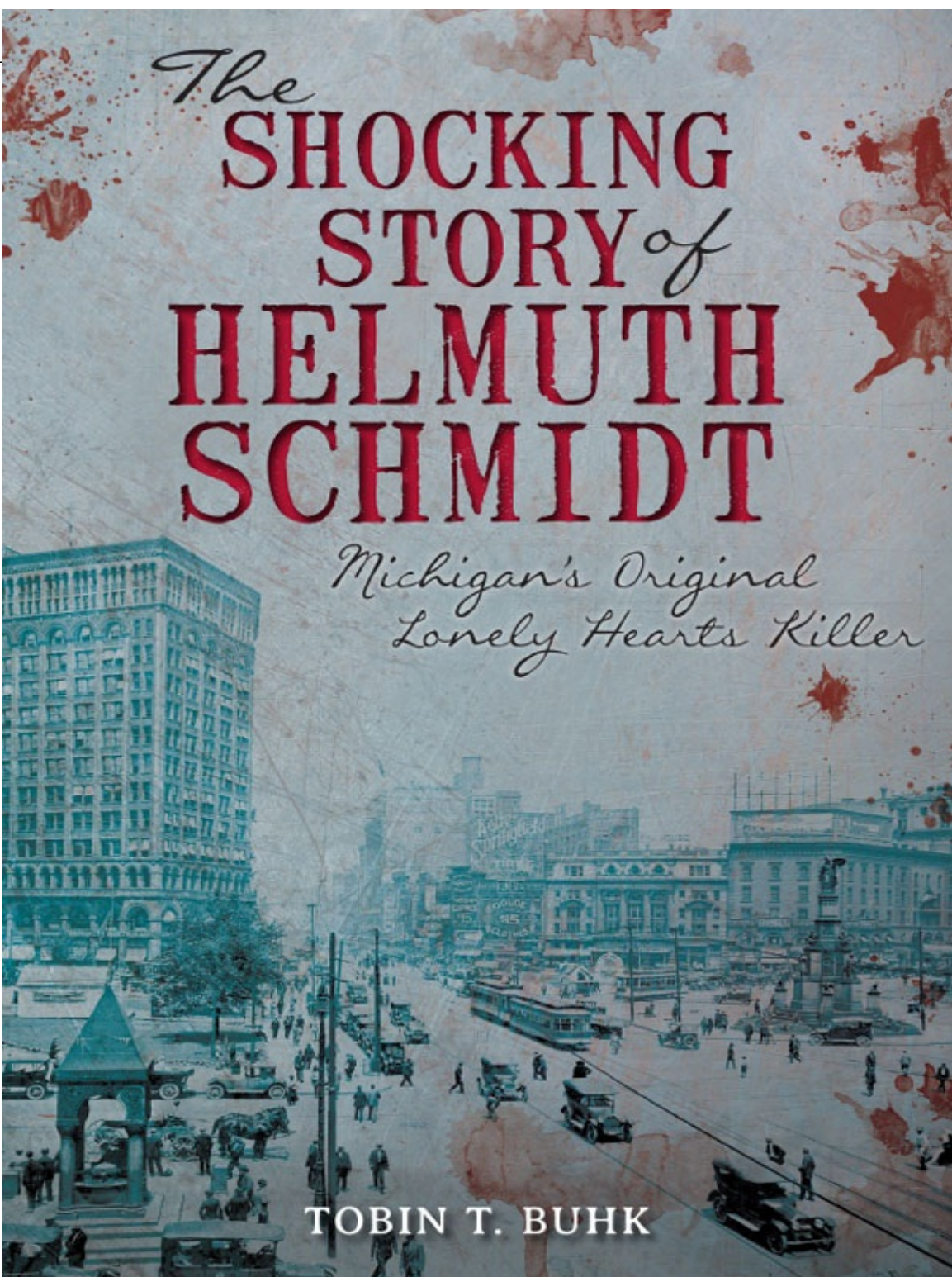


The
SHOCKING
STORY *of*
HELMUTH
SCHMIDT

*Michigan's Original
Lonely Hearts Killer*



TOBIN T. BUHK

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History
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To Ruth, Erika and Victoria, with love.

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PREFACE

Oakland County prosecuting attorney Glenn C. Gillespie looked out the front window. “April shows bring May flowers,” he muttered as he watched strings of light rainfall, causing a flickering effect that reminded him of the moving picture shows at the Oakland Theater. Despite the rain, a group of neighborhood kids had gathered across the street, careful to keep their distance from the “dead house.”

Undersheriff Harry Cryderman handed Gillespie a gold pocket watch that one of the detectives found in a bedroom dresser drawer. Someone scratched several rows of numbers on the inside lid. The prosecutor ran his finger down the scratches until he came to the last set of numbers, “11-3-17,” and immediately thought of the effervescent New Yorker who sought a new life in Royal Oak. After a brief courtship with a Detroitier she met through a matrimonial advertisement, Augusta Steinbach left a cushy job as a lady’s maid in Manhattan to marry the man of her dreams. She disappeared on March 11, 1917, last seen entering the bungalow at 9 Oakdale Boulevard in Royal Oak.

Gillespie was running his fingers back up the sequence of numbers when he heard shouting from the backyard. Detective Harry Emerson, a private investigator working for the Ford Motor Company, had found something behind the garage. That rainy morning of April 21, 1918, investigators searched for clues about the fate of Augusta Steinbach. As the morning progressed, however, they realized that they had stumbled onto something much more complex. None of them had witnessed anything like this in their careers. Over the course of the next week, they would match wits with the “Royal Oak Bluebeard,” a criminal the *Detroit Times* called “one of America’s master outlaws.”

