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August Becker and traditional vs. modern culture in the first decades of the twentieth century

Michelle Lea Becker Smith
University of Northern Iowa

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AUGUST BECKER AND TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN CULTURE IN THE FIRST
DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Michelle Lea Becker Smith

University of Northern Iowa

July, 2015

ABSTRACT

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, American culture changed drastically from the traditional agricultural culture that had sustained it for a century to one that was modern and revolved around the urban landscape, consumer culture, and manufacturing. In this thesis I explore this change in American culture through the life of August Becker, son of a rural German immigrant who chose a life of crime instead of staying in rural Iowa. His life choices are the lens used to explore the changes in American culture through the first decades of the twentieth century.

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Entitled: August Becker and Traditional VS Modern Culture in the First Decades of the
Twentieth Century

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

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Date _____ Dr. Brian Roberts, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date _____ Dr. Liesl Carr-Childers, Thesis Committee Member

Date _____ Dr. Robert Dise, Thesis Committee Member

Date _____ Dr. April Chatham-Carpenter, Interim Dean, Graduate College

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INTRODUCTION

In 1900 another baby boy was born to Katherine and Conrad Becker in the rural community of Buck Creek, Iowa. They named him August and he joined a family of twelve growing up on the family farm. Hundreds of babies were born in northeast Iowa that year, and none figured prominently in the country or in the world. Not even little Gus as he would be known. But his life represents a glimpse into the changing landscape of American culture during the first decades of the twentieth century. Not every American's name is mentioned in a history book, but every American's story is significant in its own way. The story of America is more than just the story of prominent men and women whose names are recorded in the annals of history. The story of America is told through every American who lives and dies on American soil. It is told through their tragedies and their triumphs, through their loves and their losses, through their passions and the sundry day to day chores that we all must face. It is told through every visitor who has been touched by the unique culture the American melting pot has produced. Gus Becker joins the millions of Americans who anonymously march through time striving to achieve their unique dreams and goals. Every single one of those lives and dreams have a story and have helped to create America. This is the story of the farm versus the city, of the traditional versus the modern. This is Gus's story.

CHAPTER 1

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

Beginning in the eighteenth century America waged unrelenting war against the Native Americans who inhabited its most Western states for the next one hundred and seventy-five years, completely annihilating some tribes and pushing the rest onto small reservations; leaving the majority of the land available for white men and women who were willing to improve it by the late eighteenth century. The American West was wide open and represented freedom and autonomy. Many believed that a man could own his own land and build a farm and a life for his family with just the sweat of his brow. In 1870, The Iowa Board of Immigration published a pamphlet entitled “Iowa: The Home for Immigrants” in English, Swedish, Dutch, German, and Danish to entice those looking for the freedom of land ownership.¹ Immigrants from Northern Europe poured into America looking for opportunities of land ownership and autonomous family farms. After a quick stop in Chicago or the larger cities strung down the Eastern seaboard, most of the northern European immigrants headed to the sparsely populated states west of the Mississippi river and established farms and homogenous rural communities that carried on the traditional culture of their homelands.

By the turn of the century the bucolic American ideal of independent farmers and landowners was rapidly disintegrating. The land west of the Mississippi river had been

¹ Stephen J. Frese “Divided by a Common Language: The Babel Proclamation and its Influence in Iowa History,” *The History Teacher* 39/1(2005): 59-88.

tamed and was now in the hands of private citizens. The days of open farmland available to anyone willing to improve it were gone. At the same time immigration accelerated sharply; 15 million immigrants arrived in the US between 1900 and 1915 which was about equal to the number who had arrived in the previous forty years combined.² Additionally, these immigrants were not the rural Northern European farmers that had most recently sought out their fortunes on American soil. The new immigrants to America hailed from Southern European countries like Italy and Greece and settled in American cities instead of seeking out the agricultural opportunities of rural America. Ghettos sprung up in New York and other major cities along the Eastern seacoast that consisted of several blocks of lower income homes and tenements that were mainly comprised of a single ethnic group. Like the Northern European immigrants before them, they continued to keep their native cultures alive; but they did so within the confines of the city instead of seeking out the farmland of the American west.

More and more American were living in cities. Between 1899 and 1908 34% of American were employed in agriculture, by 1919 that number had dropped to 24%, and would continue to drop drastically throughout the period; by 1939 only 13% of Americans were working in agriculture.³ To make a living and support a family, a large percentage of Americans began to work in the booming field of manufacturing.

² Library of Congress *Immigrants in the Progressive Era* retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/> (1999)

³ Sean D. Cashman, *America in the Age of the Titans*. (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 10-12.

Previously, goods were manufactured individually by craftsman who took pride in their work. With the dawn of the industrial revolution and advances in manufacturing like standardization, interchangeable parts, and the ubiquitous assembly line, goods could be manufactured more quickly and cheaply using unskilled laborers versus highly skilled craftsmen. The advances in manufacturing were staggering. For example, a man working in 1781 could produce one pair of shoes in four days; in contrast a man working in 1925 could produce ten pairs of shoes in just one day.⁴ The laborers were just as interchangeable as the parts they created and assembled and were treated as such. Working conditions were dangerous, and the pay was low.

The goods that were being churned out of American factories not only needed cheap and interchangeable labor to create the products, they also needed a ready and willing buyer. Marketing and advertising became big business in their own right. The growth of advertising was as staggering as the growth of production: in 1880 American manufacturers spent a total of \$30 million on advertising, by 1910 that number had jumped to \$600 million.⁵ In order to effectively market all of the new products that American industry was producing, advertisers began to shape and create a new culture of desire and acquisition. The successful American no longer owned land but things. As Jim Potter declared in *The American History Between the World Wars* (1974) “the bread

⁴ Cashman, *America in the Age of the Titans*, 22-23.

⁵ William Leach, *Land of Desire Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. (New York: First Vintage Books, 1993), 154.

and but for problems of survival of earlier decades were now replaced for a majority by the pursuit of happiness in the form of the traditional minority pursuits of wine, women, and song.”⁶ Advertisements sold style and promoted desire. Americans needed their products in order to attain happiness. Self-fulfillment could no longer be attained by hard work and moral living, but by acquiring an array of products. Success was no longer defined by character, but by possessions.

The entertainment industry further promoted the idea that consumption was the key to happiness. One of the most popular genre in Hollywood was the gangster movie. The majority of these movies followed the life of a poor but moral boy who is dissatisfied with his life. In his pursuit of a better life he comes in contact with gangsters who teach him how to steal and cheat his way to prosperity. He achieves success and social mobility through the back door of criminal behavior but his method is immaterial, the fact remains that he achieved. The new American gangster differed from the outlaws of previous years by their luxurious lifestyle. Desperados like Billy the Kid and Jesse James lived in the saddle with only the clothes on their back and were part of the vast untamed landscape of the West. They were hard men who lived in hard times. In contrast, the new gangster was from the city. He was a flashy dresser with polished shoes and a pinstriped suit. He drove a fast car and lived in a big beautiful mansion or an ultra-modern penthouse. He had impeccable manners and was always suave and sophisticated.

⁶ Sean D. Cashman, *America in the Twenties and Thirties*. (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 41-42.

He acquired the façade of society along with the rest of his possessions that proved he had made it. The gangster was always recognized by his style and opulence, whether on the big screen or in the lurid tales published in the newspapers.⁷

While the new American culture of consumption and style was created and nurtured in the city, rural America was no longer isolated from their urban neighbors. Advances in printing assured that even the most rural populations had access to newspapers. And due to advances in communications rural newspapers were able to report national news in a much timelier manner than ever before. Rural publications like the Waverly Democrat and the Sumner Gazette carried stories of national importance like the sinking of the Titanic alongside stories of local importance that told of weddings, funerals, visits, and other events of everyday life.

In the first years of white settlement west of the Mississippi river it could take up to 3 months for news of national importance to reach rural populations, and once a family set out in a covered wagon headed west the family and friends they left behind understood that they would most likely never see their loved ones again. But in 1869 the Union and Central Pacific Railroads met in Promontory Point, Utah and within the course of the next few decades America was connected by a fast and reliable transportation source for goods, people, and information. Additional lines were rapidly added connecting every part of America and Americans were able to travel about their vast country with much more ease and regularity, bringing new ideas and culture with them.

⁷ David E. Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 64-65.

For the first time in the history of America, people had greater access to a variety of lifestyles and cultures that was previously unavailable.

The America at the turn of the century was a very different place than the America of just a few decades before. The change in immigration patterns, the rise of industry, the gains in agriculture, and the advances in sharing information all contributed to change society and American culture more rapidly than any other time in history.

CHAPTER 2

GUS BECKER OF BUCK CREEK

August Becker, nicknamed Gus or Auggie, was born June 17, 1900 to Katherine and Conrad Becker in rural Bremer County, Iowa. The Becker family consisted of ten children; Emma (1882), William (1884), Anna (1885), Alma (1888), Sarah (1890), Louise (1894), Conrad (1896), Lena (1898), August (1900), and finally Henry (1904) (Figure 1).

Both Conrad and Catherine had emigrated from the Mecklenburg-Schwerin area of Germany as children; Conrad in 1867 at the age of 13 and Catherine in 1869 when she was 9. The Becker and Buhr families were part of a large migration of German peoples to America that began about 1850 and lasted until the early 1910's. The German immigrants were usually skilled in a trade or in agriculture and were drawn to the newly settled west instead of the more densely populated urban areas of the Northeast.

The first white settlers had arrived in Bremer County in 1845 when the land was inhabited by Winnebago, Meskwaki, and Potawatomie Native Americans. By 1848 an attachment of American troops from Fort Atkinson were called to clear out the Native Americans; moving them North of St. Paul Minnesota on the Crow River Reservation. After the removal of the Native Americans white settlers streamed into Bremer County at a rapid pace, lured by the rich dark soil and abundant water and woodlands. The majority

of the settlers in the area were either the children of German immigrants, or had emigrated from Germany themselves (Figure 6).¹

Conrad and Catherine married March 31, 1881 in the small rural Buck Creek German Lutheran Church. The ceremony was conducted in the German language of the Mecklenburg-Schwerin area, as were all church functions until 1941. They settled a few miles from Buck Creek along the banks of the Wapsie River in the Spring Fountain area of Dayton Township. Dayton Township was exclusively a rural area with the exception of the tiny village of Buck Creek. In 1882 Buck Creek was described as “A country settlement in the eastern central part of Bremer County, 18 miles from Waverly, and 7 south of Sumner, on the D. & D. R.R. [a railroad line]”... The community included a carpenter, a justice, a saloon, a wagon maker, a sawmill, a grocer, a shoemaker and a blacksmith. The majority of Dayton township residents are German immigrants or the children of German immigrants.²

The Beckers, like their neighbors, clung to the culture, language, and values they had brought with them from Mecklenburg-Schwerin. At home the entire family exclusively spoke the German language of the Mecklenburg-Schwerin area. The younger generations did learn English, but their parents refused to learn and also refused to allow

¹ Union Publishing Company *History of Butler And Bremer Counties, Iowa: Together With ... Biographies of Representative Citizens. History of Iowa* (Springfield, Ill.: Union Publishing Company, 1883). 75-78.

² J.F. Grawe, *History of Bremer County, Iowa*. (Chicago: SJ Clarke Publishing Co, 1914), 134-135.

it to be spoken in their home. The Beckers were not alone in their adherence to their native culture and language. In 1917 with the onset of the war with Germany, the Iowa state Council of Defense resolved “that the public schools of Iowa, supported by public taxation, should discontinue the teaching of the German language ... in the interest of harmonizing and bringing our people together with a common language, believing thus they would act more patriotically and more essentially with a common purpose.”³ This legislation, called the Babel Proclamation, was just one of the many examples of anti-German sentiments that were becoming widespread in Iowa cloaked in the guise of patriotism. While Germany’s attack and sinking of the Lusitania was the main cause of the anti-German sentiment across America, the German-American’s perceived resistance to acclimation into American culture also played a part.

Although anti-immigrant sentiment was not secluded to the state of Iowa, Iowa was the only state to outlaw the public use of all foreign languages, and it was clear that the Germans were the main target of the legislation.⁴ Due to aggressive recruiting of German farmers just a few decades before, German immigrants were present in all 99 counties and were by far the largest immigrant group in Iowa. Once the proclamation was in place German language teachers were let go and German textbooks were destroyed. After the German language was eradicated from public schools the Iowa

³ Frese, “Divided by a Common Language” *The History Teacher* 39/1, (2005): 59-88.

⁴ Frese, “Divided by a Common Language” *The History Teacher* 39/1, (2005): 59-88.

government next targeted private parochial schools that were instrumental in continuing the German language and culture for the younger generations.⁵ The Iowa State Council on Defense did not just target the educational system, it was also suspicious of any business or community that retained traditional German influences. For example, the German Savings Bank in Tripoli, located just five miles from the Becker farm, was brought to the attention of the Council in 1918. “Enclosed [is] a draft on the German Savings Bank of Tripoli ... You will notice ... the German Coat of Arms on the face of it. It seems an awfully strange thing that a bank in this country can put out a check with the German Coat of Arms on it and go unmolested.”⁶ In response, the secretary of the council promised quick action and later that year the German Savings Bank of Tripoli, Iowa became the American Savings Bank.⁷

The aggressive nature of the Iowa government against the German language is indicative of the nature of the German immigrants in the state. If the German immigrants had been willing to embrace American culture and language, they would not have been persecuted. But their choice to live in tight knit communities that were intrinsically German made them a target.

⁵ Frese, “Divided by a Common Language” *The History Teacher* 39/1, (2005): 59-88.

⁶ Frese, “Divided by a Common Language” *The History Teacher* 39/1, (2005): 59-88.

⁷ American Savings Bank Tripoli, Ia. *Our History* retrieved from <https://www.asbtripoli.com/about-us/our-history>

The Beckers were a typical farm family of the period and produced the majority of their own food. Catherine and her daughters would spend a good portion of their time preparing meals for the family as well as planting, maintaining, and harvesting a large garden and canning massive amounts of vegetables to be used throughout the coming winter. Electricity was not widely available in Bremer County for the rural population until the mid-thirties, so all household chores would be done without the help of modern appliances.

Along with the vegetables, the Beckers raised cattle and hogs for butchering and cows for milking. Conrad and the boys would work the fields, tend to the livestock, repair fences, and all the other back breaking chores associated with the running of a successful farm at the turn of the century.

