

Who Left a Little German Home to Build Floats for King?

SOMETHING over fifty years ago an event took place in a little village on the Rhine in southern Germany which was destined to bring great fame to that village in after years.

It was the birth of a boy, whom his parents named Augustus, and whose playmates made it Gus. Today, with awe in their voices and pride in their eyes, the villagers tell how little Gus, who emigrated to America when he was 10 years old, has become the genius of Ak-Sar-Ben, a company of goodly knights who work great works in the land of Nebraska, which in their opinion is the only really important state in "die vereinigten staaten," besides New York.

"Be a good boy and learn your lessons at school and some day you may be president of the United States," says old Herr Donnerblitzen to his grandson, Heinrich, in that far-off village. "See what little Gus Renze has done. He went to America and became such an artistic genius that King Ak-Sar-Ben heard of him and now he is the principal man in the land of Ak-Sar-Ben. Every year his genius brings people to the king's festival from all parts of the United States. Make little Gus your example and when you go to America you won't have to be a senator or a trust magnate to gain fame and fortune."

Little Gus is little no longer. Judging by his looks, he weighs close to 200 pounds, though Gus hasn't had time this summer to get on the scales. Also those blond Teutonic locks that were the glory of Gus' youth have passed away and the peak of his thought dome is a skating rink for saucy flies, while the fringe of his ruse filaments over his ears and nape is clipped short.

Not one of his sparse hairs is gray. He passed the fiftieth milestone this summer, but he looks like a youth of forty. If one takes a job under the ruler of Quivera, one doesn't have any time either to worry or dissipate, and therefore, one has no reason to get gray, observes Herr Renze.

Gus works the year around for his majesty and what he says about not having any time to idle is pretty nearly true. With building floats, looking after initiations, designing King's Highway entrances and doing a multitude of other things, Renze says he has no time to pray except in the winter, and even then his prayers are short. For a month before the big fall festival he is busy at the Den day and night, Sunday included, putting in about sixteen hours a day. Many a time he has threatened to organize a union, with the eight-hour day platform, but the threat always came to naught, as the nearest man in his own vocation is at Kansas City, and the next nearest at St. Louis, and all were so busy that they didn't have time to meet. Gus tries to rest from his work on Saturday nights during the rush season, but he doesn't always get away from the Den even that one evening.

Gus is not periodic in his habits; he is very regular. He smokes cigars every day, drinks enough hop and barley juice to keep his appetite keen and never misses being on hand at the Den on initiation night. For seventeen years, ever since Ak-Sar-Ben was started, he has never been absent from an initiation. One night he was injured in the initiation apparatus, but the next Monday night he was on hand again. Nothing short of typhoid fever or a whole army of Napoleons would keep a Rhine man from his post of duty, says Renze.

It might be remarked, in passing, that nothing but urgent duty would keep Gus away from the banquet of "hot dog," hard-boiled eggs and liquid refreshments which delights the knights after each Monday night's initiation. With a "wienie" sandwich in one fist and a mug in the other, Gus makes a figure at the banquet no less picturesque than that of Sir William Kennedy himself, who often acts as grand mufli. Gus may not bestride a horse as gracefully as H. J. Penfold or dance like Will Yetter, but he is certainly "there" with "the boys" at the weekly banquet.

He is a sort of a tyrant in his own realm, is Renze. What he says goes. Of course, the general results he aims at must be O. K.'d by the Board of Governors, but in working out the detail he is given a wide range and allowed to use his own judgment. When Gus says a certain figure goes on a float it goes; when he says a certain piece of initiation machinery must be arranged thus and so, it is thus arranged; when he says a Den employee is fired, he is fired. The artist who writes the "opery" or the "drammer" for the initiation season must needs consult Gus or he will have much of his work for naught. Gus builds the stage and the scenery and the play must be written, completely reversing the usual custom in stageland. The playwright has to find out from Gus how many characters he can have in his cast, whether the scene is to be laid at the north pole or the island of Swat, whether or not the stage will be strong enough to hold up a horse, and a few other things, and then he is ready to dip his pen in the ink, or put a new ribbon on his typewriter, as the case may be.

