

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.¹ As a child, Gus’s family lived in a rented house at 1521 South Ninth Street in Springfield, Illinois. His father, John, held a variety of jobs while the family was living in Springfield. He was listed as a day laborer in the 1900 United States Census and worked as a carpenter by 1902.² In 1905, John worked as a solicitor, or door-to-door salesman, specifically for the National Protective Legion.³ This fraternal beneficiary society was founded by the Freemasons, and provided care for “the sick and needy,” as well as protection for a member’s family in the event of their death.⁴ In 1910, John changed careers again and worked as an agent for an insurance company.⁵ By the time Gus was 15 years old, he was working as a newspaper boy in 1910.⁶ The next year, Gus began working as an assembler at the Sangamon Co. Electric Company.⁷ The family moved homes as often as John changed jobs. They lived at 1527 South Ninth Street in 1902, 1020 North Fifth Street in 1905, and 631 North Fifth Street in 1911.⁸

Edith Pressler was born to Jacob and Susie (Goldfuss) Pressler on February 9, 1896.⁹ A German family from Chatham, Illinois, the Presslers had seven children, with Edith being the youngest.¹⁰ 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. By 1912, the family was living in Springfield and Edith worked as an exchange operator (manning telephones) for the John Bressmer Co.¹¹ The Bressmer Company began as a dry goods store, but eventually grew to become a large department store.¹²

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. By 1917, the couple was living in Duluth City, Minnesota, which is where Gus registered for the draft during World War I. On his draft card, he is listed as working for the Duluth News Tribune.¹³ Gus and Edith had two children; William in 1918 and Wanda in 1927. By the time of William’s birth, the Belt family had moved on to Indiana.

One thing that is certain is that the couple had their fair share of challenges. In 1923, ten years after their marriage and five years after the birth of their son, the *Muncie Evening Press* announced that a divorce suit brought by Gus against Edith had been dropped.¹⁴ There is no mention of when the suit had been started or what instigated Gus’s decision to separate, but after this, the pair remained married until Gus’s death in 1954.

It is not known exactly when the Belt’s moved to Indiana, but they were living in Indianapolis at 3735 Salem Street by the time their son, William, was born on September 28, 1918.¹⁵ While

¹ “Steak n Shake President Dies,” *The Pantagraph*, August 21, 1954

² *Polk’s Springfield City Directory, 1902-1903*. (R.L. Polk and Co., 1902).

³ *Polk’s Springfield City Directory, 1905-1906*. (R.L. Polk and Co., 1905).

⁴ <https://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/5153/national-protective-legion-shelf-clock>

⁵ *United States Census, 1910*, Ancestry.com.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Polk’s Springfield City Directory, 1911*. (R.L. Polk and Co., 1911).

⁸ *Polk’s Springfield City Directory, 1902, 1905, and 1911*.

⁹ “Mrs. Edith Belt dies; restaurant co-founder,” *The Pantagraph*, July 23, 1972.

¹⁰ *United States Census, 1900*, Ancestry.com.

¹¹ *United States Census, 1910*, Ancestry.com; *Polk’s Springfield City Directory, 1912*. (R.L. Polk and Co., 1912).

¹² “John Bressmer Co.” SangamonLink. October 31, 2013. <https://sangamoncountyhistory.org/wp/john-bressmer-co/>.

¹³ Augustus Belt draft card, World War I, June 5, 1917, Ancestry.com

¹⁴ “Belt Dismisses Suit for Divorce,” *Muncie Evening Press*, December 14, 1923.

¹⁵ Indiana State Board of Health Certificate of Birth for William Hamilton Belt, September 30, 1918, Ancestry.com.

the Belts were living in Indianapolis, Gus was the assistant manager at the Circle 3000 Tire Company.¹⁶ In 1921, Gus worked as a traveling salesman and the family moved to Richmond, Indiana. They were living at 1113 North B Street.¹⁷ By 1923, they had moved again and were living in Muncie, Indiana.¹⁸

During the Belts' time in Muncie, 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.¹⁹ He worked in a tire factory, where he learned how to make a high-quality tire. He also worked as a salesman, where he learned what people looked for in a tire and "how, when, and where to buy tires to the best advantage." Thus, he was "a man who is hard to fool when it comes to a matter of quality and workmanship."²⁰ 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.²¹