The case was so outrageous, so bizarre, that when the story broke on April 22, 1918, it captivated headlines for a week, pushing news of the Great War to the margins. A *Pontiac Press Gazette* reporter in a front-page spread on April 22, 1918, called it “one of the most sensational and interesting criminal cases ever developed in this county...No story of fiction ever contained more thrills and romance.”¹

Except this story is not fiction. The following narrative, I think, is a historically accurate depiction of the events as they occurred. The quotes are authentic, not fictionalized, culled from news reports, court documents and the scant documentary evidence still in existence after nearly a century. If a source’s reliability is questionable, or if a source is suspected of sensationalizing some aspect of the case, it is documented in the notes. Should the reader desire to attempt a private investigation into this fascinating case, the notes also contain attribution for all sources used and consulted.

Reaching back through history to collar the Royal Oak Bluebeard was no easy task. Over the past few years, I’ve played a historical detective of sorts, gathering clues in my attempt to unravel the serpentine trail he left behind. There are virtually no secondary sources on this case, so I had to reconstruct the investigation by traipsing through a thicket of sensationalized and often conflicting press reports.

Since the case never went to trial, where a jury could listen to testimony and give a verdict, the tale

of final judgment is left to the reader. Pay attention to the evidence, listen to the witnesses and evaluate possible ulterior motives as the various characters discuss their experiences with the Roy Oak Bluebeard.

There are certainly more gruesome crimes, but few are more relevant to our time. Although the story took place almost a century ago, anyone who participates in a chat room or an online dating service will recognize the lesson of this story—a danger inherent in using a third-party service to find mates.

And for the true crime buff, there are fewer places more interesting to visit than Detroit in 1911 where county sheriffs stopped lynch mobs from enacting frontier justice, cops staged lineups in the front yards of victims, suspects sometimes limped away from interrogations with new injuries and reporters sometimes eavesdropped on interrogations and even posed questions to the accused.

It's a real trip. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

THE DOMESTIC AND THE SUITOR

LOVE LETTERS

New York City
February 3, 1917

It was a frigid morning in New York when Agnes Domaniecki said goodbye to her best friend Augusta Steinbach. She dreaded the moment when Augusta would leave for Detroit, where she planned to marry a man she had never laid eyes on before. It was the climax of a New World adventure that began three and half years earlier.

In the summer of 1913, about one year before Europe plunged into a conflict that would consume the entire continent, thirty-five-year-old Augusta Steinbach boarded a passenger ship—the *Kronprinz Wilhelm*—en route from Cherbourg, France, to New York. She made the journey across the Atlantic to her new home with a married couple from New York, Charles and Lina Weber. As the ship steamed west, she wondered what her new life in the United States would be like.

In the Old World, she made her living as a lady's maid. She began as a domestic in Berlin around the turn of the century, working among Germany's aristocracy alongside Agnes Domaniecki. Later, the two women drifted to Paris, where they worked as domestics until 1913. With war looming, Paris was no place for German natives, so the two decided to change their milieu. Agnes took a job as a lady's maid in Kingston, Jamaica, while Augusta moved to the Big Apple.



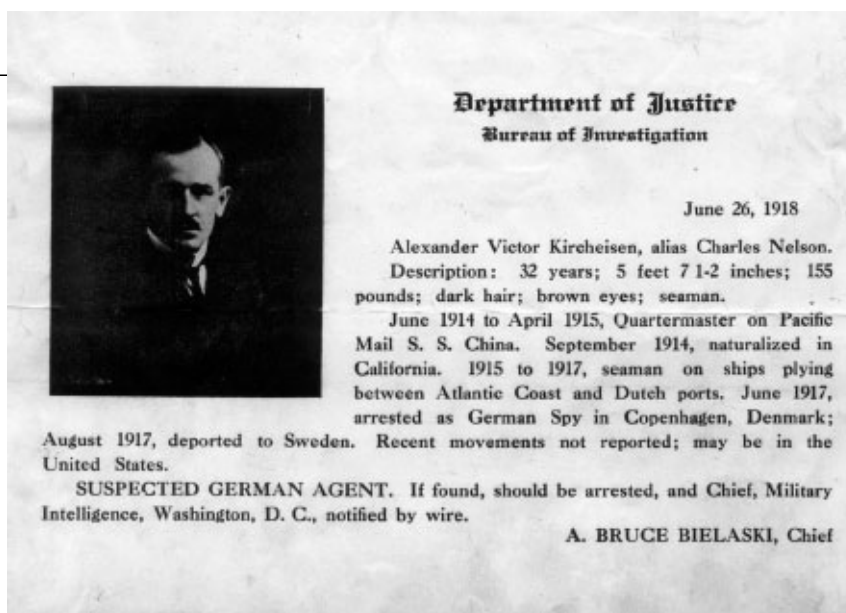
Sketch of Augusta Steinbach made in 1918 by a *Detroit News* artist. *Courtesy of the Detroit News Photo Archives.*

The *Kronprinz Wilhelm* arrived at Ellis Island on June 24, 1913. Shortly after her arrival, Augusta found work among New York's elite, eventually taking a job as a lady's maid for the wife of a wealthy New York banker named Edward Heidelberg, who lived on West Fifty-fourth Street. The Heidelberg family adored the shy but bubbly girl from the German countryside.

Augusta Steinbach enjoyed life among the affluent and liked to spoil herself with expensive clothing and jewelry, but the one thing she yearned for—a house and family of her own—eluded her. It wasn't as if she had gone unnoticed. She had chocolate-brown hair, blue eyes and a full-bodied figure that some men found irresistible.²

In April 1914, thirty-year-old Agnes Domaniecki immigrated to the United States and joined Augusta in New York.³ Even though they didn't work in the same households, they spoke often, usually in German mixed with an occasional English word or two. They giggled about old times and gossiped about New York high society and discussed the war that raged in Europe. Augusta was particularly interested in the news; her four brothers had joined the German military machine, and her sister was a nurse in Constantinople.

