

Wilhelmina Henrietta Kaiser



My name is Wilhelmina Henrietta Kaiser Dahl Henkel.

I was born in Bischofswerde, West Prussia, on the 2nd of April, 1864, the daughter of Johann Kaiser and Eva Kaminsky Kaiser. At the time of my birth Bischofswerde was in West Prussia, Germany but after the war this land has now reverted to Poland and the town is called Biskupiec (pronounced Bis-kew-peck). The town itself is unchanged over the past 140 years and is in fact just the same appearing as the day I left home. It is only about 3 blocks long in size and has only 1 main street. After you walk down main street you are out of town. The only substantial buildings in town are the railroad station, which the government forbids you to photograph and the Post Office across the street. There is one farm house and out buildings of substantial size and construction, but little else.

I have two brothers, Adolph and Julius Kaiser.

My brother Julius had 7 children, Adolph, Olive, Olga, Theodore, Otto, Edward and Anna.

My brother Julius had 4 children, Otto, Ernst, George and Martha.

When I was a child my family left Bischofswerde and moved to Potsdam, just outside of Berlin, Germany. I loved living in Potsdam, it was the best time of my life living there. I especially loved having picnics with my family on the Wannsee, a lovely river that flows through Potsdam.



Minna Kaiser & Friedrich Dahl – 1885

I met and married my first husband, Friedrich Johann Dahl in Potsdam. Fred, as

we later called him, was a harness maker for the Kaiser's horses. At the age of 35 he was still in the army and no prospect of getting out, and he was longing for a better way of life, so when his mother died he and his brother Wilhelm received a funeral leave pass from the government to go home to attend his mother, Anna Marie Fuerth's funeral in Oberboinghausen, Rhine Prussia. They buried their mother, sold her beautiful home and 10 surrounding acres of land, and then the pull to America became too strong and they decided to sail to America and meet up with their Uncle on the Fuerth side of the family who had moved to America in 1870. Their Uncle on the Fuerth side of the family had received 100 acres of free land by Buffalo, New Buffalo, New York, farmed that for over 10 years and then sold that land and got another free 100 acres of farm land in Woodslee, Ontario, just outside of Windsor and not far from Detroit. But Fred and his brother had one major obstacle in going – they were still in the army and could not receive a discharge that easily. So they decided that the men could walk to Antwerp, Belgium and then board a sail boat for America. They were unable to take a train as they did not have the proper papers to be riding in the wrong direction from Potsdam, so they walked. Wilhelmina, her mother and her two brothers Adolph and Julius likewise set sail for America. The Kaisers arrived in Detroit in 1882 or 1883 and set up residence within blocks of one another. Johann and Wilhelmina (Minna as she was later called) arrived in Detroit a little later and moved in with the Louis Weikel family until they could afford a place of their own.

When Minna became pregnant with our grandfather William Frederick she and Fred panicked - was their German marriage valid in America or not? No one knew for sure, so Minna and Fred decided that to be on the safe side, they had better get married again in America. So they went to the Sacred Heart Church on Russell St just off what is now the I-75 freeway in Detroit, Michigan and got married once again by the Reverend P. Martin Bauer, O.S.F., just to be sure. Their witnesses were Ben Kreucher and Barbara Kreucher.

Fred and I had 8 children:

William Frederick Dahl Sr., born on the 5th of April, 1886 on 46 Benton St in Detroit. We had moved into this house just a short time before Willie was born. Before that Fred boarded with the Weikel family in Detroit.

Bertha Dahl, born September 22, 1887 in Detroit and died on the 9th of July, 1888.

Frank Dahl, born August 28, 1888 on 727 Russell St, Detroit, married Celia Chapp, and died on 21 November, 1958. He ran a tavern and a gas station.

Herman Anthony Dahl, called Tony by our family, born January 28, 1890 on 851 Russell St in Detroit, and died in World War I in France on the 12 of October, 1918. Tony never married. He was buried in France.

George Charles Dahl Sr, born September 18, 1891 on 851 Russell St in Detroit. He married Amelia Posanski and ran a tavern on Chene St.

Frederick Dahl, whom we nicknamed Fritz, was born on September 14, 1893 at 851 Russell St in Detroit, and died in 1918 killed going to war. He hopped a box car and was ripped off the side of the boxcar and killed when a fence leaned against the fast moving box car. He lies buried in New York. He was single.

Anna Dahl, born on March 24, 1896 at 851 Russell St. She was baptized on her brother Willie's 10th birthday. She married Paul Galvin and they had 9 children.

Clara Helena Dahl, born on October 29, 1898 on 851 Russell St in Detroit. She was baptized on November 13, 1898. Her brother William's daughter would later be born on this date in 1913, 15 years later. Clara married Ray Fredrick. They had no children by her choice. She stated that having been brought up in a household with so many children, she'd had enough of kids to last a lifetime. Clara died of pancreatic cancer on 30 June, 1968.

Fred and his brother landed first in Woodslee Ontario Canada just in time to help their Uncle Fuerth bring in a late harvest. It had rained continuously up to that point and the fields were so wet machinery could not get into the fields, so the 3 men harvested the corn by dragging it out of the fields with chains.

