

By Mike Vogel

Margaret L. Wendt, whose namesake charitable foundation has ignited a new era of philanthropic outreach in Western New York, would be surprised indeed at the fame she now has attained. Her father would be astounded.

Forbidden to attend college and discouraged from following the footsteps of a “progressive” cousin in the early years of the last century, Miss Wendt lived a quiet life that tempered the privilege of her class and station with a personal commitment to charity – a commitment that evolved, eventually, into a multi-million-dollar fund that was among the first in this area to seek out projects with great potential impacts on the well-being of the entire community, rather than simply respond to pleas for assistance.

Margaret’s father, William Wendt who with his brother and nephews captained the Buffalo Forge Company and built wealth in the world of commerce, could not have expected that young Margaret would accomplish so much. William, perhaps overprotective after the death of another daughter and definitely the product of an age in which women were limited in their roles and overshadowed by their husbands and fathers, undoubtedly would have been astonished that the Wendt family would become more famous for giving away wealth than for accruing it. One can only wonder what the clan’s hard-nosed businessmen and engineers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would have thought of the millions that have been given away as their family’s most lasting legacy.

In the process, though, Margaret Wendt’s personality has again been overshadowed – this time, by the very foundation that bears her name. Its works make headline news; Margaret never did, and by most accounts would have been appalled had she unintentionally done so.

The Continuing Legacy of Margaret L. Wendt



Margaret Wendt around the time of her graduation from Buffalo Seminary in 1903.

She was born in 1885, the daughter of William Franz Wendt and the former Mary Gies. William was a native Buffalonian, born here in 1858 and educated in Buffalo Public School 32 and the old Central High School. Round of face, with a high forehead and a bushy moustache to contrast with his neatly-trimmed hair, Wendt was a lifelong businessman. Soon after high school he was training as a bookkeeper at R.W. Bell & Co., and by

1878 – just before he turned twenty – he found he had saved enough to purchase a half interest in a small blacksmith equipment company that had been started only a few months earlier.

Wendt's acquisition of an interest in Buffalo Forge, a small manufacturer of portable blacksmith forges founded in 1877 by Charles Hammelmann in a loft at Broadway and Mortimer Streets, became his path to prosperity. There may have been little initial indication of that; Buffalo, in 1878, was still a relatively small city of about 155,000 people and most of its industry was on the waterfront or just a short way inland, in the downtown district. "While the horse-drawn street cars provided a connecting link with the city, there were still farms on Broadway," a company historian noted. "However, there was already established nearby a growing German-American neighborhood from which many skilled mechanics have come."

Wendt, who initially managed the financial side of the business, immersed himself in the engineering and manufacturing processes and soon became the general manager. His takeover was completed in 1883, just five years later, when he bought out Hammelmann's share and became sole owner of Buffalo Forge.

He was not content to simply market what already had proven to be a very popular portable forge, one that used a small mechanical blower instead of the traditional hand-operated bellows. Nor was he content simply to assemble his own product from purchased parts. Wendt soon was expanding his product line, and Buffalo Forge was making its own parts, even marketing the machine tools the company had developed to do so.

In 1884 the company's geared and lever-driven forge fan became the springboard to a line of heating and ventilating equipment; the initial two sizes of forges, intended for the forty blacksmith shops in Buffalo, became an array of differently sized and styled portable forges marketed throughout the nation in what, by the turn of the century, was the largest forge manufactory in the United States. In 1893 the company added a line of high-speed automatic engines, and soon had sales agencies in London, Paris and St. Petersburg.

A highly successful company through the twentieth century, Buffalo Forge eventually would become a leading manufacturer of heavy industrial equipment for moving, cleaning, cooling and heating air. Its pumps and other lines of equipment found favor worldwide. Pumps stamped with the word "Buffalo" were standard on Navy ships.

The company was very much a family business. In 1886, three years after becoming the sole owner, William admitted his younger brother Henry W. Wendt to partnership. Born in 1863, five years after William, Henry also was educated in city public schools; unlike William's bent for business, Henry was the brother with natural mechanical aptitude. Buffalo Forge was the first step in his employment career, and it would be his last; he started

at the bottom, working at the mechanic's lathe, and eventually came to own and run the company.

The Wendt brothers' combination of talents proved a strong one. Similarly mustached but slimmer of face, Henry became internationally respected for his heating and ventilating equipment designs, and was awarded a number of patents. When William was ready to retire in 1916 – some say because his personal eccentricity had strained relations between the brothers – Henry was ready to buy him out and assume sole control in his turn. Eventually, after Henry's death in 1929, his own sons Edgar and Henry would take over; Edgar would retire as president in 1958 and Henry in 1966. The Wendt name lives on, for the Henry Wendt side of the family, in the Lake Erie summer home and 169-acre estate now known as Wendt Beach in the Erie County town of Evans.