August attended the one room schoolhouse down the road with his brothers, sisters, and neighbors until seventh grade. Here he would learn the three R's; reading, writing, and arithmetic. School allowed the children a reprieve from their usual day of farm chores that lasted from sun up to sun down. The closest high school was about four miles away in Sumner, and at the time most rural children did not attend school past eighth grade. The Beckers did not see the point of going through so much trouble of sending the children to high school just to work on the farm. In 1929 August wrote "you see my parents were 100 percent German and did not believe in schooling."⁸ His younger brother Henry stated in 1940:

⁸ August Becker, letter to J.J. Sullivan; Warden of Minnesota State Prison in

Now I want to tell you something about the Becker family, my father and mother came from Germany, bought a farm in Bremer county near Sumner. They had very little schooling but made a success of farming but did not believe in education, August was one in a family of twelve that wanted an education, he wanted high school and college and we were all against him on that, because our father and mother felt that they had made a success in farming with only about a year of education and we had all received an eighth grade education and that was enough for August. But August never gave up, he begged and pleaded for days and months to let him go to high school four miles from where we lived, they finally let him go for three of four months then took him out of school and would not let him go back, this broke his heart and spirit, he worked at home but was and took no interest in his work, then he left home and when we heard from him again he was working in the Russell Lamson Hotel in Waterloo, Iowa and going to night school...I don't want you to think that our father and mother was cruel to August, they just did not believe in education, and what they did by taking August out of school, they was sure was for his own good.⁹

The Beckers, like most of their neighbors, were totally focused on their farms and continuing the culture and lifestyle they had brought with them from Germany.

Education was not seen as a priority since it was not needed to run a prosperous farm.

Although Gus identified the reason they were not supportive of education as their

German background, it may have been more than that. Richard Hostadter has identified

that Americans engaged in agriculture are often opposed to higher education for their

children and the Becker family's unwillingness to allow Gus to pursue his dream of

education was indicative of the sentiment of anti-intellectualism in the agricultural

community.¹⁰

Stillwater Minnesota, undated.

⁹ Henry Becker, letter to State of Minnesota Board of Parole, 28 June, 1940.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1964), 112-114.

His parent's attitude concerning education had major effects on Gus, who dreamed of life beyond the banks of the Wapsie and the farm. Gus believed that the key to fulfilling his dreams was obtaining an education, or at the very least he rationalized later in life that his lack of education was the impetus that drove him into leaving the farm life.

When he was 16 August left his home and family to move to Waterloo; a city with a population of 4,000 located about forty miles south of Buck Creek. August worked at the Russell Lamson Hotel as a busboy from 6:00PM until midnight, and would attend what he called college from 8:00AM until 5:00PM. According to Gus, he continued this grueling schedule for about six months until he could no longer afford tuition and was forced to quit college. At which time August began to work twelve hour shifts at the hotel in order to support himself. August later said of this time at the Russell Lamson hotel:

I was forced to leave school and take a regular watch as a bell for 12 hour nights which brought me a little more money But not much. And so as a poor green farm boy in a large hotel I was an easy victim to temptation and found out later that a hotel is the worst place in the world for a green boy at sixteen. So when I saw how other people were living and me going hungry half the time it was not very hard for an older person to use me to sell his whiskey to guests for more money and so became a bootlegger and gambler at 17 years of age.¹¹

Gus described this as a turning point- the moment when he was no longer an Iowa farm boy trying to get an education to better himself. He was now a criminal, but he was

¹¹ August Becker, letter to J.J. Sullivan; Warden of Minnesota State Prison in Stillwater Minnesota, undated.

also careful to note that it was not his fault. He identified an older person who led him at the tender age of 17 to a life of crime that he would never have done on his own.

While working at the Russell Lamson Gus also became fascinated with the sport of boxing. He identified himself as a boxer for the next decade and would spend his time training and fighting in amateur matches. A nephew who lived with Conrad and Catherine remembered Gus coming to visit the family farm and training by running for miles in the frigid Iowa winter with no shirt or shoes to toughen himself for the ring.

Boxing in America has always been identified as a lower class sport that “epitomized a lower-class cultural style of raucous play that affirmed such (lower) working-class virtues as prowess, bravery, and physical culture, while promoting honor over money-making and valor over comfort.”¹² Gus chose to engage in sport to stay physically fit instead of the hard farm labor of his family. Also by choosing to train for boxing instead of a much more accepted sport like baseball, Gus distanced himself even further from the rural traditions of his family and their community.

The time Gus spent at the Russell-Lamson was a study in contrasts. On one hand Gus had moved to Waterloo to chase his dream of education which represented the epitome of high culture. At the same time he also became active in the sport of boxing that represented the very lowest form of American culture. It is clear he was still undecided on how to pursue his own brand of success, but both avenues lead him away

¹² Stephen A. Riess, “The New Sport History” *Reviews in American History* 18/3 (1990), 311-325.

from the bucolic success of land ownership to a more modern idea of success centered on the city and material culture.

Gus stayed at the Russell Lamson for two and a half years and made the forty mile trip back home to visit his family frequently during this time. He became known as a trouble maker and was arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct and brawling several times in Sumner. It is not hard to conclude that the young Gus would enjoy spending money and showing off to his friends that had stayed behind and became farmers like their parents before them. Gus was no longer part of the community as later articles in the local paper would make abundantly clear; in 1928 the *Waverly Democrat* wrote

Becker is 29 years old and has resided southeast of Tripoli nearly all his life. He is a shrewd fellow, and his associations in Chicago and other places have proved a good school for crooks. The Milwaukee police warned Sheriff Hallowell that Becker was shrewd and knew the various ins and outs of the professional criminals ... The defendant comes from a family of high standing in Bremer County. They are honest and frugal people that are respected by all who know them¹³

Gus was no longer identified as a local boy but as a criminal with ties to large cities like Chicago. Gus was described as shrewd while his family was frugal and respected. This idea of the moral farm family was generally accepted across the country. As more and more Americans left the farm and settled in metropolitan areas, they began to view the families they left behind as simpler as and more honest than the people they encountered

¹³ "Hold-Up Man Returned to Answer Charges." *Waverly Democrat*, 8 December 1928.

in the cities. This nostalgic attitude of glorifying the American farmer as a bastion of morality continues in America even to this day.

Between the ages of 16 and 29 Gus held a variety of jobs including various bellboy positions at the Russell Lampson Hotel in Waterloo, IA; a leading hotel in Independence, Iowa; the Randolph Hotel in Des Moines, Iowa; The Lemmington Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Carpenter Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and the Newcomb Hotel in Chicago, Illinois. He also spent a year and a half as a bellboy and dietician at the City of Chicago's Tuberculosis Sanitarium. After the Sanatorium he would become a laborer at the Chicago Cut Stone Factory for about a year. He then worked for a year or so as a private chauffeur for Miss E Fisher. He then switched jobs again and became a truck driver for Edward Sanitarium in Naperville, IL for about a year after which time he returned to the Chicago Cut Stone Company for another year before he became a truck driver for Mrs. Larsen of Chicago. Gus would also travel home to help his parents out on the farm when he was needed, like when his older brother Conrad was drafted to fight in World War I. He also worked on a farm for Mr. Tonne in Sumner Iowa in 1927 or 1928.¹⁴ Gus claims that although he did move positions frequently, he was never discharged. He does not; however give any reasons for his frequent and varied job changes that allowed him to move all over the Midwest. Americans were enjoying more freedom of movement at the turn of the century with the advent of the automobile, but rarely did the average American change jobs and cities as frequently as Gus.

¹⁴ State of Minnesota Board of Parole, Interview with August Becker #9852, 25 July 1935.

It is also important to note that although Gus did spend a little time back in Sumner, the majority of his time was spent in increasingly larger cities. Gus stopped taking classes and instead focused his energy on boxing. Gus was no longer caught between two worlds, his path was decided.

CHAPTER 3

CRIME SPREE

Gus's first major brush with the law came in 1927 when he stole a car in Sandusky, Ohio and received a suspended sentence. This is the only time the record shows Gus in Ohio, presumably he was only passing through possibly for an amateur boxing match. This incident while minor; was the start of a string of arrests in 1927-1929. The Waterloo Courier reported the following incident in 1927, before Gus was identified as the perpetrator. In August Gus; using the alias Fred Necker; approached Jay Hileman of the Blackhawk Buick Company in Waterloo about purchasing a used car. Hileman found a Hudson Brougham valued at \$1200 and went on a test drive with Gus who said he was a farmer from Denver, IA and would need to consult with his wife before purchasing. Gus knew that by choosing to pose as a farmer, he would be perceived as more trustworthy and honest. Later that day, a third man approached Hileman and told him he worked for Fred Necker and that his employer would be unable to get to Waterloo with his wife until after supper. The "hired man" was a short, heavy-set man with a foreign accent who would later be identified as Hugo Eiffert.

According to newspaper accounts Gus and Eiffert showed up at the garage to talk to Hileman about the Hudson again still using the aliases of Fred Necker and his hired hand. Gus claimed that he was unable to bring his wife to approve the purchase because they had chickens and there had been a chicken thief in the area and they did not want to

take any chances of getting their chickens stolen. Hileman offered to drive the car to Denver so that Gus's wife could see the car and approve the purchase.

The three men headed towards Denver which was about 15 miles North of Waterloo and 20 miles South of Sumner with Hileman driving, Gus in the front seat beside him, and Eiffert in the back. As they got closer to Denver, Gus asked to drive and Hileman obliged. As they drove along, Gus talked about the farmers who lived in the area with familiarity, putting the salesman at ease. A little past Denver at the small community of Artesian Gus turned onto a little used road that led to the Big Woods and pulled the car to the side of the road near the bottom of a hill. He then turned to Hileman, ordered him to "stick 'em up", and produced a revolver. Hileman struggled to escape, breaking the glass of the windshield and passenger side door in the process. But Gus quickly over powered him and robbed him of his wallet and jewelry before tying a red handkerchief over his eyes. Gus and Eiffert then shoved Hileman into the backseat and drove around the country side for nearly an hour before unceremoniously stopping the car and shoving him out onto a lonely country road a mile east of Artesian.

Hileman walked about a half of a mile to the nearest farm where he used the telephone to call his employer who in turned contacted the Waterloo police as well as the Bremer county sheriff's office. Hileman described Necker as "of medium build, age about 28, height, 5 feet 10 ½ inches, wore brown sweater coat and striped overalls over dark pants. A part of the time he wore brown glasses with one lens cracked." Eiffert was

described as heavy-set, weight, 150 pounds, height, 5 feet 6 inches wearing a blue serge suit and a black soft hat.¹

Gus chose to pose as a farmer because he knew a farmer was portrayed as someone moral and trustworthy. Hileman himself states that Gus's knowledge of area farmers put him at ease. After the robbery, the men were called "confidence men" and compared to "the thrills of the dime store novel"² before their real identities were revealed. The men had dressed and acted like simple farmers, and had even identified people who lived in rural communities, but once they revealed their criminal nature they were no longer identified with the rural community and instead were identified as outsiders.

The Waverly Democrat reported that the next day Gus and Eiffert abandoned the stolen car near Galena, Illinois. A short distance from where they abandoned the stolen Hudson they came upon a young man and his "best girl." They attacked the frightened couple and tied them to a tree and took off in their car. A few weeks later the pair stole another car from a doctor in Osage Iowa and headed back to Bremer County.³

¹ "Confidence Men Rob Jay Hileman of Gems and Car." *Waterloo Courier*, 11 August 1927.

² "Confidence Men Rob Jay Hileman of Gems and Car." *Waterloo Courier*, 11 August 1927.

³ "August Becker in Idaho Penitentiary." *Waverly Democrat*, 27 June 1929.

The next crime to be reported in the local papers was on September 4, 1927. Gus and Eiffert knocked on the door of John Shultz of Tripoli, just a few miles from Gus's parent's home. Schultz invited the two familiar men inside. Once inside his farmhouse, Gus demanded Schultz give him any cash and firearms he had. Schultz was shocked since he had known Gus and the Becker family his entire life. When Gus pulled out his revolver, Schultz complied with his demands and handed the robbers \$200 in cash and a shotgun.⁴

The papers also reported that on September 24, 1927 Gus and Eiffert showed up at the Wilkening Oil Station of Readlyn, Iowa, about 10 miles from the Becker farm and robbed the startled attendant and various patrons of the garage. In the police report the attendant said that he and the other victims had known Gus and had tried to reason with him to no avail. Once again Gus and Eiffert sped off with about \$100 gathered from the patrons and the cash register.⁵

These armed robberies of his rural neighbors cemented Gus's reputation as a hardened criminal and assured that he would be the top target for every officer in Bremer County. Gus stole from his neighbors and friends. The hard working farmers in Bremer County just did not behave that way. The Waverly paper described his activity as

⁴ "Hold-Up Man Returned to Answer Charges." *Waverly Democrat*, 8 December 1928.

⁵ "Hold-Up Man Returned to Answer Charges." *Waverly Democrat*, 8 December 1928.

“terrorizing the central and southern part of the county”⁶ and him as “alleged hold up man, auto thief, and all around bad man.”⁷ He was no longer one of their own but “had left three years ago for Chicago where, it is said, he learned the ways of big crime.”⁸

The papers continued to recount Gus’s activities after the gas station robbery by reporting that the car that Eiffert and Gus had used for the recent robberies stalled on a gravel road and two young local men stopped to see if they needed help. They were rudely rebuffed and left the two men and the stalled car. As they drove off, Gus or Eiffert fired a shot at their car. The startled young men reported the incident to the local police who headed out to investigate. Eiffert and Gus took off running into a corn field. The less agile Eiffert was captured and was put on trial for the robbery and kidnapping of Jay Hileman, John Schultz, and the Wilkening Oil Station. He was given twenty-five years at hard labor at the state penitentiary and implicated Gus as the mastermind behind the crimes at his trial while he himself was just a simple accomplice, lured into crime by the hardened Gus.⁹ The capture of Eiffert and his subsequent confession was a catalyst for Gus. Throughout the rest of his life, Gus would claim that Eiffert unfairly accused him of

⁶ “Hold-Up Man Returned to Answer Charges.” *Waverly Democrat*, 8 December 1928.

⁷ “August Becker Obtains Freedom through Clever Ruse” *Waverly Democrat*, 3 January 1929.

⁸ “Becker Brought Back to Waverly to Face Charges” *Waterloo Courier*, 10 December 1928.

⁹ “August Becker in Idaho Penitentiary.” *Waverly Democrat*, 27 June 1929.

crimes he did not commit, thereby setting of a chain of events that ironically forced him into crime and away from his rural roots. It is also important to note that although Gus continued to claim innocence from all the crimes in Bremer County he would later be positively identified by Jay Hileman the car salesman, as well as by the friends and neighbors he robbed in Tripoli and Readlyn.