Gus showed his business prowess with his creative marketing and promotions as well. In March 1923, he held the first "Traders' Day Tire Sales," which offered even better deals to customers who exchanged their old tires. Cars lined up "three deep in front of the store" waiting for their tires to be changed, or to purchase tires to be laid away until later in the season. The sale was so popular, and the wait was so long, some people decided to carry out their tires and replace them themselves at home.²²

Despite his successful business, there were a few hiccups during Gus's time in Indiana. In November 1922, Gus Belt and Delma Jones were arrested on charges of having intoxicating liquor in their possession. This happened during Prohibition, a national ban on alcohol in the United States that lasted from 1920 to 1933. Gus and Delma brought their families on an outing to Barbee Lake in Warsaw, Indiana. Police planned to raid the cottage of Harry Myers, a suspected whiskey seller living on the lake. The officers ran into Gus and Delma on the way up the lane and discovered two quarts of whiskey stashed in their car. According to one newspaper account, Gus managed to "escape from the automobile, but was captured when the officer who stopped them shouted to the Chief of Police to shoot at him." They purchased the liquor from Myers, who kept his whiskey hidden by sinking it to the bottom of the lake. Because the men were accompanied by their wives and children, each man only had to pay the \$100 fine (equivalent to around \$1,800 in 2024).²³ Originally, they received 30-day jail sentences each, which were eventually suspended.²⁴ This setback was clearly not an issue for the Belts, as the Factory Tire Store continued to thrive and grow, setting the stage for the couple's future as business moguls.

¹⁶ *Polk's Indianapolis City Directory, 1919*. (R.L. Polk and Co., 1919)

<https://archive.org/details/polksindianapoli1919unse/page/n6/mode/1up>

¹⁷ *Richmond City Directory, 1921*.

¹⁸ *Emerson's Muncie City Directory, 1923*. (Emerson Directory Company).

<https://dmr.bsu.edu/digital/collection/MunCityDirs/search>

¹⁹ "Overhead is Big Expense in Tire, Asserts Dealer," *Muncie Evening Press*, February 15, 1923.

²⁰ "Knows Tire Business From All Its Angles" *Muncie Evening Press*, August, 14, 1923.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² "Tire Dealer Finds Unique Sale Success" *Muncie Evening Press*, March 7, 1923

²³ "What Is \$100 in 1922 Worth in 2024?" www.amortization.org. Accessed August 1, 2024.

<https://www.amortization.org/inflation/amount.php?year=1922&amount=100&to=2024>.

²⁴ "To Arrest Bootlegger" *South Bend Tribune* November 7, 1922; "Two Fines for Law Violation," *Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette*, November 8, 1922.

By 1926, Gus, Edith, and their son William, lived at 603 Normal Avenue 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 Washington and Prairie Streets (the location of The Copy Shop in 2024) on April 1, 1929, with his father, John, and brother, Vern. 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." Part of that promise included offering customers plush waiting rooms "in a luxurious atmosphere," while employees tested their car's brakes, changed the oil, aligned its wheels, and pressure washed the exterior.²⁵

To promote the new store, which offered a slew of automotive services, all customers received one free gallon of oil on opening day when they purchased five gallons.²⁶ Also highlighted in the advertisements was that Belt's Better Tire Service was a family business, run by "Gus," "Dad," and "Vern." This strengthened the feeling of trust and caring that customers could feel from and towards their mechanics.²⁷

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 of those stations (which would be known as the Shell Inn by following year) was located at 1219 S. Main Street at the corner of Main Street and Virginia Avenue in Normal. This location was a gas station and restaurant, as well as the future home of the first Steak n' Shake.²⁸ 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.²⁹

Like in their other business endeavors, Gus used generous and exciting deals to entice new customers when the Shell Inn opened. In December 1931, he offered a free lake trout sandwich to any customer who purchased five gallons of gas at any of Gus Belt Inc.'s five Shell gas stations. All they had to do was present the coupon at the Shell Inn.³⁰ After Prohibition ended in 1933 (with the ratification of the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution), many of the Belts' promotions also involved cheap or free beers, like the December 1933 deal for a big 14-oz stein of beer, a quarter of a fried chicken, French fries, dill pickles, and buttered bread all for just 25 cents (\$5.85 in 2024).³¹ Adding a free or discounted stein of beer to a full meal was a favorite of Gus's.

