

# The City Council: A fictional narrative of Rural Life in the American West

## Episode 161: Gustav Gut

■ By Jim Tindall

He had a lot to do with appearances. When Gustav Gut arrived by sternwheeler in Warhaven in 1875, his skills included dentistry, barbering, and undertaking. He very soon proved he was indispensable under the business name of Gustav's Shop of Preparations. After five years in this jack-of-all-trades position, soul searching showed Gustav he felt most alive working for the dead, ministering to the needs of those left behind.

His parents had fled the famines and revolutions of Europe in 1848, emigrating to America and settling in Cincinnati. He had been 8 years old. The ships and trains and riverboats had enthralled the boy. From then on when he daydreamed, departures were full of chivalrous, daredevil travel. When the Civil War erupted, Gustav mustered in at Camp Dennison into the 9th Ohio Infantry, the regiment made up mostly of Germans. It was in this service to country that he learned the embalming arts. War was a bitter pill, but he swallowed hard and countered the horrors with

the mundane cutting of hair, where he heard many a tall tale and laughed heartily. He and his fellows fought through the battles of Rich Mountain, Chickamauga, and Resaca, among others. He buried friends; he buried the loathsome. He was impartial to his passengers as a ferryman to the afterlife.

Gustav set up shop in downtown Warhaven on the southeast corner of Catbird and Jay in a three-story frame building he helped construct finished with white clapboard siding. Originally, he had an office up front which included the chair for dentistry and barbering, and a rolltop desk for conducting the business of billing and receipts. He could be stern; he could be impish, his remedy for dark gnawing remembrances of combat.

Gustav joined the Methodists and became betrothed in 1877 to Esther Krilling, the daughter of a West Hills farmer. In the following year, the Guts organized Oddfellows and Rebekah lodges, and helped to develop the IOOF Cemetery with lanes and

irrigation, and that lovely boulevard into the burial ground, which we now call, respectfully, the Last Mile. He and Esther raised two sons and a daughter, Esau, Bethuel, and Sarah. They resided on the third floor of their business.

When in 1880 he decided to divest of teeth and hair, he researched for able, competence to fill his shoes. He had learned barbering from observation and trial on his siblings; he had grasped oral medicine from reading a book — actually two books, Taft's A Practical Treatise on Operative Dentistry and Harris's The Principal and Practice of Dental Surgery. Now there were dental schools. He wrote to the Dental School of Harvard University, securing the interest of one young graduate, Dr. Harold Thisby, who agreed to set up practice in Warhaven. He also placed an advertisement in the San Francisco Daily Dramatic Chronicle, seeking a barber, and was successful, engaging Herbert Rammling, a 30-something fellow originally from west Texas.

To make these deals

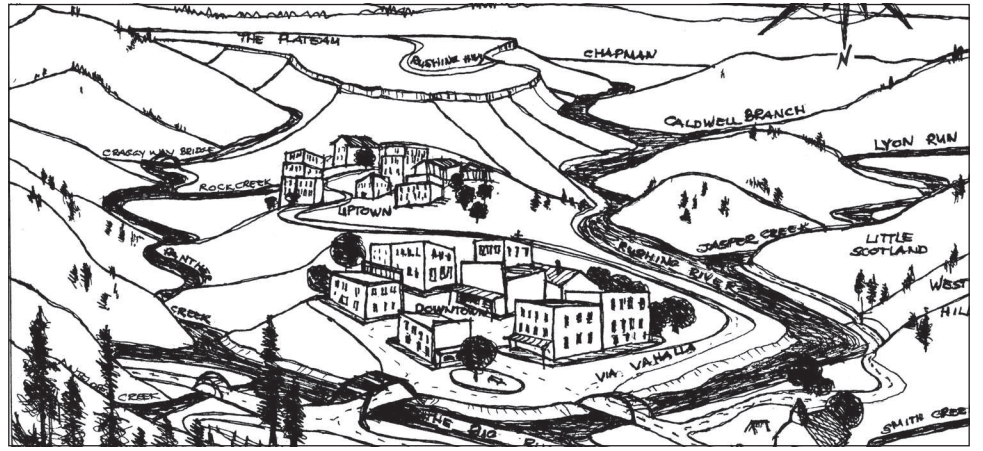


Illustration by Peggy Ohlson

sweeter, Gustav purchased two lots a block up on Dove, and had two buildings constructed to the men's specifications, then rented these facilities to them reasonably.

He named his new, focused business Todstad's Mortuary. In addition to his professional skill sets, Gut was a talent on the pump organ and the flute, playing for many funerals.

When there was a fire or other emergency that might include physical mayhem, he would willingly respond with the volunteers, and if

his talents were needed, he was there and performed them always in his quiet dignified manner.

Grisly or macabre deaths were a reality, and remain so, of course, but before the automobile, these events were a little less frequent. Accidents on the farms or ranches or in the woods were common. Twice in his career he had to sew two halves back together. One of these tragedies occurred in the West Hills when too much tension was applied to a barbed wire; the other when a wagon load of glass

loosened up descending a slope in the Craggies, cleaving the teamster. Gus was a faithful man; his prayers always contained regards for his silent, passed clients.

Gut was elected to the Warhaven City Council in 1882 and served three terms, presiding as mayor in '85 and '89. He was a very capable and entertaining public speaker. His speeches invariably contained poignant insights into life in each of Warhaven's five voting districts: Downtown, Uptown, the West Hills, the Plateau, and the Craggies.

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