## « An American Character »

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF NORMAN A. GEISLER

Norma Heffron

An American Character: The Life and Times of Norman A. Geisler

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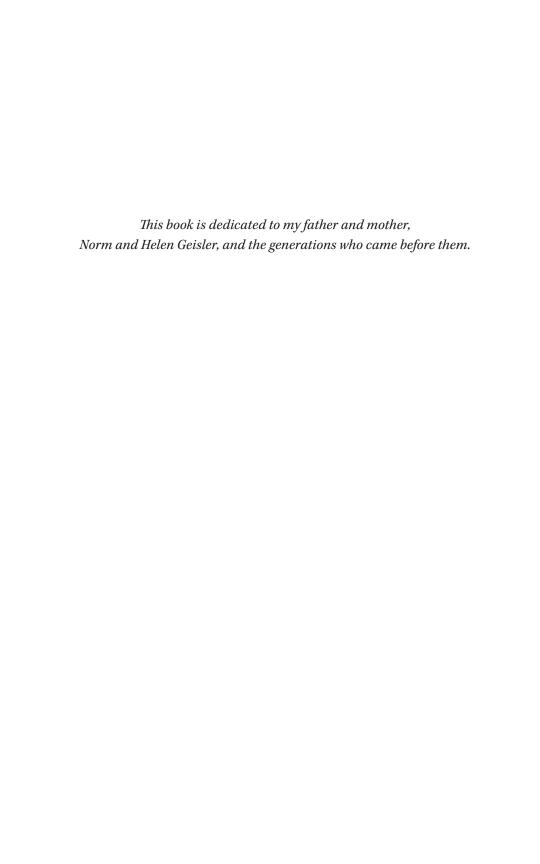
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All grammatical and typographical errors have been put in this book for your enjoyment in finding them.



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Without the support and encouragement of my husband Jim and other family members, this book would still be a distant dream.

I appreciate the shared memories of my brothers, Richard and Don Geisler; my daughter, Kim Sutter; and my cousins, Shirley Popp, Lois Wright and Gerry Powers. Thanks also to my sister-in-law, Sandy Stryker, who worked diligently in preparing the photographs for this project.

Special thanks goes to Patricia Charpentier for her patience, advice, editing skills and her Writing Your Life classes that motivated me to write my father's story. I am very grateful for her class motto:

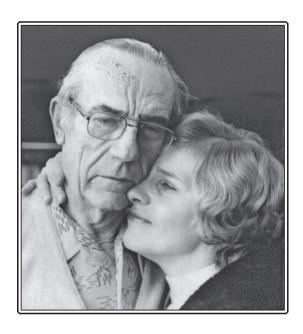
The only way to do this wrong is to not do it at all.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

An American Character: The Life and Times of Norman A. Geisler is based on memory and research available as of this date.

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#### **PROLOGUE**

This book is written to honor Norman A. Geisler, the father of three children: Richard Lee Geisler, Donald Allen Geisler and Norma Lou Geisler Heffron. It includes Norma's journey to discover her father's family history and tell his life story. Norma has intertwined some of her own writing with her brothers' memories, her father's poems and stories and a few verses written by Richard.

IN THE SUMMER of 1980 on August 13th, I sat side by side with my father, Norman Geisler, on the well-worn, striped sofa in his family room. My heart cried out like a needy child with an unrelenting desire to connect with this man I had called my father for thirty-five years.

I touched his hand timidly and said, "I love you."

He broke the momentary silence with a heavy sigh that came from the depths of his soul. With his head down, his eyes staring at the floor, he patted my knee and simply responded, "Me, too."

His ashen face and sunken eyes emphasized the weakened condition of his body. I fought back tears as I carefully measured my words. In my heart, I knew this was the last time I would see him on this earth.

Fighting back my disappointment in his response, I quickly said, "I want to honor you for providing for me all these years and for being my father; I love and appreciate all you have done for me."

His eyes finally met mine as he replied, "I have not done anything special; I am just a man. I did the best I could."

On September 13, 1980, I received the phone call that my father had passed from this life. It had only been one month since I sat beside him on the sofa in his home in Oxford, Michigan. In the midst of my grief, I had to smile when I discovered the circumstances surrounding his death. We often heard him say he would die doing what he loved—playing cards with his friends. When the aneurysm ruptured, he simply put down his head on the card table with the winning hand still in his fingers.



#### **CHAPTER ONE**

## The Heritage

Du Kamst, dugingst mit leiserspur, Ein fluchtger Gast im Erden land; Woher? Wohin? Wir wissenmur; Aus Gottes Hand in Gottes Hand. —LUDWIG UHLAND You came; you went with faint steps, A fleeting guest on earth; From where? To where? We only know Out of God's hand into God's hand.

NORMAN GEISLER LIVED as a fleeting guest on this earth for seventy-four years, but his footprints were anything but faint. This man made his mark on the world and left a legacy of adventure for his children to uncover.

He became a giant of a man in the eyes of some, a big salesman-gambler to others. His fifteen-plus-size shoes left an imprint of adventure and controversy behind him, and some said he went through life like a *bull in a china shop*. Others said he was rawboned and strong, eager to journey into the unknown, a man of creativity who was able to see potential and new possibilities even after others around him had given up.