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

²⁵"Opens Tire Shop Here," *The Pantagraph*, March 12, 1926; Advertisement for Belt's Better Tire Service, *The Pantagraph*, March 9, 1926.

²⁶"Our Special Opening Day Souvenir," *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1929.

²⁷"Grand Opening of Belt's Better Tire Service," *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1929.

²⁸"A Letter of Appreciation," *The Pantagraph*, May 22 1932.

²⁹Keith A. Sculle, "Learning To Eat Out: The Origins of Steak 'N Shake," *Mid-America: An Historical Review*, Volume 81, No. 2, Summer 1999, 151.

³⁰"Free Fish," *The Pantagraph*, December 11, 1931.

³¹"Late Hour News Special This Week Only," *The Pantagraph*, December 20, 1933.

features—good food and fast service.”³² 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.³³

Unfortunately, a problem arose in 1934 when the Town of Normal attempted to outlaw alcohol once again. On April 7, 1933, the U.S. Congress passed legislation that amended the Volstead Act (which defined what an alcoholic beverage was and provided enforcement to National Prohibition) to classify wine and beer under 3.2 percent alcohol as non-intoxicating. This new legislation allowed states to create their own laws to allow alcohol sales, which 19 states and the District of Columbia did.³⁴ Illinois passed its own law allowing the sale of beer and wine under this classification on April 26, 1933.³⁵ The Town of Normal permitted the licensing and sale of 3.2 beer because of state and federal legislation. This allowed business owners like Gus and Edith Belt to serve beer at their establishments, generating more revenue for them, and much-needed tax revenue for all levels of government.³⁶

However, new state legislation repealed the Illinois law of April 26, 1933, when it redefined alcohol classifications that were deemed “non-intoxicating” to those containing .5 to 1 percent alcohol instead. Because of this, Normal City Attorney Birney F. Fleming stated that due to Normal’s special 1867 charter, “which prohibits forever the sale of intoxicating liquors,” Normal’s ordinance became null and void, meaning any licenses issued under that ordinance would become invalid, making Normal dry once again. All licensees could expect partial refunds on their fees.³⁷ Thursday, February 15, 1934 became the last day for the sale of beer in Normal, affecting local establishments such as Sprague’s Service station, the William Snedaker Lunch Room, and, of course, the Shell Inn.³⁸ In a decision that likely gave businessowners whiplash, Illinois State Attorney General Otto Kerner ruled that Illinois municipalities “have no authority to prohibit sale of liquor... unless a referendum vote... declares for prohibition.”³⁹ After May 10 of that year, Normal would not be allowed to enforce a ban on selling alcohol without a referendum vote that called for prohibition. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) for Normal, their next election was not until 1935, and by April 1934, the Shell Inn was serving beer at their fish fries once again.

When the vote finally came around, the citizens of Normal voted to become dry again, with 1,730 voters in favor and 851 voters against the motion. The liquor ban became effective on April 4, 1935, and impacted the Belts’ businesses irrevocably.⁴⁰

Just as these new rules were going into effect, Gus Belt opened another business. Around February 1935, Belt opened the Lake Road Inn, located outside of Normal near Lake Bloomington at the end of the town’s newly paved road. Advertisements boasted delicious food and drinks, music every night, and in true Gus Belt fashion, specials that included free beer.⁴¹ Gus Belt was officially granted a liquor license by the McLean County Liquor Commission in

³² “A Success Story,” *The Pantagraph*, July 5, 1950.

³³ “Late Hour News,” *The Pantagraph*, December 20, 1933.

³⁴ “Saturday is National Beer Day! Here’s Why!” Brew York, <https://brewyorknewyork.com/post/172658898663/saturday-is-national-beer-day-heres-why>, date accessed July 23, 2024.

³⁵ “City Bone Dry, Says Attorney,” *The Pantagraph*, February 9, 1934.