"I have a beautiful little ditty here," says the playwright to Gus, "that I want to use for the chorus at the point where the pirate captain learns



that Carrie, the hash-slinger, who was born a princess, has promised to become the wife of Willie Rib-bona."

"Cut it out," growls Gus. "Cut it out. The more you cut out of that scene the better it will be. Rotten is an easy word for it. Such a chorus should be sung by the sad sea waves, and I haven't got time to make a seashore, as I am having a lot of trouble in building up a yellow bear-se, with green trimmings, to carry away the captain in the last scene. Forget your chorus and think of something appropriate for Carrie to say when the church bell tolls."

Renze is not afraid to state his position on any given point to any member of the board, and if, after the argument is all over, the board does not support him, he says "all right," and, naturally, does as the board wishes. If the majority of the board puts the O. K. on him, the minority will talk about the "cussedness of that bull-headed Dutchman." All of which is in the game and Gus smiles, for he knows that the next time the fellows who called him bull-headed may be for him.

Gus is long on ideas, and the board gets the benefit of his numerous suggestions for initiation features and parades. He claims to be originator of the "no initiation" idea in 1904, in which year the order had the largest number of members in its history. It was this way, according to Renze:

"I was standing on the street one day talking with George West of the board, when someone came along and asked what was going on. I could just as well have told him that we were talking about the attempted assassination of the czar of Russia, but I said, 'Haven't you heard the latest. We are not going to have any initiation this year.'"

"No? Quit, you're kidding," was what he said. "On the square," I told him, "we have decided that it would be a good thing to try for a year."

"He spread the report. Pretty soon Dad Weaver and some others came along; and asked about it."

"Sure," I said. "We have had initiations until everybody is tired of them and we're going to try a new wrinkle."

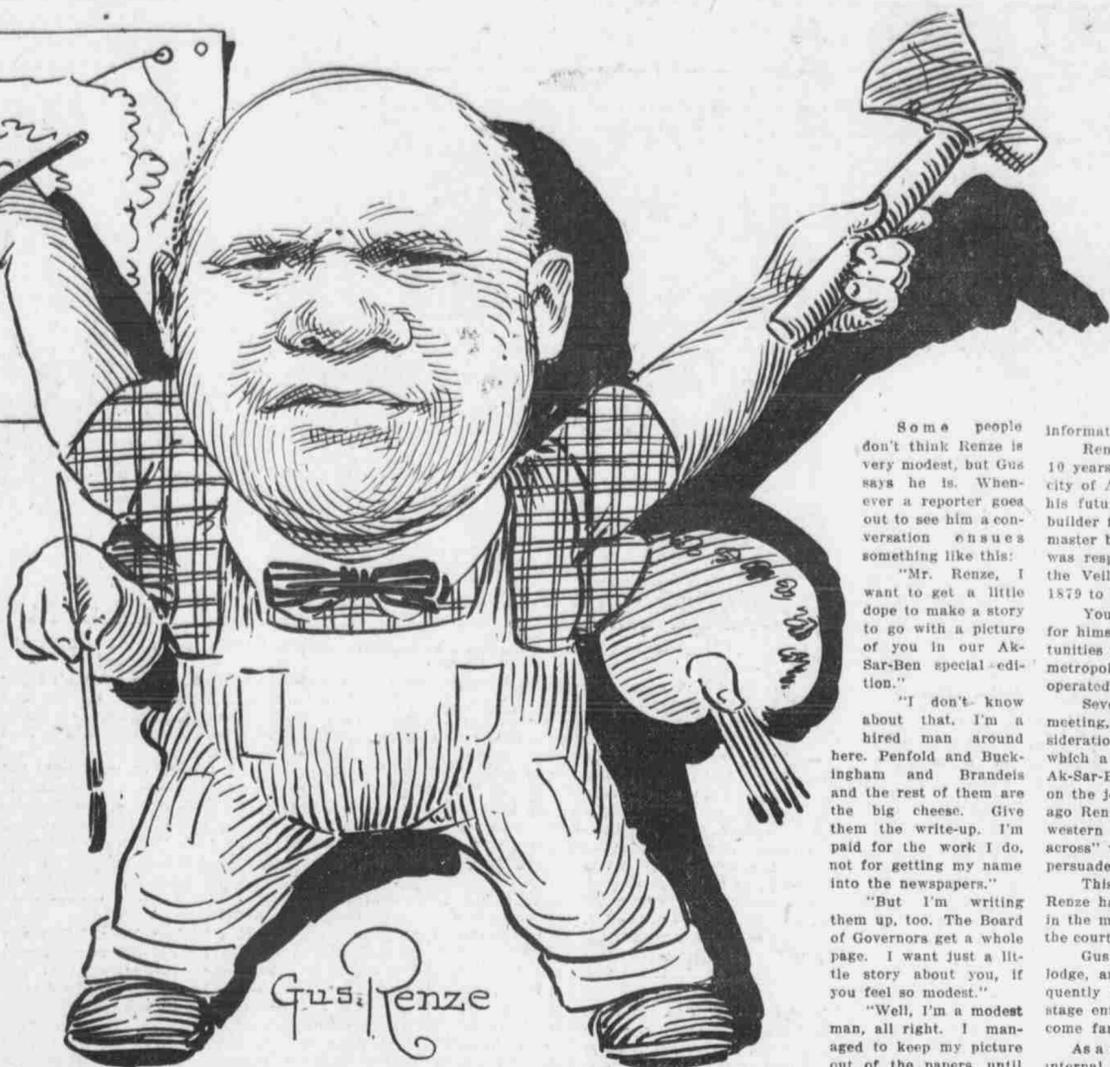
"But we won't stand for it," said Weaver. "We've got to have an initiation."