Although an ocean away from the trenches, New Yorkers were never very far from the war. America remained officially neutral, but the conflict turned New York City into a place of intrigue. When hostilities began in the summer of 1914, imperial German authorities worried that munitions in the United States would go to their enemies. So they set up networks of saboteurs, which often included immigrants already in the German American community. Throughout the spring of 1914, their saboteurs went into action, hitting explosives caches along the northern New Jersey coast of New York Harbor.



During World War I, the imperial German government employed German immigrants already in the United States as agents. The U.S. Justice Department used “wanted” leaflets to hunt suspected spies and saboteurs. *Author’s collection.*

In July 1916, sabotage on U.S. soil climaxed when German agents blew up a massive cache of ammunition stockpiled on Black Tom Island in New York Harbor. American manufacturers used the island as a munitions dump for shipments en route to Europe. On July 30, the complex contained over 10 million pounds of ammunition. One barge alone carried 100,000 pounds of TNT.

The initial explosion, which occurred around 2:00 a.m., caused a tremor that rocked nearby Jersey City, New Jersey, and shattered windows in Manhattan. New Yorkers thought that an earthquake had shook the city, but it was the “enemy within.” This fear of subversives cast suspicion on all things German, but Agnes and Augusta endured these turbulent years together. To strangers, they may have appeared an odd couple; Agnes worried about things, while sanguine Augusta always found a reason to smile.

Sometimes, she and Agnes would deal out the Tarot cards to see if they could find a clue about what fate had in store for them. They mused about romance, courtship and marriage, but by the summer of 1916, neither had found a mate. Although she looked much younger than thirty-eight, Augusta was past her dating prime and considered an “old maid.” Loneliness mixed with a little desperation caused her to begin sifting through the matrimonial advertisements of the *New York Herald* and the *New York Revue* for possible partners.



Black Tom was a shipping depot for ammunition sent to English and French forces. On July 30, 1916, saboteurs detonated a large quantity of explosives on the island. *George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress.*

In September 1916, she found two advertisements, both in German, posted by gentlemen from Michigan:

Good-looking mechanic, 38 years old, five years good job; weekly-wages, \$80; seeks to marry suitable person; only well-meaning offers requested. George Roloff, general delivery, Highland Park, Mich.

Gas inspector, 37 years old, without dependents, very respectable and very good-looking appearance, steady monthly income, \$180; seeks a suitable lady, may be out of servant class, to marry soon. Explaining, offers of well-meaning persons requested. Herman Neugebauer, general delivery, Royal Oak, Mich.⁴

On the surface, both suitors appeared to be a good fit for a middle-aged woman in search of heart and husband. Each man was about Augusta's age and earned enough money to support a wife. Intoxicated by the possibilities, Augusta responded to both advertisements. Within days, she received responses from both Roloff and Neugebauer. After a brief correspondence, she chose Neugebauer as the best match and began a long-distance courtship.

During the fall of 1916, while soldiers exchanged hot lead from trenches burrowed into the soil around the Somme River in France, the pair exchanged a flurry of letters. Herman Neugebauer described himself as more than six feet tall and having a muscular build. He also said that he attended the University of Heidelberg before coming to the United States. He told Augusta that he worked as a toolmaker for the Ford Motor Company and that he had acquired several properties in the Detroit area, including a bungalow in Royal Oak, where he lived with his two sisters, who took care of his house.

He promised to buy Augusta an electric washing machine—a newfangled extravagance that saved American women countless hours scrubbing clothes on ribbed boards in steel washbasins. He promised to buy her a new wardrobe and, as a wedding present, a car that he would have painted blue. Augusta made promises, too. Although never married, she'd had years of domestic experience. She promised to be a good, faithful wife who would keep an immaculate house and make sure that mea

were ready when he came home from work.

~~There were also other ways she would please him, and Augusta wasn't timid when came~~ describing her physical attributes. In one letter, she described, in lurid detail, what would make her such a pleasing spouse. But the racy prose landed in the wrong man's mailbox. The postman misread the name on the envelope and delivered it to Adam Nelgebar, a Detroit shoemaker. Unfortunately for Mr. Nelgebar, Mrs. Nelgebar retrieved the mail that day. The woman grew enraged as she read about how Augusta planned to please her husband and accused the confused cobbler of running around on her. She took the letter straight to a local attorney, George Dondero, who was well known among the area's German community, in part because he spoke fluent German. It took some time, but Dondero managed to explain the mix-up.⁵

The correspondence became hot and heavy throughout January 1917, and by the end of the month Augusta was hooked. She agreed to meet Neugebauer in Detroit. Agnes stood, dumbfounded, as her best friend broke the news that she was about to leave New York to marry a man she didn't know, had never seen and had never met. Agnes was distraught. "At first when Augusta told me about going so far away to marry a man she didn't know," she later recalled, "I begged her not to. I laid the cards for her—which is a custom we German girls have when we want to know about our future—and I saw black cards there for her."⁶

But the pull toward Herman Neugebauer and the promise of her own family trumped the "black cards" in the deck, and Augusta went forward with her plans. She bought a wedding dress and packed it, along with her other things, in three large steamer trunks. She deposited two of the trunks at Schillinger's Reliance Warehouse on East Sixty-third in New York and told her friends—German domestics throughout the city—that she was going to Detroit to marry a wealthy man.