³⁶ “Saturday is National Beer Day! Here’s Why!”

³⁷ City Bone Dry, Says Attorney.”

³⁸ “Thursday Last Day For Sale of Beer; 3 Places Affected,” *The Pantagraph*, February 14, 1934.

³⁹ “Normal’s Dry Law Invalid, Says Ruling,” *The Pantagraph*, Mar 9, 1934.

⁴⁰ “Normal’s Dry Vote Becomes Effective Thursday,” April 4,” *The Pantagraph*, March 7, 1935.

⁴¹ Advertisement “Car Load Meister Brau Just Received,” *The Pantagraph*, April 24, 1935.

April 1935, and for the next year continued to run his new establishment without the imposition of a dry city.⁴²

Meanwhile, back in Normal, the Belts changed the business model for their Shell Inn to be compliant with the Town's new dry law. After removing beer from the menu, Gus and Edith revamped their business to focus 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.⁴³ They also continued to offer curb service, allowing customers the opportunity to get food without ever entering the premises.⁴⁴ Their ideas worked, and their establishment thrived despite the lack of liquor.

In 1936, Gus and Edith opened their second restaurant; a walk-in location in Downtown Bloomington at 509 East Monroe Street. The building had eleven stools, and came to be known as "The White House Steak-n-Shake."⁴⁵ In 1937, following the opening of the White House Steak-n-Shake, the company got an official charter to "run a general restaurant business in Bloomington."⁴⁶ Once Steak-n-Shake Corp. existed, it started to spread, expanding into Decatur, then Champaign, in February and April of 1938 respectively.⁴⁷ They then solidified their branding by registering trademarks for "Steak Hamburger," "Jumbo-Shakes," "Cheeseburger," and "Steak-N-Shake."⁴⁸ 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. They continued to follow Shell Inn's original tagline, "We Protect Your Health," but also added "Often Imitated-Never Duplicated" and "It's a Meal!"⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ Who would want to eat in their cars? Clearly, the naysayers were wrong.

The massive success of Steak-n-Shake came with notoriety, but it also came with a target on their backs. A string of attempted or successful robberies took place in the early 1940s. On Monday, November 18, 1940, a bandit walked into the flagship Steak-n-Shake at 1219 South Main Street in Normal with a monkey wrench and a knife. The stranger went behind the counter, pulled away the wallboard, tore up the counter, and tried to break into the safe, from the back. After tearing away about two feet of the counter, the suspect gave up and ran out. Police Chief C. Y. Lee said, "It looks to me like the work of some crackpot... why anyone would try to break

⁴² "Tavern Fire Rules Ready," *The Pantagraph*, April 28, 1935.

⁴³ "Hamburger Stand Grows into Big Business," *The Pantagraph*, December 4, 1940.

⁴⁴ Advertisement, *The Pantagraph*, August 13, 1935.

⁴⁵ Robert P. Cronin, 2000, *Selling Steakburgers*, Clerisy Press. Pg 10-11.

⁴⁶ Advertisement, *The Pantagraph*, September 17, 1937.

⁴⁷ "Peck's Wander Inn Sold to Chain Firm," *Decatur Daily Review*, April 3, 1938. m

⁴⁸ Untitled article, *Indianapolis Star*, July 1, 1938.

⁴⁹ Advertisement, "Shell Inn," *The Pantagraph*, February 27, 1938; Advertisement, "Shell Inn Steak 'N' Shake Drive Inn," *The Pantagraph*, March 5, 1939..

⁵⁰ Advertisement, "Shell Inn Steak n' Shake Drive Inn Now Open," *The Pantagraph*, March 5, 1939.

⁵¹ "Steak n Shake Had Shoestring Start, But My, How It Grew," *The Pantagraph* February 24, 1955.

into a safe from the back is beyond me.”⁵² On Thursday, July 22, 1943, thieves broke into the Steak n’ Shake at 209 South Main Street in downtown Bloomington. The two suspects “jimmied” a window and the rear door to gain access, taking \$172 from a hiding place in the early hours of the morning. The suspects were apprehended and most of the money was recovered.⁵³ Other robberies were less notable, with few successes on the parts of the robbers.

