

Betty Gay Kurtenacker

Betty Gay Kurtenacker provided the following information on an unknown date at an unknown location.

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This is Betty Gay Kurtenacker, and I would like to talk to you about my paternal ancestors. They were not really pioneers in Dane County because, according to the Historical Society, you have to have been an inhabitant of Wisconsin or Dane County before 1850, and my great grandfather, Matthew Gay, arrived in Madison in the year 1850.

He came by ship from Bristol, England, to New York, and the sea voyage took seven weeks. The twenty-two-year old man reached Milwaukee, which was as far as his money would take him. Then he walked to Lake Mills, then to LaCrosse, and finally to Madison. I don't know why he went to Lake Mills or why he went to LaCrosse or why he left either of those places, but he ended up in Madison.

In 1853 he built himself a house at the corner of University Avenue and Lake Street and he sent back to England for his widowed mother and the youngest of his six brothers. Shortly after the mother and son arrived, they were stricken with cholera and both died on the same day, July 13, 1854. In 1855, Matthew married Sarah Story and they built a home on the Fish Hatchery Road. Three of their nine children were born there, one of them being my grandfather, Leonard. Matthew was a merchant tailor and built a building at 302 State Street for his business. That is now the Triangle Grocery Store and at the entrance on the white tile entryway the name "Gay" is in the tile.

My grandfather, Leonard, was one of nine children born to Matthew and Sarah. He was raised in the family home in the 600 block of University Avenue where, in his later years, he built some commercial buildings, including Frank Brothers Grocery Store. Leonard was a tailor, like his father. I have a photograph of him in a suit that he made when he was sixteen years old. He built his first house before he was twenty-one years old. He married Kate Lyon in 1888 and they had five sons.

One of Leonard's earliest enterprises was filling the marsh near Tenney Park. One of the streets in that area was named for his second son, Sidney, who was my father. In 1899, Leonard published an atlas of Dane County; I found a copy of that that I bought in an antique shop recently.

About 1914, Magnus Swenson engaged Leonard to buy land around Sauk City for the proposed Wisconsin River power dam. I remember my mother telling me how terrified she was that Grandpa and I would stand out on that dam after it was built and there would be electrical storms. I thought it was wonderful. I can remember taking trips out in the country with my grandfather when he was buying this land.

From 1910 to about this time, in 1914, he had a large home and a dairy farm on the Fish Hatchery Road. I believe that he had four milk routes in the city. In 1916, he built the Gay Building, Madison's first tall building. We used to have a newspaper clipping and I can't seem to find it right now. It told of the City Council's concern for the trolley car system if all those offices let out at one time.

After he left the dairy farm and lived in the city, he began to build apartment buildings, homes, and commercial buildings in the area known as Wingra. By this time his sons were all active in the business. Because the residents of the apartments in the 2800 block of Monroe Street were without bus service – mind you, 2800 Monroe Street was way out in the country in those days – Leonard's son Leonard bought two buses which ran from there to the Square for a nickel. They used to tell how people would be standing on street corners waiting for the city bus. But if the little brown bus was coming, it was almost like parting the Red Sea: People would move back and wait for the nickel bus.

Kate and Leonard now were living at 330 North Carroll Street. Somewhere before the time

that Leonard built that house on Carroll Street, he built one on Rutledge Street, on Lake Monona. I never knew about it until Randall Alexander restored it a few years ago and asked me if I had any pictures of it. It was then I discovered that the family had lived there and that my grandfather had built it. Now there's no one to ask questions about it. It is too bad that by the time we really want to know something, the people who can tell us about it aren't here any more. And probably when they wanted to tell us, we were too young and busy to ask any questions.

Leonard Gay's sister Lucy, for whom I am named, was a liberated woman back in the years when I don't suppose there was such a term. She never married and she was, I believe, the first woman professor on the University of Wisconsin faculty. She was a wonderful woman! I remember from the time I was a little child, lying on the floor in the living room in her house at 216 North Pinckney. She had a stereopticon and she would drop in slides and tell me about all these places around the world. It was better than the University of Wisconsin travel series.