On February 1, she closed her bank account, withdrawing about \$180. She also tried to cash about \$1,000 in German war bonds without success. Since she told Neugebauer that she had about \$500 in cash, she borrowed \$300 from Agnes. "I told her it was awful risky to go ahead," Agnes later said, but love-struck Augusta didn't heed her warning.⁷

On February 3, 1917, she boarded a westbound train from Hoboken, New Jersey, to Detroit, dressed to the nines. Her ensemble included two diamond rings, a gold chain, a gold watch, a pearl necklace, and a red handbag. She wanted to look her best when the train pulled into the station, where she would meet, for the first time, her future husband.

THE MOTOR CITY

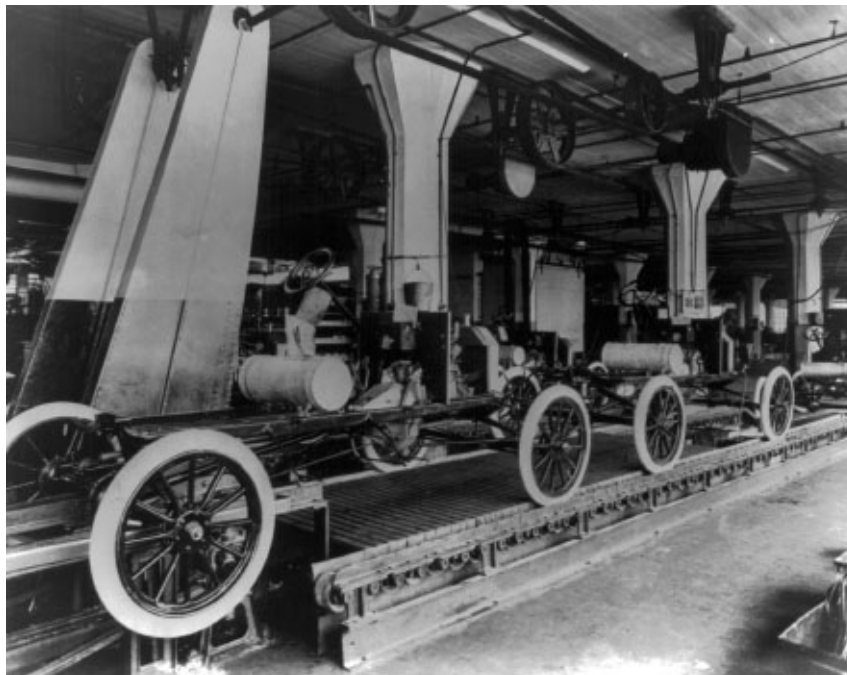
Detroit, Michigan

February 6, 1917

In one of his last letters, Herman told Augusta what train to take and how she could recognize him at the station: his car would have an American flag on its fender. Neugebauer even sent a photograph of his automobile with the patriotic symbol over its tire.



Woodward Avenue in Detroit, circa 1917. At the time, Detroit was the biggest boomtown in America. *Detroit Publishing Company, Library of Congress.*



Henry Ford's offer of five dollars per day in wages drew thousands to Detroit, and the Highland Park plant became one of the nation's largest factories. In order to earn the entire wage, employees had to follow the directives of the Sociological Department. *Library of Congress.*

Augusta stared out the window and watched the scenery change from cows milling about in fields to automobiles motoring past rows of houses against a backdrop of tall buildings. The train was headed toward the biggest boomtown in America.

By 1917, the Motor City had shifted into high gear. Almost 500,000 people lived in the Greater Detroit area, with a bulk of the city's laborers employed by the two dozen automotive companies that manufactured car parts. Many of them had moved to Detroit a few years earlier when Henry Ford offered a \$5.00 wage for an eight-hour shift—almost twice the going rate. For laborers sweating

through ten-hour shifts for a paltry \$2.50, Ford's offer seemed like pennies from heaven. People walked away from farms and coal mines all over the Midwest and flooded Ford's Highland Park plant.

The Motor City had a real swinging side in the 1910s. Saloons quenched the thirst of the city workers, while brothels catered to other needs. The establishments in the lower east side's red-light district kept their doors open all night to service all three shifts of workers.

In February 1917, however, the city's watering holes had just over a year left to live. The previous fall, Michiganders voted for groundbreaking legislation that would dry out the Great Lake State. The new laws came, in part, from concerns about workers' ability to do their jobs in a city with a tavern on every street corner, so Detroit's industrialists took steps to keep their workers from the bottle during their off-duty hours.

Henry Ford played an instrumental role in drying out Detroit. Concerned about the productivity of hung-over employees, Ford took drastic measures to sober up his workforce. Investigators from his "Sociological Department"—a division created to make sure that employees lived a positive lifestyle—made house calls to ensure that his factory workers stayed away from vice. If they didn't, they wouldn't earn the entire five-dollar wage.⁸

Alongside the Michigan Anti-Saloon League and other impresarios who felt that booze affected the bottom line, Ford lobbied the state legislature for a legal measure banning the sale of alcohol. Lawmakers obliged by putting a prohibition amendment on the ballot in the fall of 1916. The law, which passed by a slim margin, prohibited the sale of alcohol in public places. Legislators later passed a measure that also made it illegal to import booze.

On May 1, 1918, saloons, beer halls and taverns would close their doors, and Michigan, in theory at least, would become dry—a year before federal legislation corked the nation's booze bottles. The talk in the city's saloons revolved around "near beer," or low-alcohol substitutes that some of the city's breweries planned to produce in lieu of the real thing.

By March 1917, Congress hadn't yet decided to enter the Great War, but in some ways, the Motor City was already involved. Many of the city's manufacturers had signed contracts with Allies to produce war matériel. Some Detroiters, eager to fight "the Hun," had even crossed the border and enlisted with the Canadian army.

