

C.W. Klemm (1845-1930)

Carl Wilhelm (C.W.) Klemm was born on May 1, 1845 in Haynrode, Saxony, Germany. His grandfather sold Brazilian coffee and his father was a dry goods merchant. Klemm had two brothers who remained in Germany—Julius, who was in the lumber business and Robert, who was a lawyer. Beginning when he was fifteen, Klemm served five years as an apprentice clerk in Potsdam, Germany. When he was twenty he began a three-year clerkship before coming to America to continue his business endeavors.¹

When he arrived alone in New York City in 1868 the only words of English he knew were “Water is the most wholesome drink.”² Upon his arrival, Klemm’s cousin C.A. Gehrman from Springfield, Illinois, offered him a job as a clerk in his store. Klemm took his cousin’s offer and moved to Springfield where he worked for Gehrman for the next five years receiving wages of \$5 a week. However this did not satisfy his ambition. On November 7, 1873 Klemm decided to move to either Bloomington or Peoria to take advantage of the rapidly growing markets in those towns. He chose Bloomington, then a town of over 14,500 inhabitants, and never once regretted it.³

When he arrived in Bloomington he opened a dry goods and millinery store which was located at 107 West Jefferson Street. The store opened in the winter of 1873 in the middle of a snowstorm. Klemm had to shovel off the walkway in front of his store before the first customers arrived setting in motion a business that would last for over fifty years. When his business first opened, Klemm slept in a room above the store and ate his meals at the St. Nicholas Hotel in order to save money.⁴ Eventually, his store grew to be one of the most successful businesses in Central Illinois employing over 100 people in the retail department as well as another 100 in his wholesale department.⁵ The first expansion of his store occurred in 1883 when he began renting the second floor of his establishment. He then expanded his store again in 1890 when he purchased the building next door, 105 W. Jefferson, from Fitzwilliam and Sons. In 1895 he again expanded the store to the east of his building.⁶

Klemm devoted his life to his business. He was a shrewd businessman who paid all bills immediately to take advantage of discounts and demonstrated his thrift to his children by saving string, rubber bands, and parcel wrappings.⁷ He also made sure that his customers were always satisfied and had received a fair deal because no business could succeed if the customers were not happy.⁸ In an interview with *The Daily Bulletin*, he stated that his steady and successful business can be attributed to his personal motto of “sell no trash but always give the worth of the money in good, honest goods.”⁹ Klemm

¹ “German Youth Successful Here,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, April 10, 1949

² “German Youth Successful Here.”

³ “C.W. Klemm Embarked in Business in Bloomington Fifty Years Ago Today,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 7, 1923

⁴ “German Youth Successful Here.”

⁵ Clara L. Kessler. *Home Town in the Cornbelt, A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900 – 1950 in Five Volumes: Volume II*. “C.W. Klemm: A Portrait By His Daughter, Clara Klemm Agle.” (Bloomington: 1950) 251

⁶ “C.W. Klemm Embarked in Business in Bloomington Fifty Years Ago Today.”

⁷ “German Youth Successful Here.”

⁸ “C.W. Klemm Embarked in Business in Bloomington Fifty Years Ago Today.”

⁹ “Chat with Mr. C.W. Klemm,” *The Daily Bulletin*, January 1, 1888.

did not travel much except to buy new merchandise in New York every fall and spring and he worked among the clerks as though he was one of them. Fashions at the time included yards of silk and velvet with elaborate hats, and Klemm had an inherent feeling for beautiful and fine things. He was well regarded by his employees who sent him a large basket of roses every year on his birthday to demonstrate their gratitude and admiration for him.¹⁰ In 1920, following the 47th anniversary sale of his establishment, Klemm's employees presented him with a silver cup to honor his hard work and great achievements as well.¹¹

He was a firm believer in public affairs and gave much time and money back to the community through his work on various committees and his personal philanthropy.¹² Klemm served as president of the Bloomington Loan and Homestead Association, director of Third and First National Banks, trustee of the Unitarian Church, a member of the Association of Commerce, part owner and director of the Consumer's Heat and Light Company, a board member of the Withers Public Library, a board member of Brokaw Hospital, member of the Masonic Lodge, and charter member of the Old Golf Club (now known as the Bloomington Country Club).¹³