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.⁵⁴ Still, their services and practices had to change. In December 1942, the Steak-n-Shake’s drive-in at 1219 Sout Main Street 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.⁵⁵ In 1945, despite rationing efforts, a severe meat shortage hit the U.S. markets.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ After World War II, Steak-n-Shake began a program that hired veterans at a starting salary of up to \$200 a month, equivalent to \$2,800 in 2024. This program also offered on-the-job training, giving the participants experience in managerial skills and allowing them to learn about the intricacies of the business.⁵⁸

Steak-n-Shake engaged in a variety activities to support their employees and other local businesses and community activities. Their flagship location on South Main Street closed for six weeks around the holidays in the 1940s to give workers a break. The company co-advertised events like local dances and the Passion Play, to encourage employee attendance. They also encouraged employees to contribute to and join the March of Dimes, which raised funds for research and prevention of Polio.⁵⁹ Annual managers’ banquets were held to not only thank restaurant managers for their dedication to the company, but as a platform to discuss future plans for the company.⁶⁰ The company also formed a women’s bowling team, which won the Central Illinois Tournament in 1944, and hosted employee picnics.⁶¹

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.⁶²

⁵² “Bandit Tries Safe Cracking with Wrench but he Gives Up and Runs Away,” *The Pantagraph*, November 18, 1940.

⁵³ “Two Questioned in \$172 Theft,” *The Pantagraph*, July 22, 1943.

⁵⁴ “40 Steak n Shake Managers Banquet,” *The Pantagraph*, December 8, 1944.

⁵⁵ “Steak N Shake Drive In Closed for Winter Months,” *The Pantagraph*, December 6, 1942.

⁵⁶ “Meat Rationing on the World War II Home Front,” National Park System,

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/meat-rationing-on-the-world-war-ii-home-front.htm>, date accessed, July 23, 2024.

⁵⁷ “Meat Shortage,” *The Pantagraph*, June 6, 1945.

⁵⁸ “On Job Training Offered by Steak-n-Shake,” *The Pantagraph*, August 17, 1947.

⁵⁹ *Steak n Shake News: Food for Thought*, Volume V, No. 11, February 1950.

⁶⁰ “40 Steak-n-Shake Managers Banquet,” *The Pantagraph*, December 8, 1944.

⁶¹ *The Pantagraph*, April 24, 1944; *The Pantagraph*, May 6, 1944.

⁶² Bill Kemp. “Newsletters evoke time when Steak n’ Shake called Twin Cities home,” *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 2022.

As the company grew, Gus bought a new farm near Rossville, Illinois to produce the beef, milk, and vegetables used at his restaurants.⁶³ Previously, the corporation had acquired produce from a farm east of Bloomington on Route 9, which was sold in October 1945.⁶⁴ In March 1940, Gus purchased the Maplewood County Club (located southeast from the corner of Linden Street and Jersey Avenue in Normal) with the intent to build a farm there, paying around \$16,000 for sole ownership.⁶⁵ However, members convinced him to keep the club running, which he did, for a while.⁶⁶ These new plans included the addition of riding equipment, a swimming pool, a children's playground, and a complete remodel of the interior of the club. In 1942, Gus petitioned for the club to be removed from the jurisdiction of the Town of Normal so that he could continue to sell alcohol there.⁶⁷ Still, by 1948 the Maplewood site had become defunct, used only as a pasture for some of the Belts' animals, namely cattle. In 1948, Eva Sutton purchased the land to build a facility for "aged women" to rest and live in comfort.⁶⁸

The success of the restaurant chain did not stop with purchasing land. 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.⁶⁹ In the fall of 1947, the aircraft averaged over two hours of flying per day.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

Steak-n-Shake went through some institutional changes in the 1940s as well. In 1946, Arthur "Babe" Smith joined the company and became president and general manager of the Steak n' Shake Restaurant Chain so that Gus could focus on managing the farm and planning their continued expansion.⁷² In the next five years, the company wanted to open 20 new locations, in addition to improving the 22 existing locations.⁷³ At some point during this time of growth, William Belt also became more involved with the management of the company.⁷⁴

In 1948, following the incorporation of the company in February of that year, Steak-n-Shake Inc. started offering stock options. That July, 160,000 shares of common stock were announced and valued at 50 cents each.⁷⁵ Following this, the company offered employees a profit-sharing stock fund plan. This allowed employees "in about ten years, [to] acquire control of the properties and operation of the company."⁷⁶ Essentially, employees were given a share of the company's profit, taken from a \$40,000 pot, based on their individual salary and the success of the company as a whole.