On William's side of the family, there was a house on Linwood Avenue and a home created by Wendt's marriage to Mary Gies of Buffalo on November 8, 1882, some three years before Margaret was born. Prosperity was no shield from tragedy; the young couple also had another daughter, Gertrude, who would die young. Unlike Henry, William would have no sons to whom he could pass his management of the business, in an era when that was a male inheritance. Margaret would never marry, so there would be no grandchildren, either.

Margaret was slightly older than her cousins Edgar and Harry, but they were already at work at Buffalo Forge well before her father's retirement. Her path was just as conventional, albeit more limited. She was expected to attend a fine school, followed by either finishing school – not college – or marriage. That mold was occasionally broken; another cousin, Edith Stolzenbach, attended Wellesley College and then headed off to France to drive an ambulance in World War I. Margaret's father was made of sterner stuff than to even consider allowing his daughter to do that.

Margaret attended Buffalo Seminary, graduating in 1903 – the heart of the "City of Light" era. Pictures show a young woman of what was usually called ample figure, straight and poised, decked out in frills and white lace. Frills may not have been her natural milieu; she was by all accounts intelligent, quick, a woman of plain but open and honest countenance whose society upbringing did nothing to dispel a native compassion, a natural reserve, and a lifelong love of animals.

Margaret's older sister married at the age of twenty, about the same time Margaret graduated from school. Gertrude, though, would die soon after, in childbirth, and her baby would die too. The tragedy has been cited by some as one reason Margaret was forbidden college, but Gertrude hadn't been allowed that route either; William Wendt simply had strong ideas on the proper role of women, family members say.

"It was a shame that she didn't go to college," notes Ruth Geiger, a cousin and retired schoolteacher who lives in Kenmore. "Her father did not approve."

Margaret was especially close to two first cousins, Edith on her father's side and Harriet Gies Geiger on her mother's. Harriet married J. Marion Geiger, a chief engineer for the Niagara Mohawk Power Corp.; their daughter Ruth has been a fruitful source of memories of Margaret Wendt.

Another longtime friend, the late Rev. Ralph W. Loew, once told a *Buffalo News* interviewer that Margaret was "a very, very private woman" whose father had set her course in life. After the death of her sister, he added, William "became overprotective of Margaret." Fortunately, the family's wealth provided another outlet for Margaret's own talents; there was a family farm in Lockport, and its management fell to the young lady.

Margaret tended to the business of the horse farm for many years, but there are hints she indulged her own interests as well. There was a large aviary that caged exotic birds, and Ruth Geiger remembers peacocks. The farm provided horses for the family carriages as well as for riding; Margaret, Ruth recalled, loved horses and was a confident rider in Lockport and Buffalo.

"People would talk about seeing Margaret headed out Millersport Highway with her horse and buggy to go to the farm," Rev. Loew remembered.

There were travels, as well. Margaret and her mother made the ocean journey to Europe, the first of several trips, at the start of the twentieth century, leaving William

and older sister Gertrude at home. They would make a second visit just after World War I. There were also American journeys, including automobile trips to New Hampshire and South Carolina, some of them in the company of cousin Edith.

William Wendt died in the 1920s. Margaret's mother, Mary Wendt died about 1940. A year or two after her mother's death Margaret sold the Lockport farm. She found a beachfront property in Thunder Bay, Ontario where a creek met the lake, and decided to build in that colony of summer homes for the well-to-do. In 1948, that summer home – a substantial structure, far more than a cottage – was ready.

Margaret became a familiar fixture there, socializing and walking her Irish setters. "She always had a dog," Ruth recalls.

And those walks would prove fateful; one day, walking her pet dog Michael near her Richmond Avenue home, she met the new young pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church – Rev. Ralph Loew, destined to become one of the three founding trustees of the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation.

Rev. Loew recalled that he and his three-year-old daughter were out for their daily walk around Colonial Circle when "here comes this lady with her beautiful dog...my little daughter wanted to pet the dog. He licked her face, and the lady and I exchanged a few words."



Margaret, far right, with her sister Gertrude, father William F. Wendt and Aunt Hattie.

The small talk continued through daily meetings, and soon Margaret was attending Rev. Loew's church. She and the Reverend's family grew close, and Margaret became a benefactor – anonymously, at first – to the needy. "She began asking me, what will we do now?" Rev. Loew recalled. "You might say we were running a private foundation."