In December of 1928 Gus received a ticket for speeding in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and was ordered to show up for police court the next day. When he failed to do so the Milwaukee PD issued a warrant for his arrest unaware there were already multiple active warrants in Iowa. The Milwaukee police quickly located Gus and ran a full background check. Unfortunately for Gus, the Waterloo police department recognized the man listed as “ Martin John Baker, alias Martin Blake, alias William Blake” as the man wanted in Bremer county for numerous armed robberies and kidnaping and informed the Bremer County Sheriff, John Hollowell, that Gus had been detained in Milwaukee. Sheriff Hollowell quickly contacted the Milwaukee PD to let them know he would retrieve Gus to face the charges against him in Bremer County after Jay Hileman positively identified him as the man who had robbed and kidnapped him almost two years earlier.¹⁰

Once again Gus found himself back in Bremer County, but this time he was behind bars and staring down the barrel of a minimum of 25 years in the state penitentiary if convicted. Gus quickly hired Burton Sweet, a former Iowa State Senator,

¹⁰ “Hileman Robber and Kidnaper to be Brought Back.” *Waterloo Courier*, 8 December 1928.

as his attorney and spent the first several days of his stay at the jail in conference with his attorney and his younger brother Henry.¹¹ The fact that Burton Sweet agreed to take Gus on as a client attests to the wealth and reputation the Becker family enjoyed. As a former Iowa State Senator, Mr. Sweet was the preeminent attorney in Bremer County.

As reported in the local newspapers Gus refused to plead guilty, and also refused to allow any of his family members to post bail. Gus spent Christmas of 1928 in his cold jail cell in Waverly, about 20 miles from the Becker farm. The day after Christmas Gus requested a private meeting with the Evangelical minister from the church he had attended with his family as a child; claiming he desired to take communion. The deputy granted a private meeting with Gus, his brother Henry, and Rev. Philip Hilligardt of Buck Creek. The three men met alone in a second story conference room in the jail. Rev. Hilligardt recounted the details of the meeting to a reporter of the Waterloo Courier newspaper:

Becker seated himself next to the outside window and took a chair next to the door. Becker was chewing tobacco, and as he talked with the minister he raised the window slightly and spat outside. The next time he wanted to spit he raised the window a little bit higher. When the window was high enough to look out Becker stuck his head out to see how far it was to the ground. Like a flash he stood up and raised the window a little higher and jumped out.¹²

¹¹ “Farmers and Business Men Friends Call on Becker in Jail at Waverly; Former Congressman his Attorney.” *Waterloo Courier*, 11 December 1928.

¹² “Criminal Uses Minister’s Visit as Opportunity to Break Jail.” *Waterloo Courier*, 27 December 1928.

The scintillating story was recounted in the Waverly Democrat, the Waterloo Courier, and the Sumner Gazette. All three papers reported that as soon as Gus jumped the seven feet to the ground the deputy sheriff was notified in the next room. He ran out to see if he could locate Gus, but no trace could be found. The sheriff was called and quickly decided to send to Waterloo for some bloodhounds and organized a posse of local men to search for the escaped convict. Gus had escaped into the cold Iowa night at about 6PM when the majority of the townspeople were at home eating dinner, and he was able to get out of town without being detected despite still being clothed in the light clothing provide to him by the jail.¹³

By 7PM the posse was formed, the blood hounds had arrived from Waterloo, and the manhunt commenced. They followed his trail out of Waverly towards the small village of Bremer, through Readlyn, and across the countryside to the small railroad town of Dewar, a total of twenty-six miles from Waverly. The scent was lost and the trail ran dry at the train platform; the sheriff surmised that Gus jumped a train and was probably out of the state.

The weary posse made their way back to Waverly empty handed at 4am, 9 hours after they first began the hunt. When the sheriff searched the cell that had held Gus until

¹³ “Becker in Escape From Jumping Through Open Window” *Sumner Gazette*, 3 January 1929.

his escape he found a revolver fashioned out of cardboard and tinfoil. It was clear that Gus had no intentions of facing a jury of his peers and the possibility of prison.¹⁴

The story of Gus's daring escape made the front page of the Sumner and Waverly paper and new details continued to be published for weeks after the initial story. In these two more local and more rural papers, Gus is portrayed as a local youth gone bad – a farm kid who's brush with big city criminal turned him bad despite being from one of the best families in the county.

With his capture and escape from Bremer county jail, there was no going back to his family and the life that he had left on the farm at the tender age of sixteen. He was too notorious in the community and all of Bremer County. His sister Alma who lived approximately 20 miles from the Becker farm later recalled men hiding in the cornfield across from her farm waiting to see if Gus would show up to visit his sister. She was very reluctant to talk about her brother, and was very ashamed to be related as her daughter-in-law would recount many years later. His next known crime was in Gilmore City, Iowa in May of 1929.

According to a story published in the Des Moines Register at about 9:30PM three men; all armed with shotguns, entered the home of former Iowa senator HS Van Alstine who was currently a cashier at the Gilmore City Bank. The Van Alstine's were a prominent and wealthy family; along with Mr. Van Alstine's service in the state

¹⁴ "Did Becker Plan Escape or Just Grasp Opportunity?" *Waverly Democrat*, 10 January 1929.

legislature, Mrs. Van Alstine served as mayor of Gilmore City. One of the men was dressed as a woman and wore heavy make up to disguise his looks; presumably this was Gus although he would never publicly admit to the part he played in this robbery; and the other two wore masks over their faces. At the time the men entered, Mr. Van Alstine was home along with his wife, son, daughter, and two grandchildren. All six were ordered to face the wall and their hands were quickly tied behind their backs. The bandits took a diamond ring valued at \$1200 from Van Alstine's daughter and a pair of his pants, but did not take anything else from the family. For the rest of the night the Van Alstine family was kept prisoners in their own home. They were allowed to sit or lay on the floor while the bandits closely guarded them. The next morning, the terrified and exhausted Mr. Van Alstine, his son, and his daughter were untied and ordered into a sedan that was parked outside their home with two of the bandits. Inside the car were two other men and a woman who presumably had stayed in the parked car all night keeping watch over the house. One bandit stayed behind to guard Mrs. Van Alstine and her two grandchildren.¹⁵

The bandits took the Van Alstine's to the bank where Mr. Van Alstine worked and ordered the younger Van Alstine's, along with four other bank employees to face the wall. three of the bandits guarded them while the other two forced Mr. Van Alstine to open the vault. The quickly scooped up \$5000 and left the bank, warning the Van Alstine's and the bank employees to stay against the wall. The bandits headed out of

¹⁵ "Van Alstine Family is Kept All Night by Robbers." *Des Moines Register*, 14 May 1929.

town after stopping briefly to pick up the bandit they had left to guard Mrs. Van Alstine and the children.¹⁶

The police were notified of the robbery a few minutes after the bandits left the bank, and a posse was quickly formed. They searched throughout the day, but no trace of the bandits could be found until two weeks later when Harold Ball was arrested and put on trial for his part in the robbery. During his trial Ball implicated Gus as well as Frank Melavin and Roy Salman as the other bandits involved. According to Ball, the four men acted alone which is at odds with the accounts written in the *Des Moines Register* and the *Waterloo Courier* who both state there were 6 bandits, one of whom was female. But since they had convicted one bandit and had a lead on three others, the Iowa police were apparently content. No effort was made to find out who the remaining bandits may have been and all involved concentrated solely on finding and arresting Gus, Salman, and Melavin.¹⁷ When Ball implicated Gus in this crime, his notoriety grew and he became known throughout the state of Iowa, not just in Bremer County. For the first time in his short criminal career, his exploits had made the *Des Moines Register*- the largest newspaper in the state. He had also chosen to target prominent members of the community, not just random farmers and used car salesman. In addition, Gus had committed a bank robbery and had kidnapped an entire family including children. The

¹⁶ “Van Alstine Family is Kept All Night by Robbers.” *Des Moines Register*, 14 May 1929.

¹⁷ “Implicates August Becker in Gilmore City Robbery.” *Waverly Democrat*, 30 May 1929.

famous St Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago had occurred just a few month previous and had made national news. Americans were being introduced to big city gangsters and were fearful as well as fascinated. When the crime happened in other communities Americans were fascinated with the daring exploits of the new American Gangster. But when it occurred in their own backyard to their own neighbors and friends it was frightening. And he had gained the attention of more than just rural Bremer County. He now was a known criminal and a fugitive throughout the state.

CHAPTER 4

GUS'S LAST STAND

Gus again disappeared from Iowa. He now had a little cash from the Gilmore City bank robbery and headed to Minneapolis where he stayed out of the limelight and trained for boxing. According to later accounts in the *Waterloo Courier* the handsome boxer soon caught the eye of a pretty, young store clerk named Alice Hull. She had moved to the city just two years before with her parents from the small town of Kimball, Minnesota where she had played volleyball and diamond ball in high school. Since moving to the city, Alice had joined a girl's league basketball team and was an avid sports fan. The tall, dark, and handsome stranger who gave his name as Bill Thompson swept the young girl off her feet with the stories of his professional boxing career in Chicago.¹

While wooing Alice in Minneapolis, Gus pulled some small robbery jobs with Melavin and Salman, most notably robbing H.E. Stone, a store manager in St Cloud of money and his inscribed watch - which was later found in Gus's pocket. Alice married her handsome boxer in May and moved to a cabin with her groom and who she believed were his trainer and promoter Pat Melavin and Roy Salman on Birch Lake near Elk River, Minnesota. Mr. and Mrs. David Hull, parents of the bride who had disapproved of

¹ "Stop to Get His Pretty, Young Wife Cause of August Becker's Capture." *Waterloo Courier*, 10 August 1929.

the marriage, said they saw very little of their daughter and her new husband after the nuptials and believed they had rented a cottage so he could train for some upcoming boxing matches.²

According to reports after a few months on the lake, Gus was running short on cash. He knew he would need to plan something that would have a bigger payoff than the small robberies that would only net a few hundred bucks at most. He set his sights on the small bank in Elk River and formulated a plan. On August 9, 1929 Gus, Salman, and Melavin knocked on the door of Dr. Page, a kindly and well known doctor in Elk River. One of the men pretended to be injured in a car accident, and the other two supported him. The doctor was not in, but his wife called and urged him to hurry home to treat the “injured” man. Once Dr. Page arrived home, the three men pulled revolvers from their coats and ordered the family against a wall; reminiscent of their actions in Gilmore City from a few months before.³

The Courier continues to report that the men forced Dr. Page to call L.K. Houlton, president of the bank. When he did not answer, they demanded the Dr. to contact Sam Houlton, brother to the president. When he was also unable to be located the bandits told Mrs. Page to contact Tom Olson, a cashier at the bank. When she crossed the room to call Mr. Olson, she saw him walking across the street and was commanded to call him in.

² “Stop to Get His Pretty, Young Wife Cause of August Becker’s Capture.” *Waterloo Courier*, 10 August 1929.

³ “August Becker is in Custody after Minnesota Battle.” *Sumner Gazette*, 15 August 1929.

When Mr. Olson entered the home, he was quickly apprehended along with the Dr. and Mrs. Page and their son Billy.⁴

Gus and another of his men took Dr. Page and Mr. Olsen to the bank, leaving the other man behind to guard Mrs. Page and Billy. Once inside the bank Gus and the other bandit alerted the cashiers and to patrons of their intentions and ordered them to stand around and act natural. The other bandit guarded them while Gus ordered Mr. Olsen to the vault and grabbed in excess of \$7,200 in small and large bills. The two bandits fled the bank stopping only for a moment to pick up the remaining bandit at the Page's, and headed out of town.⁵

The newspaper continued to report that about ten minutes after the robbery, the superintendent of the newly formed state highway patrol happened to be traveling through Elk River and was alerted of the situation and given the description and license plate numbers of the getaway car. He quickly stopped to pick up another highway patrolman in town and gave chase.

In the meantime, Gus, Salman, and Melavin stopped by their rental cottage and told Alice that they had to leave right away because of a claim on an automobile accident in Minneapolis. They quickly collected their belongings and set out. Because of the lost

⁴ "August Becker is in Custody after Minnesota Battle." *Sumner Gazette*, 15 August 1929.

⁵ "August Becker is in Custody after Minnesota Battle." *Sumner Gazette*, 15 August 1929.

time taken to pick up Alice, the sheriff was able to easily locate the bandits and began pursuit.⁶

The patrolmen chased the robbers for miles, trading shots with the bandits until both cars were simultaneously disabled in a grain field. The patrolmen continued to fire shots at the disabled getaway car until Gus tumbled out of the driver's seat; his right arm shattered by one of the patrolmen's bullets. Alice followed him into the field and cradled her injured husband's head in her lap as he lay bleeding. Gus quickly shoved the packet of money at Alice before the patrolmen drug her away from him and arrested her along with Salman and Melavin who had surrendered once the car had been disabled. Salman, Melavin, and Alice were sent to the county jail while Gus was sent to the hospital where his arm was amputated due to the severity of the injury.⁷

Once at the jail, Alice claimed she knew nothing of any criminal activity, and said she believed that Gus was a boxer and Salman and Melavin were his trainer and promoter. She did admit to knowing there was a machine gun in the car, but had no idea they had planned to rob the bank or any knowledge of any of their other crimes. While in jail, she learned the man she married was really named August Becker, and was wanted in Iowa on charges of robbery and kidnapping. Alice was charged with receiving stolen property because of the packet of money she accepted from Gus as he lay injured in the

⁶ "Stop to Get His Pretty, Young Wife Cause of August Becker's Capture." *Waterloo Courier*, 10 August 1929.

⁷ "Stop to Get His Pretty, Young Wife Cause of August Becker's Capture." *Waterloo Courier*, 10 August 1929.

field. Much later, all charges would be dropped against Alice.⁸ The newspapers portrayed Alice as a pretty and innocent victim, enchanted by his dark good looks and his stories of his boxing success. The papers report that she was an avid sports fan, and played both in high school and on a ladies league that had been organized by the department store in which she worked when she met Gus.

It is interesting to note that department stores were the center of the new culture of consumerism as William Leach discusses in his book *Land of Desire*. Every choice that Gus has made since his move to the Russell Lamson Hotel when he was just sixteen years old speaks of his dream of consumer culture. Even the education he pursued was to take him away from the farm and the traditional life of his parents. He had waivered for a moment between the legitimate road to his idea of success exemplified by obtaining an education and the illegitimate road of criminal activity and the seedy world of boxing. But the destination remained the same. Now, 13 years later, he chose a wife who played sports and worked in a department store- the Mecca of consumer culture. She personified everything that he desired. Every decision he made, every step he took, lead him away from the farm and into the city. He rejected the traditional farm life of his family to pursue his own more modern dream.

