

Augustus “Gus” Hamilton Belt was born on January 14, 1895, to John and Margaret (McReynolds) Belt in Jerseyville, Illinois. He had one older brother, named Vernel. The family moved to Springfield, Illinois when Gus was a child. By the time he was 15 years old, he was working as a newspaper boy in 1910. The next year, Gus began working as an **assembler** at the Sangamon Co. Electric Company. The family moved homes as often as his dad, John, changed jobs.

Edith Pressler was born to Jacob and Susie (Goldfuss) Pressler on February 9, 1896. A German family from Chatham, Illinois, the Presslers had seven children, with Edith being the youngest. Jacob was originally from Germany and became a **naturalized** citizen. By 1910, the family was living in Girard, Illinois and Jacob worked as a coal miner.

Gus and Edith were married on January 1, 1913, in Lincoln, Illinois at the ages of 17 and 16 respectively. It is likely that the two met in Springfield, but there is little detail on the Belts’ relationship prior to their marriage.

The Belts’ lived for time in Muncie, Indiana where Gus developed a successful business: the Factory Tire Store, located at 123 West Adams Street. He was the manager of the Muncie location. According to the *Muncie Evening Press*, Gus’s success in the field could be attributed to his twelve-year involvement in the tire industry. He worked in a tire factory, where he learned how to make a high-quality tire. The Factory Tire Store cut out the **middleman**, purchasing its tire stock directly from a New Castle, Indiana factory in high volume and doing its business only in cash, never on **credit**. This meant lower prices for customers and immediate returns for the Belts.

By 1926, Gus, Edith, and their son William, lived in Normal, Illinois. That same year, they opened Belt’s Better Tire Service at 201 South Center Street in Bloomington, Illinois. Known for its low prices and **impeccable** service, Belt’s Better Tire Service benefitted from Gus’s previous experience in tire sales in Indiana. The business was successful, and after two years, Gus opened a new, bigger, and better location at the corner of Washington and Prairie Streets. Belt’s Better Tire Service touted it was “A Good Tire Dealer Offering More Than Just a Tire Service.” They followed the “**Golden Rule**,” and “pledge[d] to each and every **motorist** that [drove]” into their tire service that they would have “a **top-notch** experience.”

Even while the nation was in the **grips** of the **Great Depression**, the Belts decided to expand and invested in a number of service stations by 1931. One location was a gas station and restaurant, as well as the future home of the first Steak n’ Shake, located at 1219 S. Main Street in Normal. Known as the “Shell Inn,” Gus pumped gasoline and sold tires out of one side of the building, and Edith fried and served fish, turtle, and chicken from the other side of the remodeled shop.

However, most likely due to the continued economic decline during the Great Depression, Gus and Edith either sold off or lost the other service stations they operated and were down to just one location, The Shell Inn, by 1934. It was then that Gus decided to “stake everything on a plan he had been **mulling** several months. He would open a short order restaurant combining two features—good food and fast service.” He took that Shell Inn, closed the **service station** portion, and went strictly to being a **short-order** restaurant that served good food and beer at low prices.

Because the Town of Normal outlawed alcohol sales in 1935, the Belts needed to change their business model since they could no longer serve beer. Gus and Edith focused on quickly prepared items such as jumbo shakes, chili, and steak hamburgers on a toasted bun. They began offering steak hamburgers in January 1934, but since then, they had made many improvements. From perfecting their toasted buns to slicing their pickles the long way to cover the entire burger,

the Belts were making strides towards becoming fast food legends that set them apart from everyone else in the field. They also continued to offer **curb service**, allowing customers the opportunity to get food without ever entering the **premises**.

In 1936, Gus and Edith opened their second restaurant, a walk-in location in Downtown Bloomington. The building had eleven stools and came to be known as “The White House Steak-n-Shake.” The next year, the company got an official **charter** to “run a general restaurant business in Bloomington.” Once Steak-n-Shake Corp. existed, it started to spread, expanding into Decatur, then Champaign, in February and April of 1938 respectively. They then **solidified** their branding by registering trademarks for “Steak Hamburger,” “Jumbo-Shakes,” “Cheeseburger,” and “Steak-N-Shake.” Again, pulling from Gus’s experience as a tire salesman, Steak-n-Shake purchased products at a higher volume, getting better deals on their steak and **pasteurized** milk. These assurances of high-quality food were proven to visitors by cooking their meals right in sight. In 1939, the Steak-n-Shake at Main and Virginia expanded on the new drive-in option. Customers could get the same quick-but-polite service without getting out of their car. According to a 1955 article, friends recalled after Gus’s death that people thought this idea would be a massive **flop**. At the time, cars had spotty heating, no air conditioning, and bad radio signals. Who would want to eat in their cars? Clearly, the **naysayers** were wrong.