The city's large German American community remained torn about the war. In the years leading up to the conflict, these citizens managed to embrace their ethnic heritage while at the same time blending into the American cultural landscape. Encouraged by the National German American Alliance—a nationwide coalition of German Americans who originally came together to promote German culture in the United States—they formed social clubs and read German-language publications like the *Detroit Abend-Post*. Some Protestant ministers gave sermons in German, and many schools offered German language classes.

When World War I began in 1914, an intense debate about America's involvement erupted. The arguments were never more passionate than inside the taverns and beer halls of the Motor City. Some German American Detroiters, buoyed by an intense pride in their heritage and in the juggernaut of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, sympathized with their homeland and favored U.S. neutrality. Some of them even backed Germany's war effort by purchasing imperial German war bonds.

As the war progressed, however, Detroiters of German ethnicity came under fire from those who questioned their loyalty to the United States. Michigan industrialists launched Americanization campaigns. They required their workers to take classes in English and citizenship. The National Americanization Committee—an organization designed to counteract German nationalism and root out disloyalty among citizens—feuded with the National German American Alliance.

Meanwhile, newspapers ran highly biased war coverage. Graphic drawings of alleged atrocities committed by “Hun” soldiers appeared in half-page spreads, and reporters repeated whispers about alleged subversive activity.

The threat of sabotage hit home for the area’s residents. Detroit sat at the industrial heartland of North America—a fact recognized by German operatives. During the summer of 1915—at about the same time that agents targeted outgoing ships from New York Harbor—a gang of saboteurs led by Detroit machinist and resident Albert Kaltschmidt used the Motor City as a base in a conspiracy to blow up dynamite Canadian factories involved in producing war matériel. They also plotted, but failed, to destroy the Detroit Screw Works, which manufactured shrapnel.

Kaltschmidt’s most ambitious plan involved disrupting traffic between Canada and the United States by imploding the Port Huron tunnel. His scheme involved detonating a “devil car” packed with high explosives at a low point in the tunnel, but the plot never materialized.

A few months later, in December 1915, U.S. authorities discovered records of payment from the German military attaché to Kaltschmidt. The Justice Department didn’t arrest Kaltschmidt because they hadn’t yet uncovered evidence linking him with the destruction of U.S. property, but it kept a close eye on him.

Augusta was nervous as the train slowed to a stop at the station. She wrung her hands as she looked for a dapper gentleman standing next to a car with a flag draped over its wheel well, but Herman hadn’t arrived yet. She sat down on a bench and waited. Someone left a copy of the previous night’s *Detroit Times* on the seat. Augusta unfolded the newspaper and scanned the headlines as she waited for Neugebauer to arrive: “FORD OFFERS PLANT TO US; WILL MANUFACTURE MUNITIONS AT COST FOR USE OF THE GOVERNMENT, AUTO MAKER TELLS NAVY SECRETARY; Declares He’s Ready to Use His Utmost Efforts in Country’s Defense.”

The front-page story detailed Henry Ford’s offer to commit his factories to America’s war effort. “I can without question, and in the event of the declaration of war,” Ford told Secretary of the Navy Daniels, “place our factory at the disposal of the United States government and will operate without one cent of profit. I will also contribute my own time and work harder than even before.”⁹

Augusta looked up from the newspaper. An hour had passed, and Herman still hadn’t made his appearance at the station. Bewildered, she wandered out of the train station and walked a few blocks, eventually finding Woodward Avenue. She stood at the busy thoroughfare and absorbed the sights and sounds of the midwestern metropolis. Despite temperatures in the teens, the main drag buzzed with activity. A woman in a white dress holding hands with a boy in short pants shuffled past, and groups of men in three-piece suits and straw hats walked by in every direction. Streetcars tethered to overhead electric lines whisked down the center of the street, while “horseless carriages” of various types motored past a police officer holding a long pole with a stop sign at the top.

Augusta walked down Woodward Avenue, continuing east for a few blocks until she reached Adelaide Street, where she found the boardinghouse of T.H. Hetherington.

THE GENTLEMAN SUITOR

Detroit, Michigan
February–March 1917

After the failed rendezvous, Augusta checked into the boardinghouse of Thomas H. Hetherington on 45 Adelaide Street in Detroit.¹⁰ A longtime Detroit resident, Hetherington sold antique furniture from his storefront and rented a few vacant rooms above the shop.¹¹ Augusta told Hetherington that she would need accommodations for only a week or two at most, but she wound up staying over a month.

Hetherington and his wife, Louise, immediately took a liking to the New Yorker. She was heavyset but nevertheless quite attractive, with a youthful face and deep auburn hair done up in the fashion of a Gibson Girl. The Hetheringtons enjoyed her girlish giggle, the quaint expressions she imported from the old country and the way she lowered her chin, grinning, slightly embarrassed, when she mispronounced an English word. Louise Hetherington described Augusta as “a big country girl” with a coquettish side. “The first time Neugebauer called she was afraid to go to the door,” she later recalled.¹²

Hat in hand, Neugebauer provided an excuse for missing their date at the train station, and their courtship began in earnest. Over the next few weeks, he called on Augusta twice a week. He never stayed for more than a few hours, and he never visited on Sundays, which raised Mrs. Hetherington's suspicion. Typically, a suitor would call on a Sunday, but Augusta explained away this quirk by telling Mrs. Hetherington that Herman had important things to do.



Woodward and State was a busy intersection in 1917. *Author's collection.*

Herman was everything she imagined. He was a real lady-killer: tall with a full head of thick brown hair and a mustache. Even the three thin scars on his face didn't detract from his rugged handsomeness. They only added to his charm; Herman explained that the scars came from fencing matches—or duels, as he called them—that he fought while he attended the University of Heidelberg.