There is a hall named for her in either Sellery or Witte, I'm not sure which. I don't suppose it's very popular these days for the students to live in Gay House, but that's the name of the hall, named for her.

My father and his brothers, in addition to building the buildings in the 2800 block of Monroe Street, also built the [unclear] Apartments on West Gorham Street; the Uptown Apartments at 325 West Main; the West Main Apartments at 334 West Main, which have now been torn down for the new Methodist Hospital; the Lion Apartments at 330 North Carroll, which are on the site of Leonard and Kate's home; the Princeton Apartments at 303 Princeton Avenue and at 1904 Kendall; as well as several commercial buildings.

There was a group of buildings in the 2500 block of Monroe Street with the Wingra Market and Knappers that were there when the building was built and stayed up until very recently, and a group of buildings in the 2600 block of Monroe Street. I remember that my uncle Randall had a bakery there for a while, that later was the Colonial Bakery, and is now, I believe, the Val Purine Gallery.

In 1936, the Gay brothers helped organize the Bank of Madison, which at that time occupied the first two floors of the Gay Building. My father, Sidney, and his older brother John were stockholders and directors of the bank until it moved to 1 West Main Street and became the Affiliated Bank of Madison and is now M&I Bank.

The story of this family from Matthew down through my father is an interesting one in that this family, with all the building that it did, never lost a property through foreclosure, and no investor ever lost a dollar of interest or principal loaned on a mortgage signed by anyone of this family.

It's interesting that when Don Hovde bought the Gay Building from my uncle Dave many years ago, of course there was a new crop of young professional men that didn't want that name for an address. Don changed the name to the "Churchill Building" and paneled it in walnut and put in some very English-looking chandeliers. Don then went to tell Uncle Dave how he happened to change the name. After he had seen Uncle Dave, he called me up and said "Do you know what, Betty? He didn't know what I was talking about."

But somewhere along the line the name "Gay" has lost the connotation that we always had. It seemed to me that we were all saying our hearts were "young and gay" and it was a name that we were happy to have. Now my brother just cringes when he leaves a reservation and over the loudspeaker comes a notice, "The reservation is ready for the Gay party." Time marches on!

My mother's family was named Holt and they lived near Vilas Park. Although my Grandfather Holt was not, in many ways, the successful man that my Grandfather Gay was, he

was a wonderful man. He and my grandmother raised ten children, put them all through school. This was a man who was a carpenter. They lived comfortably. They were a family that had great fun, and still do. I was really blessed with two sets of grandparents to be with almost every day of my life.

I remember my Grandmother Holt working so hard; as a child, I had no idea that this was hard work. She heated wash water on the stove and then carried it outside to the two laundry tubs. She washed clothes on a washboard, by hand, and then dumped them and rinsed them in the other tub and hung them up on a clothes reel that was made of wire. I can remember seeing her peel frozen sheets off this metal, to bring them in, in the winter. When I was a little kid and in Sunday school, they were singing, "Bringing in the Sheaves." I always sang "Bringing in the Sheets," because this picture of my grandmother and these sheets frozen like boards was much more real to me than whatever sheaves were. I didn't know what sheaves were.

At any rate, she baked and she ironed. I can still see this board that fit between two straight chairs in her kitchen when she ironed. She had irons that were heated on the stove and she would change the handle from one to the other. But she hummed and she smiled when she worked. I had no idea how hard she worked.

I remember that I was maybe in high school when she got an icebox. She used to let me put the card in the window; it was red or green, depending on how much ice we wanted for the day. It never occurred to me that she hadn't had any refrigeration before that. I asked her how she kept food and she said "With ten children, there was nothing to keep." She started from scratch every single day and baked, and they ate it; and she went out into the garden and brought in the vegetables, and they ate them. There was never any problem about keeping anything refrigerated, because there was nothing left after ten children had eaten.