On September 3, 1874 he married Augusta Seibel, the daughter of H.P. Siebel, a local merchant who was involved with a new paper mill enterprise. The couple had three children: Helene, Clara, and Carl H. His daughter, Clara Klemm Agle, recalled later in life that her father believed strongly in education for both his children and himself. She and her brother and sister all took piano lessons and one also played the violin. Klemm himself spent several hours each night studying French and astronomy. Her father did not allow his children to read trashy novels but instead preferred his children to read *The Youth's Companion* or the *Literary Digest*, which were always available in the library. Every Sunday, the family would also go out to the woods after church to enjoy the natural landscape and reflect on God's creations.¹⁴

Sadly, Klemm's family underwent a major change on August 20, 1886 when his wife Augusta died of burns sustained in a terrible accident at the Klemm family home, located at 806 N. Main Street. No one knows for sure what happened but it was reported by *The Daily Pantagraph* that gas from a gasoline can in the bathroom was ignited by a gas jet and Augusta's clothing then caught fire. Augusta had been an invalid for several years before this incident, suffering nervous problems, and her body was mostly likely unable to resist the shock from the burns. Klemm was in New York at the time of the accident and was unable to be contacted for several days; as soon as he found out, he rushed home for the funeral.¹⁵

Several years later, Klemm married Emelie (sometimes spelled Amelie, Emily or Amelia) Bender of Peoria on January 9, 1889. Their wedding was very quiet and not publicized much. They had one child, a son named Julius. After thirty-two years of

¹⁰ Kessler, *Home Town in the Cornbelt, A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in Five Volumes*, 252

¹¹ "German Youth Successful Here."

¹² "Chat with Mr. C.W. Klemm."

¹³ Kessler, *Home Town in the Cornbelt, A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in Five Volumes*, 252

¹⁴ Kessler, *Home Town in the Cornbelt, A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in Five Volumes*, 251

¹⁵ "Fatally Burned," *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 20, 1886

marriage, Emelie died after a short illness on June 8, 1921, nine years before Klemm would pass away.

Unfortunately, Klemm had another unhappy experience during his life which occurred during the Great Fire of 1900. This was the most disastrous fire in Bloomington's history. It started in the Model Laundry building on the corner of Monroe and East Streets. By the time the fire department was finally able to extinguish the flames, about five city blocks and forty-five buildings in downtown Bloomington were completely destroyed.¹⁶ In an eerie parallel to the day his first wife died, Klemm was in New York the day of the fire. His store and all the merchandise in it burned to the ground. His business books were saved from the fire however. The building was worth \$25,000 (today worth \$636,800) but was only insured for \$15,000 (today \$382,080).¹⁷

According to *The Daily Pantagraph* in an article published the day after the fire, Klemm's first reaction upon hearing of the fire was "Well, get a room and open up for business quick!"¹⁸ Fortunately a kind fellow merchant Frank Oberkoetter allowed Klemm to use his building on S. Main Street while he rebuilt his shop. Seven months later, Klemm was able to move into his rebuilt store which was on the site of his original building at 105-107 W. Jefferson Street. He also rebuilt his wholesale department on N. Center Street (between Monroe and Jefferson) which housed one of his overall and shirt factories. The other one was located in LeRoy, Illinois.¹⁹

Klemm's business celebrated its 50th anniversary on November 7, 1923. It had survived three economic panics up to that time, 1873, 1893, and 1907. Yet the Great Depression was still to come and it hit Klemm's store in 1930, the same year that he died. However, Klemm's reputation for hard work and honesty outlived him and his store survived the Great Depression and continued to thrive for many more years until finally closing in 1981, a victim of malls and chain stores. His overall factory only remained open for six years after his death. His heirs sold the factory and equipment to the Woolenwear Company which made sports jackets.²⁰

C.W. Klemm passed away on February 23, 1930. He had been ill for two weeks but had continued working in his store right up to the end. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his second wife Emelie.

By: Laurie Peterson, 2008

¹⁶ Bill Kemp. "Bloomington's 'Great Fire' of 1900 Quickly Swept Through 45 Buildings," *The Pantagraph*, June 14, 2008

¹⁷ "Mr. Klemm Home," *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 21, 1900

¹⁸ "Passing of C.W. Klemm," *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 24, 1930.

¹⁹ "C.W. Klemm Embarked in Business in Bloomington Fifty Years Ago Today."

²⁰ "Klemm Sells Overall Plant," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 27, 1936