Herman was a captivating character with a rare blend of Old World charm and New World experience. He told stories about his youth in German high society, punctuated with anecdotes about his time in the United States. A man of culture and refinement, he spoke often of music and the arts. Louise Hetherington later said that Augusta “was very much flattered by the attention of a man who she believed above her station in life.”¹³

Augusta glowingly recounted her visits with Neugebauer. She described her betrothed as a courteous gentleman who was always on time and knew the proper code of conduct when courting a lady. He always insisted that the door remain ajar to avoid the appearance of any improper behavior.

Despite his frequent visits, Herman kept a low profile. During the month-long courtship, Thom

Hetherington met him only once. The smooth courtier apparently wanted to keep his personal affairs private and didn't want Augusta talking about their romance. When Augusta told Louise Hetherington something about Herman, she would always nervously add that Herman would kill her if he knew.

But the "big country girl" just couldn't keep her affairs in the dark. In a volley of letters to New York, Augusta relayed specifics about Neugebauer to Agnes. She described what appeared to be a fairy tale romance. Enraptured, Agnes read the letters and then reread them to a co-worker at the Ritz Carlton, where both women were employed as domestics. "I liked this chambermaid and she enjoyed hearing what Augusta, my friend, had to say about her courtship and her coming marriage," Agnes later said. The two women delighted as they read Augusta's descriptions of Herman and her new life in the Motor City.¹⁴

One of the letters contained what Agnes thought was an odd statement. Herman told Augusta to break off all ties with her friends in New York and under no circumstances say anything about how they met through a matrimonial advertisement. He didn't mind, though, if she kept in touch with Agnes as long as they didn't talk about *how* she and Herman met. Perhaps, Agnes thought, he felt ashamed about ensnaring a bride through the personals.

Just about a month after Augusta arrived in Detroit—on March 4, 1917—Neugebauer broke his usual pattern and came to call on a Sunday. This time, the couple left the boardinghouse and traveled to Neugebauer's Royal Oak bungalow.

During her visit, Augusta inked a letter describing the bungalow and the two "fine" women who lived with their brother and took care of his home. The older sister, whom Augusta didn't mention by name, was a widow from Chicago who came to Detroit after losing her husband. Augusta didn't like the older sister as much as the teenage sister, Gertrude, whom she called "jolly." The seventeen-year-old walked with a bounce in her step and seemed to find humor in everyday things, whereas the widow rarely smiled. Augusta thought that the older sister might have felt threatened by her presence, since she would soon become the woman of the house.

During her visit, Herman's sisters treated Augusta like royalty and appeared to be quite excited about the impending marriage, although they wanted to fête Herman with a large wedding which Augusta wanted to keep it a small affair.

"Now as I write," Augusta gushed, "his sisters are fixing a fine dinner. His oldest sister is a first-class housekeeper. They are planning a big wedding for me and I do not like it because I want a quiet one. They are going to fix the house up before we get married, because they want it all in good order for me. His big sister thinks I look pale and wants me to take a good rest."¹⁵

Augusta went on to describe the house and its rich furnishings, including sewing machines and a piano that Gertrude enjoyed playing. It was an idyllic scene except for one aspect that Augusta didn't like: the master bedroom contained only a double bed, and she much preferred two twins. Neugebauer also showed Augusta a box filled with jewelry that he said he inherited from his mother when she died in Germany. The jewelry, he said, would be Augusta's after the wedding.

When Augusta returned to Detroit later that day, she described the visit to Mrs. Hetherington, who enjoyed listening to her boarder muse about the paradise that she assumed would be her home. "Mrs. Herman Neugebauer." Augusta beamed as she described the property, which sat in a remote part of Royal Oak, not far from a river. A small creek ran through the backyard, and a henhouse stood at the property's edge.

The spacious house, which had a green shingled roof and brown clapboard and stucco exterior, contained six bedrooms, each one decked out with quality furnishings. The formal dining room sported silver service and fine linens.

The Sunday visit went well, and the couple made plans for their future. In a subsequent letter Augusta asked Agnes to forward her trunks in the New York warehouse to Royal Oak, where Augusta believed the newlyweds would reside after their nuptials.

In a letter to Agnes dated March 10, Augusta announced that the date of the wedding had been set for mid-March, when Neugebauer would take Augusta to his brother-in-law's house. There, a priest whom he knew would preside over a small ceremony instead of the grand soiree that the two sisters envisioned.

Augusta then asked Agnes to not write any letters to her for the next four weeks, since she would be honeymooning with Herman and wouldn't be able to answer them. Augusta's risky romance appeared to be a success, but something didn't seem quite right to Agnes. Augusta's handwriting was typically neat, but Agnes noticed that in this last letter, her penmanship "looked scrawly and funny, not at all like the careful way she used to write. That was the last time I heard from my dear best friend."¹⁶

The day after this last letter was dated—Sunday, March 11, 1917—Herman Neugebauer came to the Hetheringtons' boardinghouse for the last time. Augusta said that she didn't know exactly where Neugebauer was taking her, but she apparently believed that their nuptials were imminent and that they would spend their honeymoon in the country before settling into Neugebauer's Royal Oak home. She arranged to have the one trunk at the Hetheringtons' and two more from New York forwarded to Royal Oak. She didn't mention a specific address, just "Royal Oak."

It was a bittersweet day for Thomas and Louise Hetherington, who had come to know their guest well over the past five weeks. They would miss her, but they were happy that Augusta's romance by mail had blossomed into a marriage proposal. They watched as Neugebauer's Maxwell car motor down Adelaide, wondering when they would see her again.

A WEDDING PRESENT

*Detroit, Michigan
Late March 1917*

Augusta was popular, so gossip carried the news of her engagement across New York. Friends and former employers began to purchase wedding gifts for the new bride. But no one, not even Agnes, knew Augusta's new address. They only knew her last known residence: 45 Adelaide Street, Detroit.