They had great fun. My mother told us all kinds of things that they had done growing up. I knew them when they were all grown up and married. One uncle lived in Milwaukee but, aside from that, everyone lived here. And up until the time every one of them died, you could have written a movie about them! They were so much fun. It is a real blessing to grow up in the midst of a big family with happy uncles and aunts and cousins and everybody screaming and kissing and running around, playing croquet and exchanging Christmas presents, and doing all kinds of things.

Now that we cousins are up in our sixties and have our grandchildren going through almost the same amount of fun, we keep reminiscing about, "It's never like the old days." We talk particularly about the games that we played when we were kids. We are all aghast at the amount of money that is spent for recreation at the present time. The games we played, most of them just involved a lot of running. We played, "Run, My Good Sheep, Run"; "Kick the Can"; something where we yelled "Antie, antie, eye over" and threw the ball over the garage. I have no idea what that was all about, but it was great fun.

Girls had jump ropes and boys had marbles. Girls had jacks. Some boys made scooters out of broken roller skates. Some boys had slingshots that were made out of pieces of... I suppose they were old inner tubes. Boys played "Killer" with chestnuts. You had a chestnut that hung on a piece of leather. You swung it around and slammed it into somebody else's chestnut. Then if you broke his chestnut, that was "Killer" and you got the number of points that that person had acquired.

Girls played jacks and paper dolls. We would take shoeboxes and make rooms out of them, I remember that. And we would take mail order catalogs and we cut out curtains and we cut out carpet and furniture. We would spend hours and hours on rainy days, making rooms, getting all

that white, pasty glue all over everything. We had great times that didn't involve any great amount of purchased material.

And I don't recall ever seeing an instruction booklet or having an instructor on anything. You went outside and somebody was playing hopscotch. You just grabbed a jar rubber or whatever it was that was pitched on to the sidewalk, and you played. Somebody told you how to do it. Another time somebody would be jumping rope and you just jumped in and learned how to say the various things, like "Red, white and green, Your Pa is a bean," and all those clever little things that we said when we were kids. Nothing seemed to have any great amount of preparation, and we all just spent a lot of time out running around.

I keep thinking of all these boys and girls in their teens, out in the dark, running around. One time I said to Roth Schlich, who was a few years older than I was... we were talking about what a good time we had had growing up. I mentioned the fact that out there running around in the dark, no boy ever laid a hand on me. I said that I must have been a very undesirable girl. He chuckled and said that he thought that they were all unawakened boys, that there wasn't anybody that knew that that was what he was supposed to do out in the dark with a bunch of girls. But we just ran around playing these games.

Then when we were just completely winded, I can remember we would sit on the curb and we would just talk. I don't even remember what we talked about, but we just would sit and talk. Then suddenly this kind of fog-horn boat whistle would sound from the university boathouse to call the boats in. I think that was nine-thirty at night. Then we all knew that was time to go home, and we'd all go home. That was the exciting escapade out in the dark with boys and girls. It was so much fun!

I think we spend a lot of time talking to our children and our grandchildren about those times and maybe we even change them. I'm not sure that we tell them accurately, except when there are several of us together, nobody ever corrects the other one, so I guess they were accurate.

But I'm sure that it's like these things that they say the older you get the longer that walk is to school. I know that I walked a mile and a half from Vilas Park to West High School when I was twelve years old, and I walked home for lunch on good days. That was three miles every day and some days it was six miles. And now they put a twelve-year-old on the cross-town bus so he won't get his feet wet. I'm not sure what's going on.

We have inside our front door a lovely little wooden chest with handles on it. Bob's grandfather, Carl Kurtenacker, came from Germany with everything he owned in the world. He was thirteen years old when he came to this country all alone. Didn't speak one word of English. Had nobody to meet him at this end, except that he had an uncle in Milwaukee. That's a real pioneer.