While Steak-n-Shake boomed as a national business, Gus and Edith Belt had a number of other interests and commitments well that played out in the background. For example, they were enamored with horses and had a few of their own. In 1943 they entered "Magic Chief" and

⁶³ "Steak n Shake Owner Pays \$200,000 for 1,310 Acre Farm," *The Pantagraph*, October 18, 1945.

⁶⁴ "E.P. Schandein, Horseman, Buyer of Steak 'n Shake Farm," *The Pantagraph*, October 28, 1945.

⁶⁵ Bill Kemp. "Maplewood County Club, 'Roaring Twenties' hot spot," *The Pantagraph*, April 28, 2013.

⁶⁶ "New Maplewood Country Club Plan Announced," *The Pantagraph*, September 28, 1940.

⁶⁷ *Pantagraph* June 16, 1942 "Maplewood Petition," *The Pantagraph*, June 16, 1942.

⁶⁸ *Pantagraph* Aug 26, 1948 "Buys Country Club Site for Rest Home," *The Pantagraph*, August 26, 1948.

⁶⁹ "Central Illinois Air News," *The Pantagraph*, October 4, 1947.

⁷⁰ "Central Illinois Air News," *The Pantagraph*, October 26, 1947.

⁷¹ "Steak n Shake Flies Meat to Florida," *The Pantagraph*, January 11, 1951.

⁷² "Arthur S. 'Babe' Smith Dies; Ex-State, Business Executive," *The Pantagraph*, November 20, 1969.

⁷³ "Chairman Belt Announces Expansion Plans," *The Pantagraph*, June 11, 1946.

⁷⁴ "William H. Belt Obituary," *The Pantagraph*, December 25, 1985.

⁷⁵ "Steak n Shake Stock Offered," *The Pantagraph*, July 18, 1948.

⁷⁶ "Firm Inaugurates a Profit-Sharing, Stock Fund Plan," *St. Louis Dispatch*, December 28, 1952.

“Solid Comfort” in a benefit horse show. Magic Chief was a newly purchased stallion, who performed well in many Missouri shows, while Solid Comfort was entered in the walking class.⁷⁷

The Belts also had a number of lawsuits taking up their time in the 1940s and 1950s. In May 1949, former Steak-n-Shake supervisor C. Ollyn Beerup of Springfield, Illinois sued Gus Belt for \$10,000. According to Beerup, he was hired in 1946 at a salary of \$500 a month, or around \$8,500 in 2024.⁷⁸ However, in April 1948 he was fired for no apparent reason. According to a contract between Beerup and Belt, the former was supposed to receive \$500 a month for 20 months if he was ever let go without an explanation.⁷⁹ Other issues included a woman who fell in the parking lot of the South Main Street Steak-n-Shake location in 1953, and an accusation by the Office of Price Administration that Steak-n-Shake was selling their meat at a higher price than was legally allowed.⁸⁰

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 plane.⁸¹ It was while he was in Bloomington that Gus passed away on August 20, 1954, at the age of 59. He died at the Mennonite Hospital in Bloomington from a “heart ailment he had had for two years.”⁸² Every Steak n’ Shake restaurant in the county was closed in honor of Gus’s passing. 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.⁸³

Gus’s estate, which was valued at \$1,590,962, (equivalent to around \$18.5 million in 2024), was divided between Edith (who received half), and their two children, Wanda and William (who split the other half amongst themselves). This included property ownership, cash, notes, and stock shares for both Steak-n-Shake and other stocks in private corporations.⁸⁴

Following Gus’s death, Edith was elected the Chairman of the Board at Steak-n-Shake Inc. on September 30, 1954. Wanda was voted onto the Board of Directors to fill a vacancy left with Edith’s promotion.⁸⁵ 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 1955.⁸⁶

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

⁷⁷ “McLean County will Furnish Many Entries for Horse Show,” *The Pantagraph*, May 25, 1943.