Salman and Melavin were not as lucky as Gus's bride. On August 15, just six days after they robbed the Elk River Bank, Roy Salman and Pat Melavin were given life

⁸ "August Becker Captured in Robbery of Elk River Bank." *Waverly Democrat*, 15 August 1929.

sentences. Their trials lasted less than a day since both men pled guilty. During their trials, both men implicated Gus as the mastermind behind the bank robbery in Elk River, as well as the Gilmore City robbery and numerous other smaller armed robberies of garages and stores in Minnesota like that of H.E. Stone in St Cloud. Gus's trial would have to wait until the next day since he was still in the hospital recovering from the amputation of his right arm about four inches below his shoulder.⁹

On August 16, 1929, just a week after he robbed the Elk River Bank and had his right arm shattered by a bullet, August F Becker faced a judge. His parents had hired Burton Sweet to defend him, the same lawyer Gus had conferred with before jumping jail a few months previously. His trial lasted hardly a half of an hour and at its conclusion Gus would be a convicted criminal. During the trial, Mr. Sweet made the following statement:

May it Please Your Honor. I had not expected to make any statement until a few moments ago. I am profoundly impressed with the fact that I am an officer of this Court. I am also profoundly impressed with the sacred duty I am to perform on behalf of the defendant before this court. I realize fully that anything I may say will have no effect on the sentence finally rendered by the Court. I must say to the Court that I have known this man and have known him since his youth. I know his family, I know his Father and his Mother. I know personally his brothers and his sister. They are as a whole one of the most respectful and most respected families in the county in which I live. Today you have before you a young man possessed of unusual powers intellectually, and until this occasion, physically. I will say that if those powers had been directed long proper lines, he might have been a wonderful success in the business world and a captain of industry in the community. Your Honor, within this young man, we find a strange mingling of politeness, kindness, cheerfulness and magnetism. We find blended in his personality a sort of dual nature. He is of a pleasing disposition,

⁹ "Two Minnesota Bank Robbers are Given Life Terms." *Des Moines Register*, 15 August 1929.

kind to children and his friends, and why he should take this peculiar course he has, I do not know. His is a nature full of courage, calmness, and self possession, and yet his deepest regret is not for himself, but for his family, his family is upon his mind, the family that he has disgraced. I will say, Your Honor, that Mr. Brown who is here and who is the man who maimed the defendant, that he bears no grudge against him. He says, and I believe him, that never in his life has he shot a person, neither has he attempted to shoot, but that he has bluffed a number of men. It is a peculiar history, a history, I may say, almost beyond comprehension. In a physical way, if properly trained as a prize fighter, he would be in a class with Jack Dempsey. This young man has great energies, and enormous power, part along correct lines, and yet today before stands a maimed man. Yet he holds no grudge against the man who shot off that arm. He is still suffering great pain, yet he came to this court although in the ordinary run of the circumstances he would be under a doctor's care and be confined to a hospital for many days. Yet on account of his physical strength and good condition, he is able to stand the strain. He tells me, Your Honor, that he has no grudge against the county attorney nor the judge who will sentence him. I say this, in order that you may understand this man. A few days ago, he walked the streets a free man, and today when the sun goes down a life sentence will have been imposed, and he passes from among men, not dead, but practically so. The other day he possessed all the members of his body, but today he is maimed for life, and yet all this does not make him complain. His chief concern is his home and family. Your Honor, I say there is still some good in this man. There is good in him, and I hope someday he is able to demonstrate to the world and his family that there is good in him. To be sure, a life sentence is about to be imposed, so it is only a hope. We know something of the average man, we know his trials, we know his failures, his successes, his triumphs. We know his passions, the temptations to fall, but we do not know when the wild storm and tempest wreak havoc, we do not know when the clouds dim and darken in an unguarded hour, and the terrible deed is done which leaves a curse upon the soul. Our ignorance should make us hesitate. Our own weakness should make us merciful. We are ready for sentence to be pronounced.¹⁰

Once in prison Gus proved that an education was important to him by studying via correspondence classes. He also wrote plays, lectures, and songs- all of which are now lost. His incarceration and the loss of his right arm proved to him that he would not

¹⁰ State of Minnesota, transcript of State v. August Becker, 16 August 1929.

be able to achieve his dreams through the quicker method of criminal activity and boxing, but he clung to his dream and continued to work to achieve it by correspondence classes. Education was still not a necessary element of success in the rural community he left. It was not easy or cheap to receive an education in college. Gus was required to work long hours daily in the prison factory as well as performing other chores within prison industries. Gus also had to learn how to write again because of the loss of his right arm. But he continued to overcome all of the obstacles and received his degree while incarcerated with the support of his younger brother Henry. Gus also wrote many letters and worked tirelessly to be considered for parole, which was finally granted in 1942.

After obtaining parole Gus worked briefly for his sister who now owned the family farm, before moving to Waterloo to work with his brother William at a manufacturing plant. Finding work that was suitable for a one-armed man was difficult even with the prosthetic arm he was fitted with in prison and the education that he had worked so tirelessly to receive. After a few years in Waterloo, Gus moved to Des Moines and married a woman named Doris. He was working as an attendant in the parking lot owned by his wife when he hung himself with the drape cords in the home he shared with his wife. August was 55 years old when he chose to take his own life.

When Gus died he was living in relative anonymity in a small house in a lower middle class neighborhood in Des Moines, Iowa. He had been running from the farm and the traditional life of his parents his entire life. From leaving the farm at sixteen to get an education, to boxing, to robbing friends, to robbing banks, to obtaining an education in prison, Gus never gave up. Until he was 55 and he saw no other avenue open to him to

find success in the modern world; the one thing that had drove all of his decisions his entire life. Gus chose to end his life and his struggle to find his place in the world by his own hand.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes just hearing a name will take a person to another era. George Washington and Samuel Adams brings feelings of bravery and patriotism in the war for Independence. Quantrille's Raiders evoke feelings of desperation and cruelty in the twilight of the Civil War. Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp exemplify the freedom and lawlessness of the Old West. Theodore Roosevelt stands in the dawn of a new century holding his big stick. Al Capone and John Dillinger race across the Midwest in fast cars with pretty molls. The name August F Becker does none of these. He was nothing but a German farm boy in Iowa turned two-bit criminal who's only claim to fame were a few articles in local papers that followed his crimes and eventual capture. But his story still resonates within the era he lived.

Gus saw his family and community as rural and traditional. Buck Creek Iowa was the embodiment of his parent's bucolic ideas of success. It is what they and their parent's dreamed of as they journeyed from their native Germany to Iowa. But Gus wanted something else. America was changing fast and Gus wanted to be part of that change. He wanted the fast life and the fast cars that embodied the Modern America. But how was a poor farm boy who was even denied higher education to take the leap from farm life to city dreams? Gus lived his life searching for the magic road to his version of success.

Gus achieved his version of success for a short time. He got to drive fast cars, travel, wear silk suits, and even get in the ring as an amateur boxer. But his success was

cut short once the law caught up with him and he lost his arm and his freedom in the space of a week. Gus turned criminal in order to achieve what he believed was success, while turning his back on his parent's idea of success. His methods assured that he would never be able to achieve success in any capacity in the end. In February, 1930 Gus wrote the following letter to his sister Emma who had married a neighbor. She and her husband owned a prosperous farm located just a few miles from her parents. She had a large family and followed in her parent's footsteps.

2/23/30

Sunday Afternoon Feb 23-1930

To my dear Sister Emma & Family

I do not know how you are making it in this cruel world. But it is my wish and hope that this letter: it being the first letter I ever wrote to you and your family that you are well and happy one and all. Emma dear Sister I remember my last at your splendid farm home with a bleeding heart and tears in my eyes. My last visit was on the day of your new barn raising it certainly was a beautiful day for that purpose and will never forget the many and good things we had to eat. How many years is it since I saw your place last? If my memory is not failing me it must be seven years ago in 1923. Anyway it is a long time ago, and I will carry the beautiful vision with me to my dying day which may not be much longer. Sister dear please forgive me for not writing to you and your family before this. But I went through so much hell and pain that I was really not my real self. Further moor I lost my right arm and being naturally right handed I found it very hard to write with my left hand. To be maimed is a big handicapp. no one can realize its greatness until one becomes so. Emma dear sister I suppose it is [REDACTED] far bove you to understand how and why a son of Conrad Becker can be in prison. Well it is very sad. But to make a long story short on account of limited writing space I will tell you some thing about why I robbed a Bank [REDACTED] or why I become a robber. I was forced to do it. by being constantly falsly accused by the police and people of Iowa. in fact they had false circumstantial evidence with falsly sworn endictments against me that called for a twenty five year sentence.

so you see I was hounded by the police day and night in fear of being caught to serve a sentence of which I am innocent. so I took to trail to avoid to avoid such unjust. But I found out I could not remain at my boxing or any other honest living for fear of being detected and hunted by a lot of false blood thirsty selfish none justice dealing money hungry people. So that is the very reason why I became a robber of said bank to be what they falsely accused me of being. Why? because they might have eventually sentenced me to twenty five years to prison of which I was and am not guilty. Well to make a long story still shorter. I will say and write the truth that the Iowa police and some narrow minded people did not dare to consider the fact that Hugo Eifert lied about me. Oh well life offers so much bitter fruit so I guess one and all must share if not on earth then in the great unknown. knowing I am partly justified to know that those who are guilty of sending me to a life long living prison death will pay for it if not on earth then in the hereafter. And now I want you – your whole family, and the police, and the people of the United States to know I am not guilty of anything. except this bank robbery in minnesota. even so I was forced to do it or choose between starvation or serve a sentence in Iowa of which I am innocent. And so I choose the former. So may God help me as I did not receive Justice. Oh Sister dear where are the saviors of humanity or where are the Justice dealing public if such a thing exist. Yes I planned to rob the bank here with two other boys. But I used all the intelligence common sense character to over come hurting anyone in doing so. But never the less they did not even meet me half way in giving me Justice. They did not consider my manly part nor anything pertaining to my broadmindedness goodness or life saving plan. The Judge merley read the law. stating that such an offense called for a life sentence. So he went on. I the Judge of the law sentence you August Becker to prison at hard labor to the end of your natural life. as your physical body may permit. Well sister those Words have been my harshes in all my life. Any way Justice was not given me. Only a wrong law was imposed. which was made and passed by men that never were in want nor do they understand such a teribble sentence nor do they care. if they do care I hope they will show it before it is too late to have me benefit by it. no body seems to care. and no body really knows. how it hurts to be in prison espicially when on is not bad at heart. It is impossible for any one to understand a prison hell unless one becomes a prisoner. one must live the living death to find and see the heart ache loneliness agony sacrifice mental torment mind torture suspense bitterness and the down fall physical and spiritually. the hell of prison is to great for me to endure. since my goodness and clean character was not taken in consideration and not dealt with accordingly. So there is or are only three ways to over come it. one is liberty one death the other insanity. if one goes insane which is bound to come if I live. at least if I become insane then I will not be conscious of it. But I prefer liberty or death. So if they carry out such an unjustifiable law

then I will fool them all. by doing the only thing that is left to do. I swear I will not go out of here and old man nor middle aged alive. Why? because I have not done a wrong big enough to ask or impose it upon me. I am a lover of the great outdoors the sun the wind moon lakes and streams and of natural foods in there natural state. I despise anything modern or prepared foods. there is nothing to live for while here. Nothing but worry and loneliness. But I will say that I do not mind paying for my wrong. But only equal punishment for wrong not 60-40 or worse. With love to all. Your Brother August Becker

P.S. yes I received your letter thanks. Also Please answer my letter at once because I am anxious to hear from you. Save this letter¹

Gus talks about the idyllic days of raising her barn and life on the farm. He articulates a longing for nature and the good clean living that he left on the farm, and he blames society for forcing him into a life of crime. While his letter is overly-dramatic, I do believe Gus was goaded into a life of crime. He was inundated with advertisements and other media of a luxurious and exciting life in the city, and he had no idea how to become a part of that life. While he alone is responsible for his criminal actions, he was led there by a larger society that no longer valued the calm and traditional life that he knew in Iowa. So the German farm boy took whatever method he could find to get him to the life he wanted. But in the end, his desires destroyed him.

¹ August F Becker, letter to Emma Geistfelt. 3 February 1930.