"I told him it was too late, that the board had made all arrangements and had gone to big expense to put in other attractions. I told him we were going to put in a bowling alley and billiard tables and some card games and other amusements of that nature and we thought it would draw more members than the usual initiation."

"Weaver said he didn't believe it and was going to ask Edgar Allen. He started for Allen's office. Me to the telephone. I fixed it up with Mr. Allen, and when Weaver got down there things were ready for him. He came away believing my story."

"In a day or two the newspapers printed a story to the effect that other amusements would be substituted for the initiation that year, and here was the chance for all those to join who were afraid of being initiated."

"All the members of the board fell in with the joke. We had one of the most strenuous initiations that year we ever had, and initiated hundreds who came because they thought here was a chance to join and get off easy. We thought the joke would last only a week or two and that somebody



Gus Renze

would give it away, but it held good through the entire season, and on the very last night we had victims who didn't expect to be initiated."

about two years ago, when Colonel McCullough of The Bee got after me so hard that I had to give in. I've tried to keep the boys from writing about

me, but I couldn't do it. They knew I arranged the initiation and designed and made the floats and prepared the Den for the ball and designed the carnival entrance and they went ahead and wrote about it."

"Let you off easy," says the reporter, not mentioning the fact that he is expected to fill a half page with the Renze story and picture. "I'll try to write it in such a way that it won't get you in bad with anybody else who thinks he's the main thing in Ak-Sar-Ben."

"Well," says Renze, "what kind of dope do you want?"

With the information that Gus thereupon leaks out, and with what the reporter already knows, he can perhaps fill his allotted space. But Gus really doesn't realize the versatility of the average reporter and actually believes that he has given up only about enough information to make a couple of paragraphs.

Renze came to America from Germany when 10 years old, and the age of 18 found him in the city of Anheuser-Busch, laying the foundation for his future usefulness in Nebraska, as a float builder for the Velled Prophets of Khorassan, his master being Tom Couch, who for thirty-six years was responsible for the floats in the parades of the Velled Prophets. Renze worked here from 1879 to 1881.

Young Renze wanted to engage in business for himself, and as Omaha offered greater opportunities than St. Louis, he moved to the Nebraska metropolis, where he became a sign painter and operated in a shop of his own for many years.

Seventeen years ago Renze attended the first meeting, at which parades were a subject of consideration, of the new Business Men's association, which a short time later became the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben. From that time to this he has been on the job with the knights. Two or three years ago Renze was offered a similar job in some far western city. The Board of Governors "came across" with an increase in salary and Renze was persuaded to stay.

This year, in addition to his usual duties, Renze has designed twenty-six of the floats to be in the manufacturers' parade and the columns for the court of honor on Douglas street.