⁷⁸ “What Is \$500 in 1949 Worth in 2024?” n.d. www.amortization.org. Accessed August 1, 2024. <https://www.amortization.org/inflation/amount.php?year=1946&amount=500&to=2024>

⁷⁹ “Former Steak n Shake Supervisor Sues Belt,” *The Pantagraph*, May 6, 1949.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Robert P. Cronin. *Selling Steakburgers: The Growth of a Corporate Culture*. (Carmel, IN: Guild Press of Indiana, Inc., 2000) 37-38.

⁸² “Steak n Shake President Dies,” *The Pantagraph*, August 21, 1954.

⁸³ “Augustus H. Belt Funeral, Steak n Shake Founder,” *St Louis Post Dispatch*, August 22, 1954.

⁸⁴ “Augustus H. Belt Leaves \$1,509,962,” *St Louis Post Dispatch*, September 1, 1955.

⁸⁵ “Mrs. Belt New Steak n Shake Board Chairman,” *The Pantagraph*, October 1, 1954.

⁸⁶ “Steak n Shake Has Best Year, Officers Report,” *The Pantagraph*, December 7, 1955.

Bloomington., and in 1957, they participated in celebrating the 100th anniversary of Illinois State Normal University.⁸⁷ Other advertisements recognized the achievements of the Dairy Industry and State Farm Insurance.

McLean County-based operations expanded as well, with Steak-n-Shake's meat grinding centered entirely in Bloomington. This began in the 1940s, with some of the earliest references to the Steak-n-Shake Commissary showing up in 1942 newspaper articles.⁸⁸ The plant continued to grow over the years, and by 1949, the plant processed more than one million pounds of beef for the company.⁸⁹ By 1957, meat grinding for the entire company was centered in Bloomington after spending \$65,000 to upgrade their meat processing facility. Prior to this, because of strict interstate commerce rules, the company had to set up small meat processing commissaries in all of the states which they had restaurants in. Now, because of the improvements Steak-n-Shake made at the Bloomington facility (which included replacing tile floors with concrete, replacing old equipment with stainless steel equipment that was easier to sterilize, and the addition of more refrigeration space allowed all of the meat processing to be done in refrigerated areas) they now had a complete government meat inspection program. From this point on, all of the restaurants were provided from the single location in Bloomington, thus allowing them to close their smaller meat processing plants.⁹⁰ Ground meat was then shipped out to satellite locations in refrigerated trucks.

By its 25th anniversary, Steak-n-Shake had 39 drive-ins in 5 states, and sales peaked to \$8 million that year.⁹¹ 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. While others found it problematic as they would be pandering to the needs of a private firm rather than the needs of the community.⁹² It was eventually decided that the city would use regular traffic lights and add in a turn arrow if the need arose.⁹³

Sales records only increased throughout the 1960s under Edith's watchful eyes, going from \$11 million in 1964 to \$18 million in 1968.⁹⁴ Additionally, the number of Steak-n-Shake locations had grown to 50 in four states by this time.⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷

⁸⁷ Advertisement, *The Pantagraph*, February 18, 1957.

⁸⁸ "Steak n Shake Opens Here," *The Daily Clintonian*, February 20, 1942.

⁸⁹ Bill Kemp. "Newsletters evoke time when Steak n' Shake called Twin Cities home," *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 2022.

⁹⁰ "Steak n Shake Meat Grinding Now Entirely Centered Here," *The Pantagraph*, August 25, 1957.

⁹¹ "Steak n Shake is Celebrating Its Silver Anniversary," *The Pantagraph*, December 1, 1959; "Steak 'n' Shake Maps Florida Expansion; Peak Sales \$8 Million," *The Pantagraph*, December 7, 1959.

⁹² "Normal Balks at Left Turn Signal for Drive-in trade," *The Pantagraph*, December 3, 1957.

⁹³ "Got Lights, But Eveything's Not Right at Main, Virginia," *The Pantagraph*, March 14, 1958.