So, about two weeks after Augusta left, a gift arrived at the boardinghouse. The package, addressed to "Augusta Steinbach" and dated March 24, contained a wedding present from a Mrs. Strefath of 15 West Twenty-ninth Street in New York City: a glass butter dish and silver plate. When the gift arrived in Detroit, the Hetheringtons didn't know where to deliver it because Augusta hadn't left a forwarding address with them, either. "Naturally," Louise Hetherington recalled, "when the wedding present came, I wanted to get it to her and learn if she were happy."¹⁷

Thomas Hetherington did have one clue about Augusta's possible address. He had listened carefully to her descriptions of Neugebauer's bungalow, so he and Louise decided to take a drive to Royal Oak in an attempt to find the house and hand-deliver the present.

Hetherington managed to find a house at 9 Oakdale Boulevard that matched Augusta's description: green roof tiles, brown clapboard and stucco siding. Louise clung to her husband's arm as they walked along a paved path and up the steps to the porch. The house was exactly as Augusta described it.

Hetherington rapped on the front door. A few seconds later, a woman answered. Circumspect, she kept herself partially concealed behind the door, but Louise Hetherington noticed that she was attractive, with chocolate-hued, curly locks done up in a rounded pompadour. Mrs. Hetherington, who had a sharp eye, also recognized something familiar just behind the woman: table linens that resembled the fine linen Augusta brought from New York.

The couple stood on the covered porch as Hetherington explained the purpose of their visit. He described Neugebauer and Steinbach, but the woman said nobody by either name lived there. She introduced herself as Helen Schmidt and said that her husband, Helmuth, was away at the moment. Puzzled, the couple hopped into the car and headed back to the city. Hetherington felt a bit foolish. He apparently had misidentified the Oakdale house as Neugebauer's; he was going from his recollection of a conversation that took place a month ago.



Number 9 Oakdale Boulevard, Royal Oak, as it appeared in 1918. Sheriff O.H.P. Green, unaware of the ghastly secret under his feet, stood on the front porch while he interviewed Helmuth Schmidt about Augusta Steinbach in March 1917. *Sketch by R.P. Buhk.*

Louise Hetherington wasn't so sure that her husband had made a mistake. Not only did the house match Augusta's description, but she was also certain that the linen inside belonged to Augusta. She recognized the pattern from a conversation the two women once had in which Augusta described how she planned to decorate her dining room and showed Mrs. Hetherington the fine linens she packed. Louise Hetherington remembered the conversation well; Augusta had taken an apron from her trunk, put it on and joked that it would soon be a wedding dress.

Something seemed very wrong about the whole affair. There had to be some sort of mistake, perhaps another visit would clear things up. Maybe Mr. Schmidt knew someone who brought Augusta to the bungalow for a visit. Or maybe he had a friend of a friend who knew the couple. Louise Hetherington insisted on going back to 9 Oakdale Boulevard.

The next day, they returned to Royal Oak. Once again, Helen Schmidt told them that she didn't know either an Augusta Steinbach or a Herman Neugebauer, but this time she said that she thought Neugebauer may live a little farther down the street. For the next few minutes, Thomas Hetherington motored up and down Oakdale, slowing as he passed the occasional pedestrian to see if he might by chance come across Neugebauer or someone who knew him. A few hours passed, but they came no closer to finding either Augusta or her beau.

“We’ll find out,” Hetherington assured his wife. He knew one way they could locate Augusta: the transit company that shipped her trunk from the boardinghouse to “Royal Oak.” He drove to the Adams Express Company, where a deliveryman named Fogarty confirmed that Augusta’s things had indeed been sent to 9 Oakdale Boulevard. So, they made a third jaunt to the suburb. And for a third time, Mrs. Schmidt told them that no Augusta Steinbach had ever visited them. Confused, irritated and now worried that something sinister may have happened to their former boarder, the Hetheringtons walked to their vehicle, unsure of what to do.

As they neared their auto, a man approached them. He introduced himself as Mr. Jonathan Welch, the next-door neighbor. He had seen the Hetheringtons come and go the day before and wondered if they needed help; they appeared to be looking for something. Hetherington explained the purpose of their trip to Royal Oak and the odd circumstances that led them to repeat the journey three times.

For the next few minutes, Welch listened, enthralled by their story about the missing New Yorker and her debonair suitor. He was especially curious about Augusta’s betrothed; from Hetherington’s description, this Neugebauer fellow sounded a lot like his neighbor, Helmuth Schmidt. When he heard Louise Hetherington discuss the table linen, he became suspicious. At one time, he and his wife, Lena, noticed a pile of steamer trunks in the Schmidts’ backyard.

That evening, while Jonathan Welch mulled over the possibility of a Royal Oak conspiracy involving his neighbors, the Hetheringtons heard a knock on *their* door. Thomas Hetherington couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw Helen Schmidt standing on his doorstep. She had lied, she admitted about Herman Neugebauer and Augusta Steinbach. Helmuth, her husband, had sent her to “straighten the matter out,” she said. He knew the lovebirds, but they had decided not to marry. Neugebauer had lost his job at the Ford plant, and Augusta moved back to New York.

Her explanation was dubious, but then the Hetheringtons observed something even more suspicious. They watched Schmidt’s wife walk a few blocks down the street and climb into a car with a man who looked a lot like Augusta’s sweetheart, Herman Neugebauer.

A few days later, America was officially at war. On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and its allies. True to his word, Henry Ford put his factories to work for the federal government. Ford Motor Company employees continued to churn out automobiles for the domestic marketplace, but they also built trucks, airplanes and ships for the military. The Highland Park plant even produced the experimental Whippet Tank—a light armored vehicle that Ford tested on artificial hills constructed on the factory property.