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APPENDIX

GUS'S LIFE



Figure 1 - The Becker family circa 1925



Figure 2 – August circa 1910



Figure 3 – August circa 1916



Figure 4 – August circa 1925



Figure 5 – Newspaper clipping given to the author by August’s great nephew from the collection of his mother, Alma Warneke, August’s sister

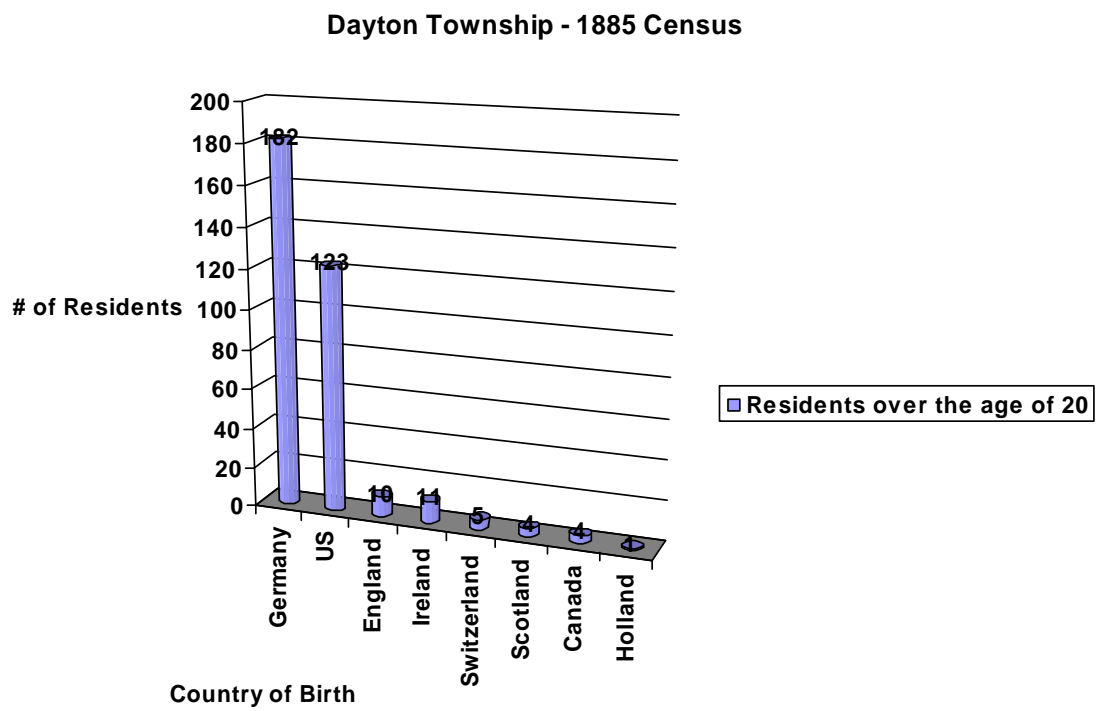
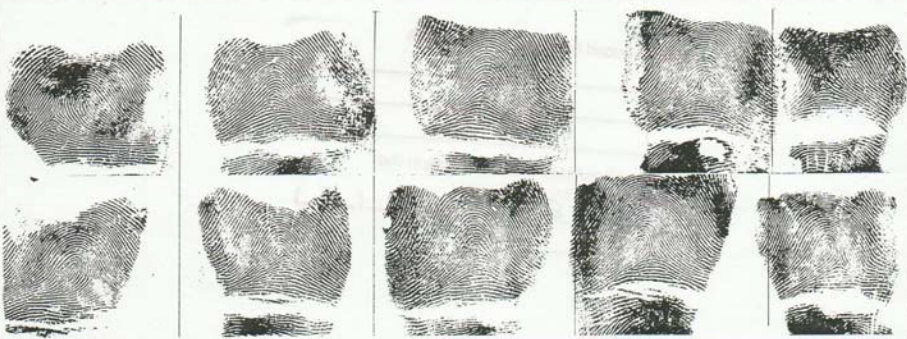


Figure 6 – Dayton Township 1885 census


STATE OF IOWA
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
CIRCULAR No. 65
JULY 15, 1929
QUANTITY ISSUED 12,000

\$250.00 REWARD
FOR THE
APPREHENSION AND CONVICTION OF
AUGUST BECKER
ALIAS MARTIN JOHN BAKER



Age 29 years
Height 6 feet
Weight 175 lbs.
Hair..Bro'n, Wavy
Eyes Blue
Complex. Dark

F. P. FORMULA
14 1 Aa 6
1 Aa 6





Becker is wanted for the crime of entering the Gilmore Exchange Bank at Gilmore City, Iowa, with intent to rob on May 13, 1929. This crime carries a life penalty in Iowa. Warrants have been issued and bonds placed at \$50,000.00. Is always interested in boxing matches and sometimes poses as a boxer. Seldom wears a hat.

IF LOCATED, ARREST AND HOLD AS A FUGITIVE FROM JUSTICE
WIRE ANY INFORMATION TO EITHER OF THE FOLLOWING:

CHARLES STEBBINS, Sheriff Pocahontas County POCAHONTAS, IOWA	J. E. RISDEN, Chief Bureau of Investigation STATE HOUSE, DES MOINES, IOWA
---	--

IDENTIFICATION BUREAUS ARE REQUESTED TO REPORT ANY RECORD OF THIS MAN TO HARRY J. PASSNO, SUPT. OF IDENTIFICATION (OVER) DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, STATE HOUSE, DES MOINES, IOWA

Figure 7 – August Becker Wanted Poster

	<p>\$250.00</p> <p>Reward</p> <p>FOR THE APPREHENSION AND CONVICTION OF</p> <p>Roy Salman Alias Roy Collins</p>	
<p>No finger prints available of Roy Salman</p>		<p>No finger prints available of Donald (Pat) Melavin High School picture of 1923 Class</p>
<p>Salman is wanted for the crime of entering the Gilmore Exchange Bank at Gilmore City, Iowa, with intent to rob on May 13, 1929. Warrant has been issued.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DESCRIPTION</p> <p>Age 21 years Hair Black Height 5 ft. 9 in. Eyes Blue Weight 155 lbs. Slim build Complex. Light</p>		
<p>Melavin is wanted for the crime of entering the Gilmore Exchange Bank at Gilmore City, Iowa, with intent to rob on May 13, 1929. Warrant has been issued.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DESCRIPTION</p> <p>Age 23 yrs. Hair, Light Red (may be darkened) Ht. 5 ft. 5 in. Hook Nose at point Wt. 155 lbs. Very even teeth Complex. Florid When walking looks down. Sometimes works as a barber.</p>		
<p>All three subjects as illustrated on this circular have been positively identified by Mr. Van Alstine and family.</p>		

(OVER)

Figure 8 – Wanted poster for Roy Salman and Donald Melavin

STATE OF MINNESOTA

August 16th, 1929

Against

August Becker

Two o'clock P.M.

985-2

Mr. White: I understand the defendant is ready to plead

Court: Are you ready, Mr. Sweet?

Mr. Sweet: We are ready.

Court: What is the plea?

Mr. Sweet: The defendant enters a plea of guilty to the charge in the indictment.

Court: The defendant, according to our statute, must make the plea in person.

Defendant: Guilty.

Court: Do you want to put a statement on record, Mr. White?

Mr. White: I now move the Court for sentence of the defendant under his plea of guilty to the charge in the indictment, and will say at this time that this crime was committed on the morning of the 9th day of August, 1929, and was perpetrated in this village of Elk River, by using Dr. Page and his wife as decoys to get the cashier of the First National Bank into the Page house, and then taking the cashier to the bank and forcing him to open the vault. These men were at all times armed with loaded revolvers and threatened that if anything went amiss with their plans to rob the bank, somebody would get shot and it wouldn't be them. When they entered the bank they found two clerks and two customers, and lined them up against the wall. They forcibly compelled Mr. Olsen to open the vault and they scooped out the money and put into a brief case, a portmanteau, I think you call it, Afterwards they went back to Dr. Page's house and got their car and the other man who had been guarding Mrs. Page and drove to Bailey Station and turned north there going to Biren Lake where they picked up the woman in the case. Then all four started north towards Brainerd. The officers chased them through parts of Big Lake, Livonia and Elk River, and near Zimmerman, ordered them to stop but they kept on going and finally the shooting commenced, the gas tank was hit and the driver of the car shot through the arm. The officers searched the car and the robbers and recovered all the money amounting to Seventy-two Hundred Dollars, except a dollar or two. All were indicted by special grand jury, and this man's two companions admitted they were the ones who committed several other crimes. There were human beings in the bank, and the bank was robbed by fear and threats exercised upon Tom Olsen, the Cashier. I think this is a fair statement of the crime.

Figure 9 – August Becker trial transcript 8/16/29 Page 1

Court: Have you anything to say, Mr. Sweet?

Mr. Sweet: May it please Your Honor, I had not expected to make any statement until a few moments ago. I am profoundly impressed with the fact that I am an officer of this Court. I am also profoundly impressed with the sacred duty I am to perform in behalf of the defendant before this Court. I realize fully that anything I may say will have no effect upon the sentence finally rendered by the Court. I may say to the Court that I know this man and have known him since his youth. I know his family, I know his father and his mother. I know personally his brothers and his sister. They are as a whole one of the most respectful and most respected families in the county in which I live, Today you have before you a young man possessed of unusual powers intellectually, and until this occasion, physically. I will say that if those powers had been directed along proper lines, he might have been a wonderful success in the business world and a captain of industry in the community. Your Honor, within this young man, we find a strange mingling of politeness, kindness, cheerfulness and magnetism. We find blended in his personality a sort of dual nature. He is of a pleasing disposition, kind to ~~his~~ children and his friends, and why he should take the peculiar course he has, I do not know. His is a nature full of courage, calmness and self possession, and yet his deepest regret is not for himself, but for his family, his family is upon his mind, the family that he has disgraced. I will say, Your Honor, that Mr. Brown who is here and who is the man who maimed the defendant, yet he bears no grudge against him. He says, and I believe him, that never in his life has he shot a person, neither has he attempted to shoot, but that he has bluffed a number of men. It is a peculiar history, a history, I may say, almost beyond comprehension. In a physical way, if properly trained as a prize fighter, he would be in a class with Jack Dempsey. This young man has great energies, and enormous power, part along correct lines, and yet today before you stands a maimed man. Yet he holds no grudge against the man who shot off that arm. He is still suffering great pain, yet he came to this Court, although in the ordinary run of circumstances he would be under a doctor's care and be confined to a hospital for many days. Yet on account of his physical strength and good condition, he is able to stand the strain. He tells me, Your Honor, that he has no grudge against the county attorney, nor the Judge who will sentence him. I say this, in order that you may understand this man. A few days ago, he walked the streets a free man, and today when the sun goes down a life sentence will have been imposed, and he passes out from among men, not dead, but practically so. The other day he possessed all the members of his body, today he is maimed for life, and yet all this does not make him complain. His chief concern is his home and family. Your Honor, I say there is still some good in this man. There is good in him, and I hope some day to be able to demonstrate to the world and his family that there is good in him. To be sure, a life sentence is about to be imposed, so it is only a hope. We know something of the average man, we know his trials, we know his failures, his successes, his triumphs. We know his passions, the temptations to fall, but we do not know when the wild storms and tempests wreck havoc, we do not know when the clouds dim and darken in an unguarded hour, and the terrible deed is done which leaves a curse upon the soul. Our ignorance should make us hesitate. Our own weakness should make us merciful. We are ready for sentence to be pronounced.

(2)

Defendant sworn.

Q. What is your name?

A. August Becker *— Aug 22 29 —*

Q. Are you married?

A. No.

Q. Are your parents living?

A. Yes.

Q. What is their address?

A. Sumner, Iowa.

Q. Is that your address also?

A. Yes.

Q. You heard the statement of Mr. Sweet, your attorney, which was very eulogistic. In face of that statement will tell how you entered this life of crime?

A. Circumstances and conditions.

Q. What circumstances. It is an understating study. Tell what you mean.

A. Well at one time when I was boxing I was falsely accused, I found out the circumstantial evidence was against me I couldn't go through with it, and I drifted.

Q: What ^{was} is your age? *start time 2*

A. About twenty-two or twenty-three.

Q. What is your profession?

A. Well, boxing.

Q. How many years?

A. I trained a year or two before, then I entered the ring and was in the ring three years or about that long. Then I was falsely accused and had to give it up.

Q. When were you first arrested?

A. a year or so ago, outside of being intoxicated.

Q. What were you arrested for?

(3)

Figure 11 – August Becker trial transcript 8/16/29 page 3

- A. For street fights once and for being intoxicated two or three times.
- Q. How long ago was that?
- A. Several years .
- Q. What was your first serious crime?
- A. This is my first serious crime.
- Q. Do you mean that?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Have you seen the statements of Salmon and Melavin?
- A. I have heard something about them. They were untrue as far as I know
- Q. Were you ever convicted of a crime before this one?
- A. No, sir.
- Q. Do you really want that to go on the record? Are you sure you understand the question. These two men, Salmon and Melavin stated that you were with them in several robberies?
- A. I was falsely accused at the time I was boxing. I didn't have a thing to do with the others.
- Q. These two men testified to sticking up a grocery store in Minneapolis, do you know anything about that?
- A. No, I do not.
- Q. They testified to the robbery of a bank in Iowa, were you in on that with them?
- A. No, I heard it mentioned but I don't know a thing about it.
- Q. Do you still want to insist that you had nothing to do with these crimes?
- A. I will admit to being falsely accused, but I will not admit something I did not do.
- Q. Tell about the robbery of the bank in Elk River
- A. Well, it was suggested by all three. I had been having trouble with my eyes, and needed a doctor. I went to Anoka to see a doctor, but he would have nothing to do with me, and sent me to Dr. Page. I went to see him several times, and after the boys mentioned about the bank, I told them it would be a good idea to get the doctor and take him to the bank so nobody would get hurt.

(3)

Figure 12 – August Becker trial transcript 8/16/29 page 4

- Q. What was the idea about the Page house?
- A. He was well known, and if he called anybody to the house, they would gladly come and for that reason he might protect us.
- Q. Are you a drinking man?
- A. I never used it whild boxing, I don't crave it, I take some now and then
- Q. Ever ~~you~~ use narcotics?
- A. No.
- Q. Did you ever have an occupation, aside from boxing?
- A. I have worked on a farm
- Q. What schooling have you had?
- A. Grammar school and about six months in a business school.
- Q. How old were you when you left home?
- A. Sixteen years old.
- Q. Where have you been since then?
- A. I was a truck driver and a private chaffeur at one time, and worked as a hotel bell boy.
- Q. What do you mean by misinforming the Court about these other crimes with these other men.
- A. I will surely admit the things I comitted, but I don't care to admit what I didn't do.

Do you want to question him, Mr. White?

Mr. White: I don't care to.

Court: I think there is nothing for the Court to do but pass sentence. I am not satisfied with your statement. It is a menace to the public to have a man of your description at liberty and for the safety of the public there is only one place for a man like you, to be withdrawn from human circulation forever. *J. J. Howell*

It is the sentence of the Court that you, August Becker, as punishment for the crime of which you now stand convicted by your plea of guilty, be confined in the Penetentiary at Stillwater, Minnesota, at hard labor for the rest of your natural life.

Recess until Thursday August 22nd, 1929, at 10 o'clock A.M.

Figure 13 – August Becker trial transcript 8/16/29 page 5

20419 a302 11-27 2m

Deputy Warden Examination Sheet

Minnesota State Prison

Register No. **9852** Name **August Becker** Date Received **August 16, 1929**
 Alias **Martin Baker, Edward Thompson, William Blake** Date of Sentence **August 16, 1929**
 Criminal History **1918 Sandusky O. Auto Theft, 14 mos. Probation. 1927 Chicago Ill. Assault 6 weeks House of Correction. 1928 Milwaukee, Speeding.**
Escaped from County Jail at Wawerly Ia. Jan 1, 1929, Under indictment for Robbery 1st.

Court Record—County **Sherburne** Sentence **Life** Crime **Bank Robbery**
 Name of County Attorney **Frank T. White** Name of Trial Judge **Hon. Arthur E. Giddings.**
 Personal—Nativity **Iowa** Age **29** years. Color **White** Religion **Lutheran**
 Occupation **Farmer** Height **6 feet** inches. Weight **162½** pounds. Build **Slender**
 Complexion **Dark** Hair **Dark Brown** Beard _____ Eyes **Blue**
 Grade of education **7th. Grade** Are your habits temperate or intemperate? **Intemperate**
 Are you married or single? **Single** Number of children _____
 Wife's name and address _____

Are your father and mother living? Father **Yes** Mother **Yes** Give your parents' names and present address
Conrad and Catherine Becker, Sumner Ia.