As if surviving the Great Depression had not been enough, Steak-n-Shake also found its way through World War II. The corporation was still very successful during the United States’s time in the war, adding stores in Illinois, and moving into Indiana and Arkansas. Still, their services and practices had to change. In 1942, one of Steak-n-Shake’s drive-ins was closed until the following spring due to “the **armed forces** taking most of [their] employees the past year.” “We **assure** you that we will be first to give you prompt, efficient service when victory is won,” the advertisement promised. In 1945, despite **rationing** efforts, a severe meat shortage hit the U.S. markets. Due to this, the entire Steak n’ Shake chain stopped serving meat on Thursdays to support national war efforts, urging people to come in for a grilled cheese or a milkshake. After World War II, Steak-n-Shake began a **managerial** job training program that hired veterans at a starting salary of up to \$200 a month.

Steak-n-Shake employees clearly become a community of their own. This is visible in the Steak-n-Shake **newsletters**, *Steak n Shake News*, sent out monthly starting in January 1945 to update employees on important events, food shortages, food and labor costs, changes to policy, and the opening of new locations across the country. However, most of the newsletters focused on the employees themselves. They crowned a Manager of the Month, released exciting news from various locations, announced new marriages and the birth of company babies, and highlighted their veteran employees in the **wake** of World War II.

Steak-n-Shake also had their own private airplane. This plane was piloted by John Percy and was used both for the company and as a private plane for Gus Belt. In the fall of 1947, the aircraft averaged over two hours of flying per day. It was meant to be used for “key personnel and for emergency shipments,” which included transporting meat to its new location in Daytona Beach, Florida in January 1951, to ensure that the newest location would open on time.

Gus’s health began to decline in 1953. According to Robert Cronin, who was president from Steak n Shake from 1971-1981, Gus had asked to see a physician in St. Louis and after that visit, Edith had him flown to Bloomington in the company airplane. It was while he was in Bloomington that Gus passed away on August 20, 1954, at the age of 59. He died in Bloomington from a “heart ailment he had had for two years.” Despite Gus and Edith having moved to Saint Louis around 1949, his funeral was held the following Monday at Beck

Memorial Home in Bloomington, and he was buried at East Lawn Memorial Gardens and Cemetery. At the time of Gus's death, Steak-n-Shake had 33 locations in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Florida.

Following Gus's death, Edith was elected the Chairman of the Board at Steak-n-Shake Inc. on September 30, 1954. Their daughter, Wanda, was voted onto the Board of Directors to fill a vacancy left with Edith's **promotion**. It was decided that the company would continue Gus's expansion plan. This plan was one reason he had **delegated** direct management of his stores to other businessmen, and it had not failed them yet. They rolled out more restaurants in more states and continued to grow their customer base. In 1954, Steak-n-Shake topped \$6 million in sales, and grew to \$6.5 million by 1955.

Although Edith was living in St. Louis, since Steak-n-Shake started in Bloomington, the headquarters remained there. They remained **devoted** to the Bloomington-Normal community as they continued to grow. In 1956, the company donated playground equipment to several parks in Bloomington., and in 1957, they participated in celebrating the 100th anniversary of Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University).

By its 25th anniversary, Steak-n-Shake had 39 drive-ins in 5 states, and sales peaked to \$8 million that year. The massive growth of the company even impacted the very footprint of the community around it. In 1957 and 1958, the Normal Town Council argued over whether to include a left turn arrow at Main Street and Virginia Avenue to deal with traffic jams created by patrons waiting to turn into the Steak-n-Shake parking lot. To some, this idea was a **no-brainer**.

Sales records only increased throughout the 1960s under Edith's watchful eyes, going from \$11 million in 1964 to \$18 million in 1968. Additionally, the number of Steak-n-Shake locations had grown to 50 in four states by this time. In 1968 the Belt family sold the restaurant chain to Longchamps, a New York-based restaurant chain with \$55 million in sales in 1969. Lawrence Ellman, president of Longchamps, purchased 53% of the Steak-n-Shake Inc. **shares** from Edith, who remained **chairman of the board**. In fact, she was re-elected for the position in December 1968. William Belt remained a "**principal agent** for the company" until the sale of the company that year.

On July 22, 1972, Edith Belt passed away at the age of 76. She died at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, though her funeral was held in Bloomington at Beck Memorial Home. She was buried in East Lawn Memorial Garden and Cemetery alongside her husband, Gus.

Now, Steak-n-Shake still exists, but in a very different way. In 2008, the struggling Steak-n-Shake corporation was purchased by the Texas-based company, Biglari Holdings. Steak-n-Shake's headquarters has been in Indianapolis since the purchase of the company. Biglari instituted changes with the hope of increasing business, like the "4 meals for \$4" menu. For a time, it seemed the company was doing fairly well, peaking with 626 restaurants in 2018. However, since that time, the restaurant has been in a moderate decline, which was not helped by the Covid 19 Pandemic in 2020. In 2021, the company decided to cut **waitstaff** at most locations across the country, leading to a massive shift in the operation of the company. Now, rather than a personal diner experience, Steak-n-Shake operates on a model that highlights self-service **kiosks** and drive-thru sales.

Whether you agree with this new model or not, it is easy to see the **legacy** that Gus and Edith Belt left with Steak-n-Shake, and the impact it made in fast **casual** dining and the community where it began, right here in McLean County.