In one act of generosity, Margaret brought a young European emigrant family here after World War II and watched over them as they became established in their new community. Ernst Both, a son in that family, would go on to become the long-time director of the Buffalo Museum of Science.

In the mid-1950s, the discussions between Margaret and her pastor broadened from individual acts of charity to talk of a more organized approach. In consultation with her investment broker, Samuel D. Lunt, and her lawyer, William I. Morey, she decided to establish the charitable foundation that bears her name.

The Margaret L. Wendt Foundation was started with \$750 thousand in 1957. Its annual income amounted to about \$30 thousand a year in those days.

Margaret was active in grant decisions in the early years, helping decide how to distribute that annual income of \$30 thousand in typical grants of one, two and five thousand dollars. She and the three founding trustees – Rev. Loew, Samuel D. Lunt and William I. Morey – met annually at Christmas time to make the awards. She was clear in expressing her desire that the money be given mainly in Western New York.

Margaret also continued an active if private life, taking part in her major loves – travel, her church and the cultural life of the city. But tragedy struck in 1959 when Margaret suffered a stroke, and lapsed into a coma. She lingered for thirteen years, never regaining consciousness; death came in 1972.

"For thirteen years, Sam (Lunt) kept her home on Richmond Avenue in order, her maid working in the house and her Chrysler tuned up in the driveway," Rev. Loew told *Buffalo News* reporter Agnes Palazzetti in 1993. "He had heard a story about a man who never expected to recover from a coma, but he did regain consciousness and was devastated to find out everything he loved had been sold."

Margaret willed the bulk of her \$14,557,348 estate to the Foundation which bears her name. She provided lifetime trusts totalling \$1.25 million for a number of her relations and additional cash bequests to charities. Today more than 90 percent of the Foundation's income is distributed to causes and organizations in Western New York.

That amount has grown dramatically in recent years. The Foundation continues to be well managed. At her death, Margaret's bequest boosted the foundation's worth to about \$11 million; today the trust is worth about \$120 million – more than ten times its value in 1972.

The Foundation channels about \$5.5 million a year into the local economy. A \$1.5 million loan, later partly



Margaret Wendt with her dog, Michael.

forgiven and augmented with grants, rescued the Buffalo Philharmonic when it teetered on the brink of financial collapse. Millions more went into a stunning restoration of the Roycroft campus in East Aurora, where the Wendt Foundation took a leading role in promoting "heritage tourism" as a form of economic development in Western New York. Other such grants followed, for restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin Martin house, Shea's Performing Arts Center and Graycliff.

Western New York cultural institutions, including the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, the Museum of Science, Albright-Knox, the Buffalo Zoo, and the Historical Society, also received major support from the foundation. Another \$1.5 million gift boosted a capital campaign that led to major upgrades at Margaret's alma mater, The Buffalo Seminary. Wendt Foundation grants helped to house the manuscript of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library and to restore the historic 1833 Buffalo Lighthouse.

In the field of education, Western New York colleges and universities have received major grants from the Foundation, as has the King Urban Life Center's early childhood initiative, run in collaboration with departments of education at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, Buffalo State, Fredonia and Houghton College.

Importantly, the Foundation's recent emphasis on major grants to projects that hold promise of lasting and influential regional impacts, especially economic impact, has led other grant-makers to undertake more active and higher-profile community roles. According to its current trustees, the Wendt Foundation has become "a sounding board for all the needs of this community – social, economic and civic. It is heavily involved in the educational, health, social and economic needs of the community."

In 1997, Margaret L. Wendt was one of the first dozen achievers to be named to the Western New York Women's Hall of Fame. Considering the impact her legacy continues to make on just about every cultural and social institution in this area, and the hope it offers to this region's future, the honor was well deserved. Even if it would have taken Margaret quite by surprise. 🏠

Here's to the days that now are past,

Here's to the joys they knew;

Here's to the friendships, aye, to last,

Here's to their memories true.

Here's to the future, fair and bright,

Away with shaking fears,

Here's to the courage to do the right

All thro' the coming years.

– Margaret Wendt

(from Class Song, written for her Buffalo Seminary class of 1903)

Photos courtesy of the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation.

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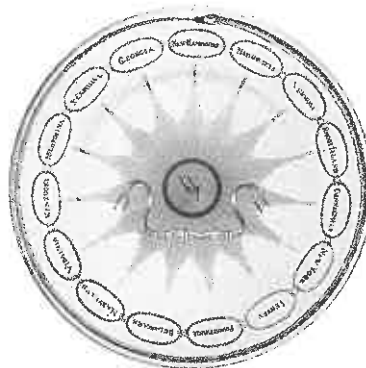
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