Wilhelm stayed in Woodslee and with his Uncle's help he got a 100 acres of land for free. He built a farm house there and three generations of Dahls farmed there. About 1960 the government came through and told the Dahls that they were putting the 401 freeway right through the middle of their farm, so they offered to buy the farm as there would be no access to the other side. The Canadian Dahls sold the farm to the Canadian highway department so that was the end of almost a century of Canadian-American Dahl family reunions there.

As a young bride Fred and I went there very often for a wonderful outing. We would stay there all day, or all weekend, eating and socializing. In the beginning there were no cars, so we got there by horse and buggy, which we continued to do at the time of Fred's untimely death in November, 1900. I enjoyed my visits there and all of our and their children grew up together, having many a fun time on that farm. My farm visits came to an abrupt end in 1901 after I had lost my Fred and Fred's brother William lost his wife to cancer in 1898. William proposed to me and told me he and I would get married right after he returned from his trip back to

his hometown in Germany. He went to Germany and when he returned he had a new German bride with him, someone he had met in his hometown during his trip back there. I was so devastated that I refused to ever set foot on his farm again, which I never did from 1901 till my death in 1944.

Bill Dahl Sr decided to become a farmer again and so he got his free 100 acres of land in Woodslee close to his Uncle Fuerth and he started farming on land that was to remain in his family through 3 generations for almost 100 years. First Bill Dahl Sr farmed it, then Bill Dahl Jr and then his son Walter. My Fred decided that he didn't want to farm, so he went to Detroit, Michigan and took up temporary residence boarding with Louis Weikel at 282 Gratiot until he got a home of his own at 46 Benton St in Detroit shortly before our first child, William was born. Fred immediately started out his working career in the new world as a bricklayer in Detroit.

Fred and I had to watch our pennies, especially when all those children were coming into our lives so quickly. I was a prudent shopper and learned to fill those ever growing stomachs with potatoes, which were cheap and plentiful. This way we could have a normal serving of meat and vegetables and mounds of potatoes to keep the kids from being hungry. My son George would grumble repeatedly, "Potatoes, all we ever get around here is potatoes!"

Fred was a diligent worker but we often had to wait awhile between brick laying jobs, so we had to stretch our dollars. Fred's only weakness was his fondness for drinking. It did not interfere with his ability to work, but it was more than I wished and it did worry me at times.

The horrendous shock of our lives came in November of 1900 when Fred was just 49 years old. He suddenly had tremendous pain in his intestines which worsened day by day. The doctor was called but could do nothing for him. 2 weeks later my beloved Fred passed away. Unbelievable - well to dead in 2 weeks!

I buried my Fred in Mt. Olivet cemetery in a single grave in November, 1900. But when I later lost my two sons in World War I I received \$10,000 for the loss of each son, so I took this money and bought a large family plot in the same Cemetery. I had my Fred exhumed and put in the new plot. He is now buried in a much smaller box as all they got up out of the ground were pieces of bones.

Fred's death affected my eldest son, Willie the worst. His hair went from blond to black overnight. His whole life was turned upside down. He was no longer a child

who attended school and let his dad handle all the grown up problems. Now he had to go to work to support the family and to help his mother make all the tough decisions for the family. He shouldered this burden from 1900 to 1904 when Minna married her second husband Robert Henkel. This carrying an adult burden on his shoulders since age 15 is probably the reason why William was willing to get married so early. He felt he had been an adult for years.

I met and married Robert Henkel in 1904. We were married in upstate New York, a quiet little ceremony with just the 2 of us and some witnesses present. Much to my amazement I got pregnant the same year and gave birth to another boy, Robert Henkel, Jr. Our union was not a happy marriage and I often lamented to my children that I had no idea why I had every gotten married the second time. My husband Robert died about 7 years after we were married. The main contributing factor to his early demise was alcohol.

From 1906 on my children started growing up and getting married. My son William was the first to marry. He married Nellie C. Rehfeldt on the 6th of September, 1906 in Sacred Heart Church, the same church I was married in. My husband had been dead for almost 6 years and my 2nd husband attended the ceremony with me. It was a nice marriage and the reception took place at Nellie's sister Tillie's house on Baker St in Detroit. After the wedding they went to the main train station on the near west side and boarded a train to Niagara Falls. They honeymooned there in the Brock hotel on the water for a week. When they returned home they set up housekeeping on their own and thus I had lost my precious William who had done everything for me up to this point. But Bill came over on a regular basis and helped me with all my paperwork, bills, etc. He helped me make wise decisions in tough situations. Bill was so affected by his dad's death from an intestinal obstruction that for years and years he made all his children take a dose of castor oil every Sunday to prevent a bowel obstruction from happening again. After they took their castor oil, he would reward them with ice cream.