I am making this tape on a hot day. It's about 90 degrees. The temperature is up and the humidity is up. We've had, I think, six days in a row of high temperature and high humidity. People are tired and irritable. Everybody's griping about the weather. This gets me thinking about when I was a child and there wasn't such a thing as air conditioning. We had day after day after day in July of temperatures in the nineties, sometimes a hundred. I can always remember my mother mopping her brow and saying, after she would hear William T. Evjue in the twelve-thirty news, "My, it's an old scorcher!" Those were really hot days.

We lived near Vilas Park. Just before we'd go to bed at night, we'd take a little ride in the car. The drive all along the lake would be just packed with cars, with people staking out their sleeping spots. I don't know how many people slept in the parks the summers of 1935 and 1936,

but there were a lot of them.

The theaters were the only places that were air conditioned, and they stayed open at night for people to come and sleep. I believe they were quite full. I don't know anybody who stayed there, but I gathered they were pretty well populated. Talk about shelters for the homeless! We had them back in the thirties in the theaters.

And, of course, nobody had an air conditioned house or an air conditioned car. We had a two-story house. My mother and father had a bedroom downstairs, but the other bedrooms were upstairs. The second floor of a house got so hot. I remember in the morning Mother closing up the house and pulling down the shades to keep the house cool all day. Even then we slept on the living room floor at night. She brought down sheets and spread them out on the floor. My brother and I got our pillows and we slept on the floor many summer nights.

During the day time, poor Mother was cooking. She cooked and she cooked, and there weren't self-cleaning ovens and microwaves. And now, today, with all of us griping about how hard this heat wave is on us, I think of how easy our lives are, compared to our mothers'. And it's almost impossible to think of how hard our grandmothers must have worked in those heavy, heavy clothes and carrying all the water and things that they had to do. They weren't big people. My Grandmother Holt was a very small woman, who had ten children before she was thirty-five. Those ladies worked. We get weaker every generation, I guess.

I remember having picnics every Sunday. We went to church. When and how Mother got a chicken cooked, I don't know. Isn't it amazing when you're a child that you don't pay any attention to how hard your mother works! About noon we would have a big picnic basket packed and go off for a ride, some place out in the country. We usually found some place where we could pick hickory nuts or gather elderberries. But if we didn't, we had a picnic usually in a school yard. Out of this picnic basket, before the days of insulated coolers and aluminum foil and paper towels, came hot chicken and cold salad. We did have a jug of some sort, an insulated jug that always had lemonade. We had the best picnic!

Then my brother and I would play on the play equipment. Why we played after we ate, I don't know. Probably wasn't a very good idea. There were swings and teeter-totters. He used to jump off the teeter-totter and leave me at the top so that I would come bouncing down in this spine-jarring landing. And then there was some kind of equipment, I don't really know what the name of it is. It's not a merry-go-round, it's not a carousel. You sit facing the inside and hold on to a metal bar. One person has to run and get the thing started.

I ended up calling it the "run and throw-up machine." He would sit on this thing. He was younger than I was and he had little short legs. Since I was older, I got the job of running and running and running. There was this big worn place that was like a trough. I would run and run and run. Just as I would jump on this thing, Allen would throw up and that would be the end of the trip. I don't think I ever got to really have a ride on this, but I surely did run around in a circle before I got on this thing that I ended up calling the "run and throw-up thing." If you know the name of that particular piece of play equipment, I'd like to know it. No one seems to know if it has a name. We all know what we're talking about, but nobody knows what it is.

We went to band concerts quite often, down at Vilas Park. They had a very good band that played on Sunday afternoon. My father was a funny man in a serious way. We never knew when we were growing up when he told us things if they were facts or not. We accepted them all as facts. I don't know why we didn't wise up to the fact that he was pretty much a joker, but we believed everything he said. He told us once that spaghetti is a crop grown on a tree in Italy and that Italians harvest this with bamboo poles. We believed him. We didn't have any reason to

doubt it. Recently Johnny Carson had a hilarious piece on one of his programs about Italians...