Gus is a leading member of the local Elks' lodge, and his master hand and mind are frequently called into service in arranging for the stage entertainments for which the Elks have become famous.

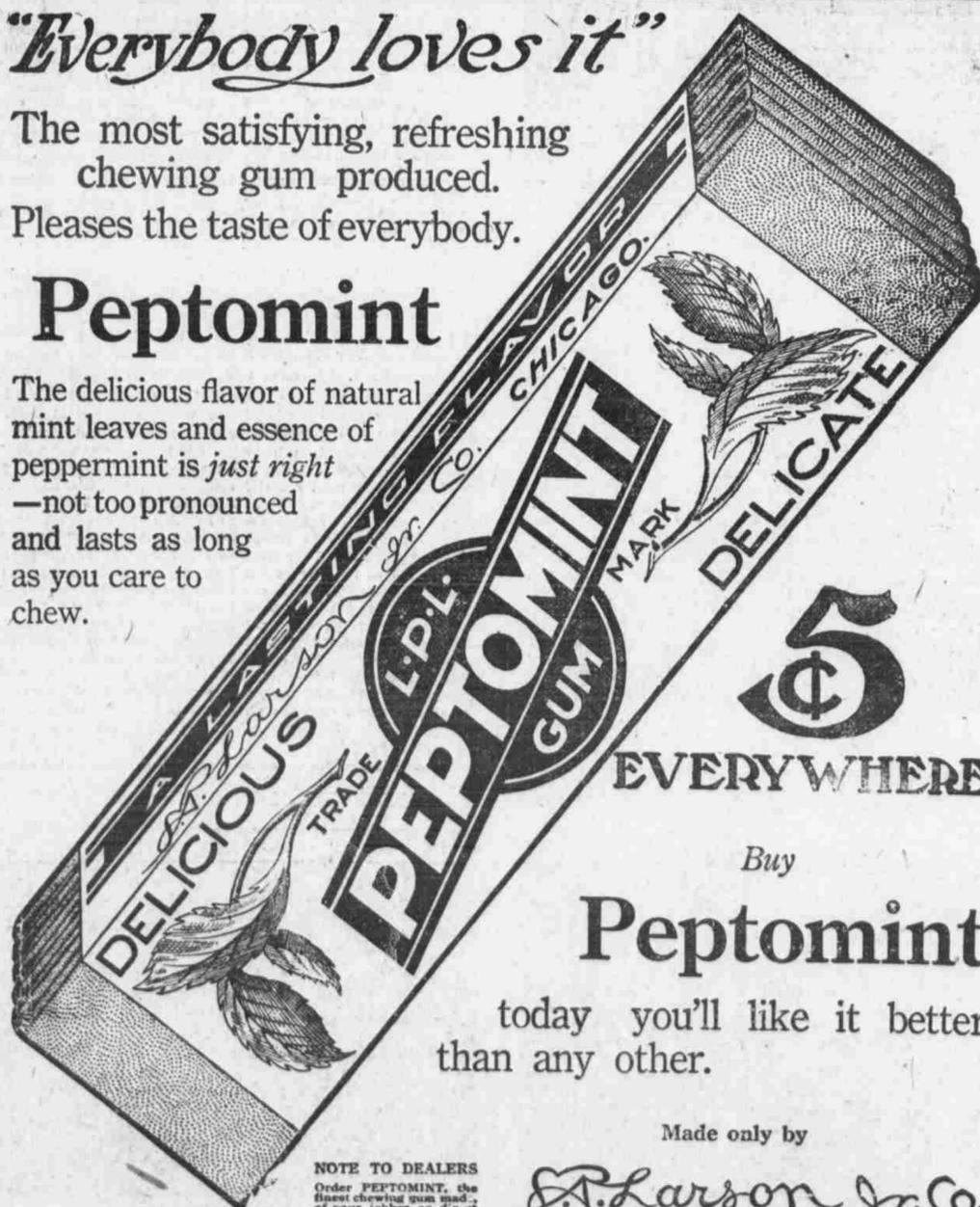
As a matter of fact, Gus is a human dynamo and internal combustion engine combined, an unfailing fount of never-flagging energy and zeal, second of imagination and fertile in expedient, and Ak-Sar-Ben would not part with him at any price.

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