During World War I, Ford Motor Company produced war matériel, including the Whippet Tank. *National Archives and Records Administration.*

While the doughboys led assaults on the German trenches in Europe using Ford-built equipment, dyed-in-the-blue Americans attacked Germans and German culture in the United States. Some German families had yellow paint thrown on their doors, and a few who were suspected of disloyalty were imprisoned in internment camps. Americanization efforts led to the rechristening of all things German. Sauerkraut became liberty cabbage, and hamburgers became liberty sandwiches. The elder of Berlin, Michigan, threw away their association with the German capital by renaming their town Marne after a major battle.



A World War I-era poster encouraging people to purchase Liberty Bonds. Note the depiction of the “Hun” as a demon with glowing eyes and bloodstained hands. *Library of Congress*.

President Woodrow Wilson labeled all non-naturalized residents who came from one of the nations now at war with America as “enemy aliens.” Later, in November, all “enemy aliens” were required to register with the government. Germans from all over the United States marched to the office of the local U.S. marshal to fill out “enemy alien affidavits.”¹⁸



A German resident of New York is fingerprinted by a New York City police officer. In late November 1917, all non-naturalized German residents of the United States were required to register with local authorities as “enemy aliens.” *George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress.*



As a wartime measure to protect vital assets, the Michigan legislature created the Michigan State Constabulary in 1917. This forerunner to the state police was organized into two divisions of mounted and motorized units. *Linn Photo Company, Library of Congress.*

Now that the United States and Canada were officially allied, authorities arrested Detroitier Albert Kaltschmidt and charged him for numerous counts under the Neutrality Act. A federal grand jury subsequently indicted the mastermind and a dozen of his cohorts on three counts of conspiracy against the United States. In December, Kaltschmidt was convicted and sentenced to four years at Leavenworth.



The Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, circa 1915. Convicted German saboteur Albert Kaltschmidt made plans to destroy the Port Huron Tunnel, but the plot never materialized. The need to protect such infrastructure from saboteurs in part led to the formation of the Michigan State Constabulary in 1917. *Author’s collection.*

To protect vital wartime assets from any possible sabotage, the Michigan legislature passed a law creating the Michigan State Constabulary—the forerunner of the state police—as an early form of homeland security.

The war against Germans, both in Europe and at home, was in full swing.

THE SPY NEXT DOOR

The Welches had lived next to the Schmidts for the better part of a year. Helmuth Schmidt contracted Jonathan Welch to build his house based on plans he himself drew. Welch completed the project in the fall of 1916, and the Schmidt family moved from Highland Park to Royal Oak. Despite living close by, the two couples remained distant, separated by a language barrier; the Schmidts spoke little English, and the Welches couldn't speak a word of German. They managed to coexist with the occasional gesture—a wave, a nod of the head—and the occasional platitude.

Only ten feet away, the Welches witnessed bits and pieces of their neighbors' lives; they heard Mimi Schmidt's teenage daughter, Gertrude, play the organ in the living room; they heard the family conversing in German; and they watched Helen go about her daily tasks, such as emptying the fireplace ashes in a heap by a stream that ran through their backyard. Like many Detroiters, the Welches worried about the enemy within and eyed their neighbors with suspicion. The Steinbach woman's disappearance only deepened their concerns.

On March 11, 1917—the last day anyone saw Augusta Steinbach—Lena Welch witnessed some strange scenes at the Schmidt place. She saw a woman (who matched Hetherington's description of Augusta Steinbach) arrive with Schmidt in his sporty Maxwell car. A few minutes later, she heard the sound of a woman groaning or whimpering and then crying. That afternoon, Lena Welch saw someone covering the basement windows with newspaper.

Jonathan Welch began to assemble the pieces. Augusta Steinbach's description of Neugebauer's Royal Oak home fit Schmidt's bungalow to a "T." She addressed her trunks to Royal Oak, and the Adams Express Company delivered them to Schmidt's address, 9 Oakdale Boulevard. His wife saw Augusta Steinbach, or someone with an uncanny resemblance to her, enter the Schmidt home at about the time she apparently disappeared. Welch was certain that Schmidt went by more than one identity.

While Lena Welch believed that Schmidt was a rake and used the "Neugebauer" alias to cheat on his wife, Jonathan's mind turned to a more sinister explanation: Schmidt, as Neugebauer, headed a spy ring, which may have included the Steinbach woman and others hell-bent on wreaking havoc on the United States from within. They burned coded papers in their furnace, which explained the concealed windows and the disposal of the ashes. One way or the other, he believed that the Schmidts knew more than they were saying about Augusta Steinbach's whereabouts. He decided to open his own amateur investigation. Espionage was a serious accusation, and he didn't want to point the finger without proof.

Welch visited the Ford Motor plant where his neighbor worked. Oddly, no one there knew "Helmuth Schmidt." Even more oddly, they had never heard of a "Herman Neugebauer" either. Schmidt, Welch discovered, worked at the Highland Park plant under the name "Adolph Ullrich." Welch contacted T.H. Hetherington, who went to the Ford plant and tentatively identified "Adolph Ullrich" as Neugebauer, but he couldn't be certain—he'd only met Augusta's suitor once.

Welch was now convinced that his neighbor was a spy. That would explain the three identities, but how did the "big country girl" fit into the puzzle? Was she part of the ring? The Welches had plenty of suspicions but no proof. The evidence, they believed, lay somewhere locked behind the door of 9 Oakdale Boulevard, and they knew exactly where to find the key.

According to some contemporary news reports, a neighbor overheard Helen Schmidt utter, "I hope Germany wins." The anonymous neighbor reported the remark to agents from the Justice Department who now suspected Helmuth Schmidt as a possible enemy operative. Whether Helen Schmidt made

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