After my 2nd husband Robert died, I was on my own until my death in 1944 and the age of 80. I lived well for most of my widowhood mostly due to the \$20,000 I received from the government for losing my 2 sons in World War I. I bought a home in Centerline on Helen St. My kids now had to take a streetcar to visit me, and they had to change streetcars at 8 Mile Rd as it was a different line that ran outside of the city. One time my son Bill was standing there on Van Dyke waiting for the streetcar when a man came up and robbed him at gun point. That sure shook up poor Bill!

Bill opened a post office box in Centerline and started receiving mail there under the name of William F. Black. It saddened me to see that Bill and Nellie's marriage was not going well even though I never really liked Nellie. Nellie would get so mad at Bill and me because we would sit and talk for hours in German and being she did not understand much German she had no idea what we were saying. Once in awhile she would hear "Die Nellie" and then she would get furious thinking we were talking about her, which we were. I and all of my children and first husband were fluent in German. I came to America when I was 19 years old so I always had a heavy German accent and I spoke a broken English and often butchered the language. So it was much easier to speak German which we did whenever the other person was conversant in that language.

My great grand daughter Sandy has said that I was a person of many faces because every 5 years or so my facial features would change so much that I would hardly be recognizable. My mannerisms were gruff and no nonsense, like so many German men and women. I would often easily upset my children, grandchildren and in laws with my direct speech. Nellie would have died when I was walking between her house and the neighbors and I saw a safety pin on the neighbor kid's shirt where a button should have been and I grabbed the front of the shirt, shook it up and down and said, "Na nu, the clobber pin! Die Ma too lazy to sew the button on?" And the usher in church rocked back on his heels when I put a nickel in the seat offering basket as that was all we had at the time, and so when he said to me, "Lady, the seat offering is a dime!" I turned and said back to him, "Na nu, this must be a show! I thought it was a church!" and walked back out without hearing mass. Or the time my granddaughter Elenore came unexpected with her girlfriend to spend the weekend at my house. While we were eating supper I said to Elenore, "Who's idea was this to come and visit me? I know it wasn't yours!"

In July, 1929 my most beloved son William disappeared into thin air and we never heard or saw him again. What a sad blow that was to all of us. I depended on Bill for everything and now he wasn't there for me anymore. I tried to find him. I hired a private detective to look for him with no luck. When social security came in in 1935 I searched their records with no success. When World War II broke out I contacted Selective Service to see if he registered for the draft. No luck.

My son George took over to help me out after that. He would get so mad at me because I couldn't help talking about my Bill every time he came, telling him all the wonderful things Bill had done for me. George would go home to his family in a foul mood, saying "Bill, Bill, Bill! All I ever hear is Bill! Why don't I ever hear about George!"

I used to sew dresses and things for my grandchildren. I sewed a coat for Marie that was a real bane for her 1st grade teacher because I made it out of car seat material which was so stiff Marie couldn't button or unbutton it so she had to go up to the teacher twice a day for help. I never did see the dress on Marie that I made for her. When I would ask her about it, Marie would fib and say she was saving it for Sunday!

I took in Annie and her children and helped raise that family. So when my Bill disappeared and Nellie was losing their house on 1763 Baldwin I seriously considered taking in that family too but my daughter Clara became very upset and told me under no uncertain terms was I to take in another family. But I felt so guilty leaving them without food and clothing and shelter, out on the street to fend for themselves. I felt somewhat mollified when Norrie Day, a cousin of George Stocker, took them in for awhile.

I started suffering from sever congestive heart failure in about 1943. My daughter Annie took care of me in our house. She got a hospital bed for me and set it up in her front room on 8144 Cadillac in Warren. There I laid while her growing family bustled around me. Once in awhile my other daughter Clara would come to visit me, all dressed up in her Sunday finest. She would pull up a chair near my bed and talk to me for awhile. Looking back on that time I would be ashamed to say that we would often spend time running poor dear Annie down, while she would be in her scrub clothes cleaning up after me.

In August, 1944 my heart and lungs became very congested with fluid, and by mid August I had to sit up in my bed as I was drowning in my own fluids. On the 25th of August, 1944, my granddaughter Marie's 10th wedding anniversary, I passed away at the age of 80. I had a marvelous funeral, the best that the family has ever seen as it was in the heat of World and I was a Gold Star Mother (that means I had lost 2 sons in the war. You were a silver star mother if you lost one son, and a gold star mother if you lost two sons. I had a full military funeral with all the fanfare that goes with it. My casket was born on a flat horse drawn wagon with a flag draped over my casket. I had a full bevy of soldiers marching alongside. They played lots of patriotic songs and then I was laid to rest at the side of my beloved Fritz in the Dahl family monument plot that I had purchased for my family 24 years prior.

I am without a doubt the most remembered, most talked about grandparent in the entire extended family. Everyone is very willing and able to regale you with a

Grandma Henkel story. From my parrot with the sailor language to "the pickles she shrink!", to the story about the bricks blowing off the pump house and blowing up the people next door with it, to the stories about how I abused my poor grandson Eddie making him carry stuff and fetch the groceries, walking for miles and miles with laden arms. Talk to anyone who either knew me or heard of me after my death, and you'll get an earful of colorful stories.



Minna Kaiser - 1881