Give nativity of parents—Father **Ind.** Mother **Germany**
 Names and addresses of brothers and sisters **Brothers: H.G., Independence Ia. C.C., Oelwein Ia.**
W.J. Waterloo Ia. Sisters, Mrs Henry Warneke, Readland Ia. Mrs Charles Brunce, do. 40
Mrs Gust Geisfeld, Sumner Ia. Mrs Anna Meswarb, do. Mrs Helen Gable, Columbia Heights, Minn. 27

Are or were your father and mother temperate? Father **Moderate** Mother **Yes**
 Were either of your parents, brothers or sisters ever arrested? If so, give particulars **No**

Have you now, or have you ever had, any relatives in prison? If so, give particulars **No**

Is there any insanity in your family? If so, give particulars **None**

Do you gamble? **Yes** Do you use tobacco? **Yes** Do you use snuff? **No** Do you use drugs or opiates? **No**
 Your age when you left home **16** years. Why did you leave? **To shift for self.**
 Were your home surroundings pleasant? **Yes** At what age were you first arrested? **18** years.
 Give particulars, places and dates _____

Give particulars of crime for which you are now committed **Took part in robbing the First National Bank of Elk River Minn., of \$7200.00**

Give names of associates **Three: Alice Hull County Jail Minneapolis. Ray Salmon MSP #9850 Donald Melavin MSP #9851**

Figure 14 – Deputy Warden Examination Sheet for August Becker 8/16/29 Page 1

Place where crime was committed **Elk River Minn** How long were you in jail? **1 week**
and where **Minneapolis, Minn.** Did you plead guilty? **Yes** Did you have a fair trial? **Yes**
Give particulars

How long have you lived in this state? _____ years, **2** months. Give names of persons for whom you have worked in this state, with addresses in full and length of time you have worked for each, covering the past six years—

.Give addresses and length of time you have worked for different persons if outside of this state—
Chicago Cut Stone Co. Chicago, Ill.
Odd jobs.

Give addresses of six or eight reputable citizens who have known you for six years prior to your arrest and conviction—
Wm Schnadt, Sumner Ia.
Bernhard Schnadt, do.
Emil Gaede, do.
John From, do.
Christ Pipho do.

What do you consider the main cause of your downfall? **Bad Companions.**

Give name of person or persons that you think would give you employment in the event of parole—

Figure 15 – Deputy Warden Examination Sheet for August Becker 8/26/29 Page 2

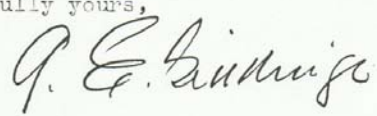
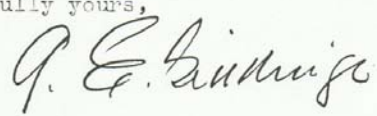
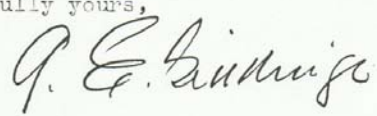
<p style="text-align: center;">STATE OF MINNESOTA DISTRICT COURT EIGHTEENTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CHAMBERS OF ARTHUR E. GIDDINGS JUDGE</p>												
<p>ANOKA, MINN.. August 19, 1929</p>													
<p>Hon. J. J. Sullivan Warden, State Penitentiary Stillwater, Minn.</p>													
<p>Dear Sullivan:</p>													
<p>I am enclosing herewith transcript of proceedings in the cases of Becker, Salmon and Melavin, recently disposed of in the District Court of Elk River, in which all of the defendants were sent to the State Prison for life.</p>													
<p>You have in this bunch a hard-boiled trio, especially Becker and Melavin. Salmon impresses me as somewhat below par mentally.</p>													
<p>You will notice in the record statements made by Melavin and Salmon, showing the comparisons ^{statements} by them of certain other crimes in which they say Becker participated. You will notice in the Becker record that he denies such participation, but from what Salmon and Melavin say, and the information give me by the officers I have no doubt Becker did also participate, and from information give by certain officers from Iowa, together with the history of the case, so far as we know it in Minnesota, I have no doubt that Becker is by far the most dangerous of these three men, and he impressed me as being the most able and the most clever.</p>													
<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p style="text-align: center;">STATE OF MINNESOTA DISTRICT COURT EIGHTEENTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top; text-align: right;"> <p style="text-align: center;">CHAMBERS OF ARTHUR E. GIDDINGS JUDGE</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="text-align: center; padding-top: 10px;"> <p>ANOKA, MINN..</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="padding-top: 10px;"> <p>#2</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="padding-top: 10px;"> <p>I would suggest that if you correspond with the State Criminal Bureau of the State of Iowa, you would receive much more information concerning these men than I am able to give.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="padding-top: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: right;">Respectfully yours,</p> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 10px;">  </div> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="padding-top: 10px;"> <p>AEG:MR</p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p style="text-align: center;">STATE OF MINNESOTA DISTRICT COURT EIGHTEENTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CHAMBERS OF ARTHUR E. GIDDINGS JUDGE</p>	<p>ANOKA, MINN..</p>		<p>#2</p>		<p>I would suggest that if you correspond with the State Criminal Bureau of the State of Iowa, you would receive much more information concerning these men than I am able to give.</p>		<p style="text-align: right;">Respectfully yours,</p> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 10px;">  </div>		<p>AEG:MR</p>	
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<p>AEG:MR</p>													

Figure 16 – Letter from JJ Sullivan, Warden of Stillwater Penitentiary and Arthur Giddings, Minnesota state judge 1929

BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
JOHN FLETCHER
ATTORNEY GENERAL
JAMES E. RISEN
CHIEF OF BUREAU

State of Iowa
Department of Justice
Des Moines

August 28th, 1929.

IDENTIFICATION DEPT.
HARRY J. PASSNO
SUPERINTENDENT

Minnesota State Prison,
Stillwater, Minn.

Gentlemen:

This bureau has the following record on August Becker,
alias Bill Spece, alias Martin John Baker, alias Martin
John Barker, your No. 3853:

12-5-28----Arrested Milwaukee, Wisc. as No. 15549.
Chg-Suspicion. Sentence-Not given.

12-9-28----Arrested Milwaukee, Wisc. as No. 33
Sheriff Bremer County. Chg-Robbery with
aggr. Sentence-Not given.

(Escaped jail from Waverly, Ia.; if
apprehended notify John Hallowell,
Sheriff, Waverly, Ia.)

This subject also bears the aliases of Edward Thompson
and William Blake.

Very truly yours,

SUPT. OF IDENTIFICATION
BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION.

HJP:TS

Figure 17 – Letter from State of Iowa Dept of Justice to Stillwater Prison 8/28/29

Form 109-5M P. 08/28/58

HISTORY SHEET

Case No. 9852

Minnesota State Prison SBC No. _____

Name of Institution

True Name August Becker Date Admitted August 16, 1929

Alias Martin Baker, Edward Thompson, Wm Blake Date of Sentence Aug 16, 1929 Co. Sherburne

Residence Summer Ia. Court Record _____

Date of Birth 6-7-1900 Trial Judge Hon. Arthur J. Giddings

Time in U. S. _____ Landing date _____ County Attorney Frank T. Hite

Time in State _____ Yrs. _____ Mo. 2 Crime Bank Robbery

Sex Male Color White Max. term Life Min. term _____

Color Hair Dk Brown Eyes Blue Build Slender Sentence Life Fine \$ _____

Height 6 ft. _____ in. Weight 162 lbs. Pled guilty Yes Not guilty _____

Beard _____ Complexion Dark Inmate consider fair trial? Yes

Married or single Single Particulars of Crime, time, place _____

Education 7th. Grade Religion Lutheran Took part in robbing the First National

Correspondent Occupation: Farmer Bank of Elk River, Minn of \$7200.00

Address _____

Physical defects, marks, scars, etc. Right Arm Amp.

HISTORICAL

Previous commitments this institution, giving numbers _____

Other institutions _____

Age when first arrested 18 Times convicted _____ Other Indictments _____

Age at leaving home 16 Reason for leaving To shift for self.

Were home surroundings pleasant Yes

Habits: Drink Yes Tobacco Yes Snuff No Drugs and Opiates No

Gambling Yes Immoral _____

Name and Character of associates Three: Alice Hull County Jail Minneapolis, Minn.

Ray Salmon, MSP #9850 Donald Melvin MSP #9851

Names of persons for whom inmate has worked in this state with addresses in full and length of time worked for each, covering past six years?

What does inmate consider main cause of downfall? Bad Companions.

Figure 18 – State of Minnesota History Sheet for August Becker Page 1

FAMILY OF INMATE

(Give as complete information as possible, especially concerning delinquency of relatives)

Character of Father..... Education..... Religion.....

Character of Mother..... Education..... Religion.....

Relatives or ancestors intemperate. Father Moderate

Were parents, brothers or sisters ever arrested (Give particulars)..... No

Are there now or has there ever been any relatives in prison..... No

Family characteristics, mental or physical disability, delinquency, etc. None

Name	Birthplace Age	Address	Previous or sub-sequent Marriage	Occupation Wage
Father or Stepfather (of inmate) <u>Conrad Becker</u>		<u>Sumner Ia.</u>		
Mother Stepmother (maiden name) <u>Catherine</u>		<u>do.</u>		
Brothers	<u>H.G.</u>	<u>Independence, Ia.</u>		
	<u>C.C.</u>	<u>Delwein Ia.</u>		
	<u>W.J. XXXXXXX</u>	<u>Waterloo, Ia.</u>		
Sisters	<u>Mrs Henry Warneke,</u>	<u>Roadland, Ia.</u>		
	<u>Mrs Charles Brunce</u>	<u>do.</u>		
	<u>Mrs Gust Geisfoild</u>	<u>Sumner Ia.</u>		
	<u>Mrs Anna Meswarb,</u>	<u>do.</u>		
	<u>Mrs Helen Gable</u>	<u>Columbia Heights, Minn.</u>		
Wife of inmate (maiden name)				
Children of inmate (state whether legitimate or illegitimate)				
Other relatives				

Remarks

.....

.....

.....

Figure 19 – State of Minnesota History Sheet for August Becker Page 2

I would not had much business to do with my left hand But Hope you will let it to rest it

Dear sir;

This is the unfortunate one Adam Becker writing you a letter the best way I can with my left and only arm. Please Excuse me for taking the liberty to write you. But what I have to ask is very important to me, and several other. Now Mr. Sullivan don't understand me right Please. First of all I do not mean in any way to go against any of your rules. So am only asking and suggesting. Well it is about what my sister told me when she visited me the other day, Monday after dinner, that you according to your rules and law perhaps, would not permit me to receive my common law wife, Miss Alice Hull here near to write me, etc. Of course I am very sorry, very sorry, as man to man I did not mean no harm by receiving it, and am sure she did not. So Please try and to forgive us, as it is your law that prompted it. Of course we are man and wife in our own way, But not legally, etc. Now I know your time is valuable. If I requested this letter and give me an answer or interview in return, my liberty is at stake and my first time in prison as a prisoner, would like to know if I can write to my intended wife, or if I can be allowed to be permitted to marry while here if she would, which I am sure of. Now if you will please read on, I consider liberty the most valuable in love and health second, of course God and soul above all but that as to the here of it more so. Now that you are a high official I would like you to know about my life, so I may be enlightened as to my near future. Of course it would take pages and pages like this to begin to explain but can give you a truthful idea of how much I like her. I am a single man, I really am, and I was born and reared on a dairy farm with six sisters and three brothers, whom are all in good standing in business and respect, my aged parents are highly liked and respected, all who know of them, no marks on any, but me, surely commencing for the rest. Well any way to make a Dad long story short when I, as sixteen years of age I left the farm to get an education at a near city of about 45 population, but found it hard to earn while learning. I see my parents were and are 100 percent But we old German, suppose did not flourish in schooling, so I was fed at a hotel which is the Russell Lawson at Waterloo Iowa from 12 in the evening until midnight and went to college from eight in the morning till five. But that proved to much for me to carry hours and hardly

Figure 20 – Letter from August to prison warden, 1929 page 1

I say as I was making as a full boy, depending on tips ^{or by} ~~or by~~
 in a month, and tips were less so you see getting no money
 from any one to help me get an education I was forced to leave school
 not take a regular month as a full boy for 12 hours nights which
 brought me a little more money but not much, and so as a poor green
 inn boy in a large hotel I was a easy victim to temptation and found
 but later that a Hotel is the worst place in the world for a Green
 boy at sixteen, so when I saw how other people were living and me
 being hungry right the time, it was not very hard for an older person
 to use me to sell his whiskey to guests for more money, and so
 I came bootlegger and gambler at 17 years of age, but did not really
 do any thing for until I became the age of 29 when stopping Elk river
 camp, now since it takes pages and pages to explain about what I
 did between the age of 17 - 29, I would like to have an interview
 with you please, cause I was falsely accused in my teens and
 why twenty, and the police and traps hounded me until I really had
 no of a home to live, cause circumstantial evidence was so strong
 that I could not do or make good in my boxing, I admit that
 I jumped out of open window of Warden jail escaping from my twenty
 in year sentence for what some one else did, and all police record
 is false concerning me from 17 to 29 except Elk river, so in the
 name of man and God give me an interview and I will show to
 you that it is true that I have been accused and hounded ~~and~~
 I mean falsely until I did not know where to turn to

Also let me prove to you that I preached to
 my two kids about Elk river camp, in case they would resist
 or to shoot or kill, and can prove to you if we were for we would
 not be here cause my boys got orders from me to shoot the tires
 of officers car which they did only and I never had a gun,
 and was shot while defenseless and lost my arm and received
 a life sentence because I should not shoot or kill, etc.

Oh yes while I was in Minneapolis jail you were
 being talked about by officers there as being a just and broad
 minded man, and hope not to be disappointed, please give me an
 interview so my future may be a little more to live for

yours truly August Becker, Reg 9852 Cell 389

Figure 21 - Letter from August to prison warden, 1929 page 2

3915-3rd St N.E.
Minneapolis, Minn

Mr. J. J. Sullivan
Stillwater, Minnesota

Dear Sir:

I'm writing, as
you asked me to, in
regard to visiting and
corresponding with
August Becker.

at the time I told
you I was his wife
I did not realize

Figure 22 – letter from Alice Hull to prison warden, 1929 Page 1

what difference it could make. I was so used to being addressed as his wife it seemed as a matter of course to me.

