Normal Civic Association headed by Dr. R.W. Fairchild, president of Illinois State Normal University. With the help of some three dozen churches and civic groups it took the association just five days to gather more than 2,000 signatures to get the liquor question on the March 4, 1935 ballot. In the end, the vote wasn't close, with the "dries" outpolling the "wets" by 1,730 to 851.

There were humiliating aspects to Normal's restrictive liquor rules. For example, ISNU faculty who wanted beer at home often had their spouses drive to Bloomington to buy it, given the chance they could lose their job if the university discovered that—horror of horrors!—they enjoyed a drink or two at home.

Interestingly, areas annexed into Normal after the 1935 local option remained wet, since those areas had never voted themselves dry in the first place. In 1971, the town council, in the interest of municipal uniformity, used home rule to declare all past and future annexed areas dry, while also finally making it legal for residents to possess and consume alcohol in private.

Around this same time, Normal's business leaders, recognizing the potential commercial development from major chain hotels and restaurants locating near Interstate 55 and the emerging Veterans Parkway corridor, called upon the town council to invoke its home rule power and declare the town wet.

Such growing sentiment led to the February 26, 1973, non-binding vote (or rather votes, since the issue was broken into two parts) to settle the dry versus wet debate once again. Voters were first asked if they supported package liquor sales and second, if they

supported liquor sales by the drink in places seating at least 75 customers.

This time voters said farewell to the town's century old prohibitionist tradition by a three-to-two margin on both questions. With a clear-cut mandate for change, Normal Mayor Carol Reitan and the town council followed through on their promise to use home rule to declare the town wet and establish a liquor ordinance.

The days of Normal being the Twin Cities' "sober sibling" were over.