⁹⁴ "Steak n Shake Has Record Increases," *The Pantagraph*, November 20, 1968.

⁹⁵ "Business News, Finance, Industry," *The St. Louis Post Dispatch*, November 26, 1968.

⁹⁶ "Steak n Shake Stock Sale," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, November 26, 1968.

⁹⁷ "William H. Belt Obituary," *The Pantagraph*, December 25, 1985.

In 1970, Longchamps attempted to sell Steak-n-Shake to White Capital Corp and Swiss Enterprise Corp, but this never happened. Instead, Longchamps continued to run Steak-n-Shake, much to the dismay of many stakeholders. In 1971, minority stockholders filed a suit in St. Louis County circuit court against Longchamps, President John R. Engle and Director William A. Huber, and Edith Belt and her son William. They believed that Longchamps misused Steak-n-Shake money, which hurt their own returns, and that the Belts used inside information to warn their friends to sell shares of their stock before Longchamps gained control.⁹⁸ Eventually, Longchamps sold its shares to Franklin Corp. from Indianapolis, Indiana, and Longchamps representatives resigned from the Board of Directors. The new management resumed the payment of quarterly dividends to its stakeholders, which had ended so poorly for the previous owners.⁹⁹

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. Her services were conducted by Christian Science Reader Allen Peters.¹⁰⁰ At the time of her passing, there were 62 Steak-n-Shake restaurants.

Steak-n-Shake has continued as an important name in the restaurant industry since then. In 1980, the company offered massive prizes like antique cars and vacations for their anniversary celebration, showcasing their wealth and importance.¹⁰¹ In 1997, they were referred to by *The Pantagraph* as “fast food before fast food.” Steak-n-Shake allowed people to get used to eating out on a regular basis, not just on special occasions. They offered good food for an affordable price, and showed that people did not have to choose between food within their budget and a friendly dining experience.¹⁰² Also in 1997, the original Steak-n-Shake location was revamped. The original building had burnt down in multiple fires during the 1960s and 1970s, leaving all but one wall destroyed. But the new establishment was brought back to life and resumed its service to its dedicated customers.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, this location only stayed open until August 1999, when they closed due to their location in the Sugar Grove Floodplain and inability to make additions to the structure without the State of Illinois’s permission. This limited the scope of their remodeling, and the company opted for a new location at 614 West Raab Road instead.¹⁰⁴ The structure that housed the first Steak-n-Shake is now the home to Monical’s Pizza.

In 2000, ex-president Robert Cronin published a book sharing the history of Steak-n-Shake, *Selling Steakburgers: The Growth of a Corporation Culture*, giving insight on the company’s culture and the stories that newspapers would not have known. By this time, there were 400 Steak-n-Shake restaurants throughout the United States.¹⁰⁵

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

⁹⁸ “Steak n Shake Holders Sue Longchamps,” *St. Louis Dispatch*, April 16, 1971.

⁹⁹ “Steak n Shake Plans to Resume Dividend,” *St. Louis Dispatch*, September 22, 1971.

¹⁰⁰ “Mrs. Edith Belt Dies; restaurant co-founder,” *The Pantagraph*, July 24, 1972.

¹⁰¹ Advertisement, *Tampa Bay Times*, July 23, 1980.

¹⁰² Advertisement, *The Pantagraph*, August 17, 1997.

¹⁰³ “First Steak n Shake Site May Be Revamped,” *The Pantagraph*, September 10, 1997.

¹⁰⁴ “Steak n Shake past savored during farewell,” *The Pantagraph*, July 15, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ “Lots of Sizzle in Ex-President’s Book,” *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 2000.

time, it seemed the company was doing fairly well, peaking with 626 restaurants in 2018.¹⁰⁶ 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. This was a money-saving move on the part of the company, but an unpopular decision among customers, and former employees and customers who were unhappy with this new direction.¹⁰⁷ One such employee, Ed Snodgrass, stated that he wished the company the best of luck, but was unsure how they would pull off the change.¹⁰⁸

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.

By: Emily McCusker, 2024

¹⁰⁶ "Changing Tastes," *The Pantagraph*, March 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ "Changing Tastes."

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.