If you can't allow me to write to him, I would like to be able to visit him occasionally. I don't get a chance to go there very often so would appreciate it very much if you could see fit to reconsider, and grant me this one pleasure,

Respectfully
Alice Hull

Figure 23- letter from Alice Hull to prison warden, 1929 page 2

4340 2nd St NE
 Minneapolis, Minn
 October 6, 1929
 Mr J. J. Sullivan 9852
 Stillwater, Minnesota
 My dear Mr Sullivan,
 I am sending a
 pipe, which I wish
 you would examine
 and give permission
 for this pipe to be
 given to my husband
 August Becker.
 He asked me to bring
 him a pipe when I
 came down but, in
 going down, somehow

Figure 24 – Letter from Alice Becker (Hull) to warden, 1929 Page 1

or other it got broken
and I would appreciate
it very much if you
would permit me
to send this pipe to
him through you.
I want to thank
you again and,
I remain,
Sincerely
Alice Becker

Figure 25 – Letter from Alice Becker (Hull) to warden, 1929 Page 2

Box 55
Oct. 11, 1933

Dear Sir:

During my four years of imprisonment I used most of my leisure time for educational purposes and acquired sufficient knowledge to take any elementary course from the University of Minnesota except one. This one exception is arithmetic. Unfortunately, for some reason I am hardly acquainted with the science of figures.

While I took a course in English composition from the University of Minnesota and while I intend to continue I am not competent to take a course in arithmetic until a certain degree of ~~an~~ arithmetical knowledge has been acquired.

Now then, in view of the fact that I am physically handicapped, that I have devoted nearly every precious moment of my leisure time to worth-while study (with a view of becoming educated and a better man in every respect) that I am willing and determined to learn, will you consider granting me a very reasonable request?

I shall be grateful to you if you will allow me to attend the present day school in order that I may prepare myself for correspondence course in arithmetic.

Respectfully yours,
August L. Becker

Deputy Warden #9857
11/2/33

OK

Please return with your notation.
J.F. 10/14/33

Warden: This man will start Day-School Monday Oct. 16th - L.F. Utecht

Figure 26 – Letter from August Becker to warden, 1933

Minnesota State Prison
MANUFACTURERS OF
**BINDERS, MOWERS, HAY RAKES
 AND BINDER TWINE**

RESIDENT OFFICIALS
 J. J. Sullivan, Warden
 M. C. McMillan, . . . Supt. of Industries
 R. B. McPhetres, . . Office Manager
 Myer Bernstein, . . Machinery Sales
 H. L. Rydeen, Twine Sales
 C. F. Rinker, Manager Repair Dept.
 420 East Ninth Street, St. Paul

STATE BOARD OF CONTROL
 Blanche L. La Du, Chairman
 L. G. Foley, G. B. Carlgren
 Downer Mullen, Secretary

Stillwater, Minn.,
 March 1st, 1934.

L. F. UTECHT, DEPUTY WARDEN


Mr. J. J. Sullivan,
 Warden.
 Institution.

Dear Sir:-

You are informed that inmate BECKER, August #9852, Shop G, received August 16th, 1929, Sherburne County, crime-bank robbery, sentence-life, was this P. M. confined to solitary; report follows:

"Getting hard; talking back to an Officer and going out into Shop F looking for the foreman, and telling an Officer, just try to put him in the hole.

J. B. Gagnan,
 Keeper.

Yours truly,

 Deputy Warden.

U/b.
 COPY-HOSP.

Minnesota State Prison
MANUFACTURERS OF
**BINDERS, MOWERS, HAY RAKES
 AND BINDER TWINE**

RESIDENT OFFICIALS
 J. J. Sullivan, Warden
 M. C. McMillan, . . . Supt. of Industries
 R. B. McPhetres, . . Office Manager
 Myer Bernstein, . . Machinery Sales
 H. L. Rydeen, Twine Sales
 C. F. Rinker, Manager Repair Dept.
 420 East Ninth Street, St. Paul

STATE BOARD OF CONTROL
 C. J. Swendsen, Chairman
 Blanche L. La Du, L. G. Foley
 Downer Mullen, Secretary

Stillwater, Minn., 5th March 1934


L. F. UTECHT, DEPUTY WARDEN

J. J. Sullivan,
 Warden,
 Institution.

Dear Sir:-

For your information I have to report that Becker, A. # 9852 at present confined in Solitary, was reported as follows:

" Loud singing in Solitary 8 p.m. 3/3/34"

Yours very truly

 Deputy Warden.

LFU/P

RECEIVED
 MAR - 5 1934
 MINNESOTA STATE PRISON

Figure 27 – Letters from deputy warden to warden, 1934

State of Minnesota
State Board of Parole

A. C. LINDHOLM, CHAIRMAN
E. A. WELKE
THOS. A. DONLIN

OFFICE OF
O. F. ZABEL, STATE PAROLE AGENT
MINNESOTA STATE PRISON

Stillwater, Minn.

July 25th 1935

Interview with August Becker-9852

Was born and raised on a farm in Iowa but says he left home at the age of sixteen and thereafter lived in Chicago most of the time though at times he returned to the farm of his parents in Iowa for short periods. When 18 years old he was arrested in Ohio for auto theft but received a suspended sentence. In 1927 served a short term at the House of Corrections in Chicago for assault and in December 1928 was arrested in Iowa for aggravated robbery but escaped jail. Claims he was not guilty of that charge. Is also alleged to have taken part in the robbery of the bank at Gilmore City, Iowa but denies any knowledge of it. Is here for having participated in the robbery of the First National Bank at Elk River in which \$7,500.00 was obtained and admits that Salmon-9850 and Melavin-9851 were with him. They were all staying in cottages at a lake near Elk River and had with them a Graham Paige car which had been stolen in Minneapolis where they had lived about a month before going to the lake. At the lake he had with him one Alice Hull with whom he had become acquainted in Minneapolis. Of the bank robbery admits that they went to the home of Dr Page who had an office over the bank, had Mrs Page call the cashier of the bank into the house as he came by and then took the cashier and the doctor to the bank with them in the doctor's car while Melavin was left at the house with Mrs Page. The doctor was taken along to avert suspicion. After the robbery was completed they took the cashier and the doctor back to Dr Page's home, picked up Melavin and in the stolen car drove back to the cottages, packed up their belongings and started for Iowa taking the girl with them. A short distance away they were arrested, however, by Earle Brown, then head of the highway patrol, Becker ~~xxxx~~ being shot in the arm in the capture. All of the money was recovered. Becker and Melavin now deny participation in any other crimes in either this state or Iowa but Salmon admits that they held up a grocery store in Minneapolis and burglarized a store near their lake cottage and committed some burglaries and a hold-up of some motorists in Iowa. In addition he admits that the other together with one Ball, Becker's cousin, held up the Gilmore City, Iowa bank while he was sick at Ball's home. Salmon freely admits that they all came to Minneapolis together but Becker and Malavin claim to have come separately and met accidentally. and rather resent any inquiry about other crimes they may possibly have been implicated in.

O. F. Zabel
State Parole Agent.

Figure 28 – Interview of August Becker by the State Board of Parole, 1935

July 26, 1935

Dear Sir:

When you interviewed me July 25, you asked me where I had made my residence from the year 1916 to the year 1929. I said Chicago and Sumner, Iowa (my home). It was when we were talking about my living in Chicago that you asked me about my employment in that city. While I forgot to give you ^{the} address of another place where I worked for some time, I took it for granted that you were only concerned with my employment in Chicago. However, shortly after I had left you, I felt that you and the Board should know of the various places and cities where I was legitimately employed from the time I left home (Sumner, Iowa) in the year 1916 up until the year 1929.

I shall, to the best of my recollection, give you the addresses of ^{the} ~~my~~ places of my employment according to the order of time.

I worked as a bellboy at the Russel Sampson Hotel in Waterloo Iowa; about two and one-half years. A Mr. Livingston was manager. (My memory is playing tricks) First I worked at the leading hotel in Independence, Iowa; then at the Randolph hotel in Des Moines, Iowa; then at Waterloo. From the Russel Sampson I went to the Lemmington in Minneapolis, Minnesota; from the Lemmington to the Carpenter hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. (Over, Please).

Figure 29 – Letter from August Becker to Parole Board, 1935 Page 1

Now comes Chicago: I worked for the city of Chicago at the Tuberculosis Sanitarium at 5601 N. Crawford Avenue in the capacity of both a bus boy and dietitian, about one year and one half: Then at the Chicago Cut Stone Company as a laborer about a year: Then for Miss E. Fisher as a private chauffeur for a year or so: Then as a truck driver for the Edward Sanitarium at Naperville, Illinois about a year: Then back to the Chicago Cut Stone Company as a truck driver, probably two years considering both times: I also worked as a truck driver for a Mr. Larsen who lived in the 18 hundred block on N. California Avenue. Occasionally I would come home to work as was the case when my brother Conrad was called to war.

You will find upon investigation that I was employed most of the time and that I was never discharged.

O, yes, in either the year 1927 or 1928 I worked for a Mrs. Tomme at Sumner, Iowa. While here I was training to enter the professional field as a boxer.

Respectfully yours,
August H. Becker. 9852

Figure 30 – Letter from August Becker to Parole Board, 1935 Page 2

October 30th 1935

State Board of Control,
Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Gentlemen:-

Returning herewith letter addressed to the Board
by August F. Becker-9852, and by the Board referred to me. The
inmate's statements are fantastic, and I believe he is not normal
mentally.

Yours very truly,

JJS jlf

Warden.

Figure 31 – Letter from the Warden to the State Board of Control, 1935

(file)

Attention please, Censor.

My letter to my sister was written while I was mentally living the lives of those of war-torn Spain and China.

If you should interpret the letter as reflecting unfavorably upon this institution, or if you feel my sister should take such a risk please destroy the letter.

August F. Becker, 9852

Figure 32 – Note from August Becker to prison censor, 1937

Box 55
Stillwater, Minnesota
September 26, 1937

Dear Sister, Helen,

This is supposed to be the "land of the free and the home of the brave" while in certain communities in our United States it is the "land of the cruel, greedy ~~few~~ privileged few and the home of the slave". However, paradoxically, there is no person so utterly a slave as he who, because of his lack of intelligence and deficient spark of humanities, rules or tries to rule by force and cruelty, oppression and repression. Particularly, I have reference to the two demoralized, dictatorial, cowardly, baby killers, namely, Hitler and Mussolini. Regrettably, there are others who are as uneducated, unenlightened and inhumane as the two monsters mentioned. It is a well-known fact that all prisoners are not criminals; that all criminals are not prisoners, and that the worst criminals are not in prison.

Of course, since it is very likely that the imp of darkness will snatch this letter somewhere between my cell and your home, there is no sense in writing more.

You see, one letter from Mr. Le Sueur strongly indicates that he did not receive my letters of recent date. Moreover, the fact that my letters to you in reply to yours of August 4 and of September 3 brought no reply, confirms my belief that a cheap thief is shamefully guilty of robbing the mails of ~~Uncle~~ Uncle Sam.

However, if the spirit of the thief's mother should prevail upon the thief's conscience to the extent of letting my letter take its rightful course, I desire you and Mr. Le Sueur to know that your presence is needed here.

You have noted that I do not know who the letter stealer is, and you have observed, no doubt, that my spirit is not only not broken but also not a spirit of a man who lives on his knees to the forces of mother-hating fascism. My dear, I glory in the fact that I am a man who has the courage to proclaim that I prefer to die like a man of a good mother rather than to live cowardly on my knees to the perverts of oppression.

A. August Becker

Figure 33 – Letter from August Becker to Helen Gable, 1937

File
Poole Box 55
 Institution
 September 27, 1938 985

Mr. L. F. Utecht, Warden
Institution

Dear Sir:

If you do not already know it, I shall take the liberty to inform you that it is my nature to complain or to praise according as I find the signs along the pathway of truth and fact. In other words, the size of a man's pocket-book or a man's title is not my standard by which I judge him. On the contrary, to me a man is what he is regardless of what he likes to be or what he pretends to be. Therefore, while I follow the logical pathway of truth and fact, I will make my report as the signs warrant no matter who or what I may find.

Regretfully, in the past, I was morally compelled to complain — it hurt me more than it hurt you — about my health, affliction and the doctors' neglect.

However, since you have demanded their giving me a physical examination, you have performed your duty and won my promise to forever hold my peace if I receive proper attention. Naturally, you have my gratitude and sincere thanks.

Also, I wish to thank you for giving my brother Heinie an "hour" and for permitting my sister, Mrs. Clara Doble, to visit me in spite of having had a visit a short time ago.

The new visiting-room: Ah! Warden, I was not only surprised at its atmosphere of dignity and courtesy but also constrained to think of its import and of your object in establishing it. Frankly, it was a tremendous relief to me to have the strait-jacket removed for the first time since my coming here. It was my intention to acquaint my sister with the contents of that hot letter to Heinie — but the humanity shown in the new visiting-room repressed my desire to do so. It gave me a chance to act and feel like a human being. Hence, nothing against you was said.

Very truly yours,
August J. Becker — 9852

Figure 34 – Letter from August Becker to warden, 1938

Institution
April 23, 1939

Mr. L. J. Utecht, Warden file

Dear Sir:

Today (April 23) I received a letter from my brother Heinie [also, five dollars]. He emphasized his request for me to thank you for him relative to your giving me a change of employment. Naturally, I too appreciate it.

What he did not ask me to tell you is this: "Gus, you know I always told you that he [you] was an humanitarian. I know that you feel about him as I do," etc.

Mr. Warden, I believe that to have a fine reputation is wealth of the most valuable riches. Heinie's estimation of you is not only sincere but also logical.

By the by, a man who rules with a club gets ~~only~~ the outward respect and inward contempt of a slave, but he who rules with intelligence and humanity gets the outward and inward respect of a man.

Therefore, believe me when I say:

Respectfully yours,
August J. Becker, 9852

Figure 35 – Letter from August Becker to warden, 1939

AUGUST BECKER-9852

(d)

Oliver J. Reeve
County Attorney of
Bremer County, Iowa
Jan. 30, 1937

As County Attorney of Bremer County, Iowa, I feel that it is my duty to notify you, that for the promotion of justice and the welfare of the people of your state and my state, a criminal whose name is August Becker, who was formerly a resident of my county and who is now serving a life sentence for bank robbery in your penitentiary ought not be given a reduction in sentence, paroled nor released. It is my sincere desire that this information reach only your parole board, and that the source of this advice be made positively secret. Upon request by the authorized official my reasons could be given.

H. E. Kemmerer
Independence, Iowa
Oct. 21st, 1939

It has been brought to my attention that August Becker now serving life imprisonment at Stillwater, Minn. is seeking a parole after serving good many years of his life in the above institution. I knew August a number of years prior to the time that he became involved in crime, and there is no question in my mind but what he got off on the wrong foot due probably to the wrong kind of associates. I have never been in complete sympathy with the law penalizing a man for life imprisonment for robbing a bank, while at the same time a employee or an officer of a bank can do the job from the inside and steal thousands of dollars and get off with a sentence from seven to ten years. This boy's health is now shattered and with his prison record I feel that he should have your deep consideration of his application. The Becker family are all very thrifty and are of German descendant, August's brother who lives in this city is in position to take care of this boy in case a parole is granted him, his brother owns his own home and other real estate. If this application for parole is granted I feel and in fact I know that August will be taken care of in the right type of way, giving him a chance to adjust himself to the right type of living as I feel it is a great injustice to send a man out from prison without some one in his family to look after them that has the means to see that he follows the right path. I believe that the end of justice has been served, and with a chance in a new life and environment he will become a useful citizen and the burden to the State will be lifted without any injury to the citizens of this community.

James L. Mc Donnell
Chief of Police
Independence, Iowa
Oct. 27, 1939

I understand that the case of August Becker, now confined at Stillwater on charges of Bank Robbery, will come before you in the near future. I wish to say that I am personally acquainted with the Becker family here in Independence and with other members of the family in Oelwein and vicinity, and that should your Honorable Board parole Mr. Becker, his brother in Independence is well able to furnish him a good home. His brother has informed me that he will give him a home and a start in a business if he should be paroled. It seems to me that the fact August Becker has lost an arm and has served several years now, he has paid his debt to society.

E. W. Hagemann
Independence, Iowa
Oct. 27, 1939

Am writing you in behalf of August Becker who is serving a life sentence in Stillwater, Minnesota. Up to about twelve years ago I lived in the same community with the Becker family. I knew his father and mother well, also Henry who has lived in this city for about as long as I have. When August was a boy he was no different from any other boy, but no doubt got in with bad company when he left the farm for the city. August has now served over ten years of his life in prison and lost his right arm, but I know that he can still be a useful citizen if he were returned to society with the guidance that his brother Henry and wife of this city and their friends will give him. The Becker family here are respectful citizens of Independence, Ia. with lots of friends and two nice boys. They attend church regularly, about three years ago I was on the building committee when we started to build a new Lutheran church, and can say that Mr. and Mrs. Henry Becker were one of the first families to pledge. Going over the books later on, I see where there were only two families that donated more to the church than the Becker family

Figure 36 – State Board of Parole file page 1, 1940

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(e)

did, this can be verified by Rev. Gerhard Bunge who is pastor of the church. These people are also financially able to take care of him; they own their new home that is almost completed now, and a gas and oil station. Here is hoping that you gentlemen will send August home to the Becker family and friends soon. It would be a humanitarian deed on your part, and in my opinion, absolutely no chance of any back-firing by this man.

W. F. Miller
Independence, Iowa
Oct. 31, 1939

I have been informed that the application of August Becker serving a life sentence in your state for bank robbery, is under consideration for parole by your Board. I have no personal acquaintance with

August Becker, but am acquainted with his history and am personally acquainted with members of his family. The Beckers are a fine German family, but August, in his youth, got off on the wrong foot. Because he undertook to rob a bank from the outside instead of the inside, he drew the extreme penalty, and unless clemency is extended him stands to spend all his life behind prison bars. I am inclined to think that what he did was as much from love of excitement and adventure as from any deliberate intention of breaking the law, and that in view of a complete history of his life, the loss of an arm and the years of confinement, he has paid sufficient penalty. After all, it is the welfare of society that is most concerned, and I fail to see where society will profit by keeping Becker behind walls for the balance of his life. When asked to sign a recommendation for parole or pardon of parties confined in prison I have invariably refused unless I am assured that someone will undertake to see that he is cared for and employed after he is out. In this case his brother, Henry Becker will undertake to see that August has a home and employment if released. Henry Becker is financially able to keep his contract and I am sure will do it, as he has a deep affection for his brother. Wherefore I feel justified in asking your board to give earnest consideration for this application for parole.

Will Lentskow
716 - 4th St., S. W.
Independence, Iowa
Oct. 31, 1939

Lately I have been talking to some of my friends and also the Henry Becker family and their friends here in the city of Independence, Ia. about August Becker who is now serving time in Stillwater, Minn. and that he is being considered for parole by

your board. But first I want to tell you a little about myself, I was born at Sumner, Ia. in the year of 1896, and was sent to the American Lutheran Orphans Home at Waverly, Ia. in 1900 when I was four years old, after the death of my mother who I don't remember. When I came to this home a Rev. Schaffnit was Supt. of the home and as I have been told he is the head of some home in Minneapolis, Minn. now. I received my education at the Lutheran Orphans Home and was confirmed there in 1911 and then was sent out to work for farmers near Tripoli and Sumner, Ia. and got very well acquainted with the Becker family as I worked across field from them for several years, and can say that they were a very Christian family, honest in their dealing and held in the highest esteem by the people in that community. Then a few years later I started working at the carpenter's trade and when I learned it I started doing general contracting myself. I have done contracting and building all over Northeast Iowa and about three years ago we built a new American Lutheran church in Independence of which Henry Becker and family and my family are members. This summer I built a new home for the Becker family in this city and must say my dealings with Mr. and Mrs. Becker were very satisfactory and it has been a pleasure to do this job for them. But what made August do what he did is something I can't explain, but it is his first conviction and I do believe he should have a chance after losing his arm and serving over ten years. If you gentlemen knew the Becker family as I do I know that you would send him home for Christmas. August's brother here owns his home gas and oil station, and they are absolutely financially able to care for him if he has a job or not upon his release. However if he has to have a job upon his release, I will give August a job as bookkeeper in my office as I do need one because I have been needing one and the job will be open to him if he wants it. If you gentlemen do this I am sure you will make his brother the happiest man in the world, and I will guarantee him a job. I am sure that when you hear from August after his release, it will be of his success.

Figure 37 – State Board of Parole file page 2, 1940

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(f)

Henry G. Becker
 Brother of inmate
 Independence, Iowa
 June 28th, 1940

Now I will give you the names-occupation-business- that these relatives hold, that called on you personally and what they will do for August as they told you when you interviewed them June 24th. I want to give you this in writing Mr. Lindholm, so you can refer to it when you

want to.

Mr and Mrs. Revern Holm-nephew-farmer, Sumner, Iowa. They live on a modern farm and want August to stay with them until he can adjust himself to the outside world again
 Mr and Mrs. Fred Holm-Sister-Farmers-Sumner, Iowa. They also have a modern farm with electric lights etc and live about 5 miles from Revern Holm and will help him until he can and will be able to make his own way.

Mr. Duane and Miss Yonne Holm children of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Holm will also help him as they are still at home, where August will be.

Mr and Mrs. Lyle Hemminger-niece-Mr. Hemminger works for the Waterloo, Cedar Falls Railway Company;

Mr and Mrs. Willard Holm-Nephew- who works for the Rath Packing Company, Waterloo, Iowa and can stay with them if he wants to;

Mr. Lester Becker-nephew-Waterloo, Iowa and he is employed by the Waterloo Valve Sprng Company;

Mr and Mrs. Donald James-niece-they are both employed by the Rath Packing company of Waterloo, Iowa and they own there home in Waterloo and as they told us that day in St. Paul, that they can get August a job in the office of the Rath Packing Co. Miss Vendola Warnke, niece-Waterloo, Iowa. Miss Warnke is employed at the James Black Dry Goods Company of Waterloo and lives with her brother Lorenz Warnke.

Mr and Mrs. Lorenz Warnke-nephew-Mrs. Warnke is a trained nurse and is employed in the Presbyterian hospital in Waterloo, Iowa. Mr. Warnke is a foreman in the John Deere Tractor plant and has been there for thirteen years, he as he told you that day will give August a place in the office doing clerical work and wants August to live with them in there home.

Mr and Mrs. Henry G. Becker-brother-Service Station Owner on U. S. highway No. 20 in Independence, Iowa and own and operate Seeburg Wireless remote control music machines, including wireless Well-o-matic booth controls music machines, and extra Seeburg speakorgan's as I am also sending you picture of these machines so you will know what I mean. We own our home here in Independence that we built last year. This music system with wireless control is interesting work and requires a lot of time and sill, if I had August with me and he liked that kind of work and I am sure that he would, he could repair them at my home while I am on the territory. I am sure that with my help he could and would soon understand them. Now I want to tell you something about the becker family, my father and mother came from Germany, bought a farm in Bremer county near Sumner, Iowa. They had very little schooling but made a success of farming but did not believe in education, August was one in a family of twelve that wanted an education, he wanted high school and college and we were all against him on that, because our father and mother felt that they had made a success in farming with only about a year of education and we had all received an 8th grade education and that was enough for August. But August never gave up, he begged and pleaded for days and months too let him go to high school four miles from where we lived, they finally let him go for about three or four months then took him out of school and would not let him go back, this broke his heart and spirit, he worked at home but he was heartbroken and took no interest in his work, then he left home and when we heard from him again he was working in the Russell Lamson Hotel in Waterloo, Iowa and going to nite school. I today can say to you Mr. Lindholm if August would have had only half the chance in life that most children have today, he would not be where he is today nor maimed for the rest of his life as he is, now than Mr. Lindholm I don't want you to think that our father and mother was cruel to August, they just didnot believe in education and what they did by taking August out of school, they was sure was for his own good. He has done everything possible to learn so that he will be capable of making good when he is released but how long will and can he do this when one day must be just like another for hope does not beckon. How long will it be before he becomes convinced that the law is cruel and is never satisfied? How long will it be before he becomes sullen and an actual permanent enemy of society? How long must he serve too satisfy Society for his offense against it? These appear to be proper questions arising in this instance and capable of only being answered by the mixture of mercy with justice. He has kept his spirit up for 11 yrs and we know that if August is going to become a useful member of society that he must be given this opportunity while he has the inclination and the determination to do so. I believe if paroled he will make good. We beg of you to give August, our brother back to us.

Figure 38 – State Board of Parole file page 3, 1940

AUGUST BECKER-9852

(g)

Katherine Boozell
Clerk District Crt
Pochahontas, Iowa.
April 14, 1939

Pursuant to instructions of District Court of Iowa, I have issued the enclosed Bench warrant for the arrest of August Becker, a prisoner now confined in your custody and upon direction of the County Attorney, forward the enclosed warrant to you for service, at such time as the prisoner may be available for extradition to the State of Iowa.

A. C. Carmichael
Attorney at Law
Fochontas, Iowa.
July 10th, 1940
(CountyAttorney)

I beg to advise that in accordance with a letter from Henry G. Becker of Independence, Iowa, in regard to his brother August who is confined as I understand, in your penitentiary, that there has been no charges filed at this time in our county against this man. All crimes for which he might have been guilty in our county have been outlawed for a number of years. We have no desire to prosecute or apprehend any further.

Figure 39 – State Board of Parole file page 4, 1940

State of Minnesota
State Board of Parole

PAROLE AGREEMENT

Know All Men by These Presents: That the Minnesota State Board of Parole, desiring to test the ability of

AUGUST BECKER

an inmate of the Minnesota State Prison, at Stillwater, Minnesota, to refrain from crime, and lead an honorable life, do by virtue of the authority conferred upon it by law, hereby parole the said **August Becker** and allow him to go on parole outside the buildings and enclosure of said prison, subject, however, to the following rules, regulations and conditions:

1. He shall leave the institution only when suitable work has been found unless otherwise determined by the State Board of Parole and then proceed at once to his place of destination. As soon as possible after reaching his destination he shall report to said employer or other person designated for him by the State Parole Agent, show him this parole agreement, and at once enter upon the performance of his duties.
2. In case he finds it desirable to change his employment or residence, he shall first obtain the written consent of the State Parole Agent in charge of his case.
3. He shall on the first day of each and every month, until his final discharge, make a full report in writing upon blanks furnished to him, and secure thereon a report of his employer, or first friend, and see that said reports are promptly mailed to the State Board of Parole, at St. Paul, Minnesota. He shall make such other and further reports as the State Parole Agent in charge of his case may direct.
4. He shall comply in all respects with the general rules applicable to paroled persons, a copy of which is printed on the reverse side hereof and made a part of this agreement as fully as if hereunto set forth in full.
5. He shall, while on parole, remain in the legal custody and under the control of said State Board of Parole.
6. He shall be liable to be retaken and again confined within the enclosure of said State Prison for any reason that shall be satisfactory to the State Board of Parole, and at its sole discretion, until he receives written notice from said Board that his final discharge has been ordered.

Signed in duplicate this **3rd** day of **October** 19 **40**

STATE BOARD OF PAROLE

Chairman

I, **August Becker**, an inmate of the Minnesota State Prison, declare that I have carefully read and clearly understand the contents and conditions of the above parole. I hereby accept the same and pledge myself to honestly comply with the conditions thereof and will at once proceed to the place of employment provided for me with

Luverne Helm

at **Sumner, Iowa**

Signed in duplicate this **28** day of **October** 19 **40**
Witnessed:

Figure 40 – State of Minnesota Parole Agreement for August Becker

For a speedy return.
 Waterloo, Iowa
 221 East 9th St
 10-9-42

Dear Mr. Utech,
 Warden:
 I waited a long time
 for that release. I now
 can tell you what I
 think of you. Well, Big
 Boy, I think you were
 (are) a pretty swell Guy.
 Thanks for everything.
 Please send the check
 at once. I need a
 drink.


Yours truly,
 August J. Becker

OCT 17 1942
 STATE PRISON

Figure 41 – Letter from August Becker to warden, 1942

**Funeral Tuesday
For A. F. Becker**

Services for August F. Becker, 55, who died by suicide Friday at his home, 1528 Harding road, will be at 2 p. m. Tuesday at the White-Bumgardner-Mack Funeral Home, 2505 Grand ave. Burial will be at Laurel Hill Cemetery.



A native of Sumner, Mr. Becker had **BECKER,** lived here seven years. He was an attendant at Brownies parking lot, Ninth and High streets.

Surviving are his wife, Doris; two sisters, Mrs. Fred Hiim, Tripoli; and Mrs. Clare Gable, Minneapolis, Minn.; and two brothers, Henry Becker, Tampa, Fla.; and William Becker, Waterloo.

Figure 42 – Obituary for August Becker from the Des Moines Register, 1955