In 1979, Norman Vincent Peale included one of Norm's stories on his radio program entitled *The American Character*. The program ended with: "Four-thousand-six-hundred volts couldn't stop this man from Oxford,



Norman A. Geisler

Michigan. For his spirit came from even greater power—the power of The American Character."

I felt it was important to begin the journey of looking back at my father's life with his family and his German heritage. My father's character, beliefs, work ethic, sense of adventure and his wit and humor were fashioned by his strong, hard-working, God-fearing German family. This family influence produced a man who valued truth and honest dealings. He had a faith in God that carried him through the struggles and disappointments of life. Forever a storyteller, with a unique sense of humor, he could make others forget their troubles by recounting tales of his experiences. He lived

life on the edge of a wild whirlwind. He loved new cars and traveling and conquered the highways by speeding down roads, through fields, over ice-covered lakes, through backwoods and up high mountains. The German term *wanderlust*, meaning yearning to travel, fit him nicely.

To begin, I want to share information on his family lineage. Next I will explore details I have regarding his fraternal grandparents, Allen and Lorette Geisler: his maternal grandparents, August and Fredireka Koth; Norm's parents, Allen and Mollie Geisler; and his siblings, Frank and Florence Beier Geisler.

When I was a little girl, I heard my father speak a few German words around our home. I tried unsuccessfully to reproduce their guttural sound with flare and emphasis. The German word *Gesundheit*, used to give a blessing after someone sneezed, made me giggle every time my dad said it. *Guten morgen* or good morning was another one of my favorite greetings. As a child, I was so excited after my father successfully taught me how to count to ten in German . . . ens, zwei, drei, vier, funf, sechs, sieben, acht, neun, zeh. I can still picture his smile of satisfaction at my achievement.

My father grew up in Utica, a rural, German, farming community in Sterling Township, Macomb County, Michigan, founded in 1825 on the banks of the Clinton River at the intersection of two ancient Indian paths. It was located twelve miles north of Detroit, Michigan. During the middle of the 1800s, Michigan needed farmers and settlers to help the state grow, so the government recruited and welcomed citizens of Germany. The locals

viewed these new neighbors as religious, well educated and prosperous. Many Germans seized this opportunity to immigrate to the United States. They left their homeland because of taxation, increased industrialization, loss of confidence in the government, political and economic turmoil and the failed German revolution in 1848. Over the next ten years, one million people left Germany and settled in the United States. By 1870, Germanborn farmers made up one-third of the United States agricultural industry.

My father was raised in a home and community where German was the preferred language. I often wondered if the Geisler family ever suffered persecution because they were German, especially during the two World Wars. My dad was eight when World War I began in 1914. Many newspapers were still being printed in German until laws were passed requiring that all publications be printed in English only. In some areas, German music was banned. Towns, streets and buildings with German names were renamed, and some German Americans changed their surnames to hide their origins. At that time, immigrants from the same German states clustered together, and the persistent use of their native language set them apart from the world around them. Their desire was to preserve their local and regional identities. Many German immigrants like Norm's maternal grandfather, August Koth and his fraternal grandparents, Lorette Pochert Geisler and Allen Geisler Senior, settled close to one another in Utica as shown on an 1875 Sterling Township map.

I have very little information about my great-grandfather Allen Geisler Sr. other than he was born in 1825 and died in 1900. According to the 1870 census, he was a farmer with land valued at \$3,000 and \$1,000 of personal property. This same census listed his birthplace as Prussia. The next census in 1880 indicated that his father was born in Austria and his mother in Prussia. I wonder what he looked like; I have never seen a picture of him. I imagine a deeply-lined, weathered face shaded by a battered hat with graying strands of unkempt whiskers hanging down to his chest. Our family has a beautiful set of German sleigh bells made of brass. My father told us they came from the old country, but he could not remember which relative brought them to America; perhaps it was Allen.

A short history of the area now known as the nation of Germany included such historic figures as Charlemagne, Martin Luther and John Gutenberg, along with various emperors, popes, tribes, princes, knights, crusaders, kings and peasants. Frequent wars, struggles between Protestants and Catholics, the breaking down of the feudal system and the fight to abolish serfdom were all factors in the formation of Germany. The process of blending of the German nation stretched across hundreds of years. The land was broken up like a patchwork quilt into independent, sovereign states, Prussia being one. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Prussia became a great European power under Frederick the Great and had substantial influence on German and European history. The rich soil of Prussia, suitable for growing wheat, became known as the breadbasket of Western Europe. Allen Geisler, Sr. or members of his family may have grown wheat while living in their native Prussia.

After World War I, the Prussian National Assembly met in Weimar to draw up a republican constitution. From 1919 to 1933, Prussia existed as a free state in the Weimer Republic, but its independence was abolished by the Nazis in 1934 and by the Allies of World War II in 1947. Since that time, the name *Prussia* was limited to historical, geographical or cultural usages. Today the area that comprised Prussia includes part of Germany, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Denmark, Belgium, Czech Republic, Netherlands and Switzerland.

When I discovered the countries once a part of Prussia, I immediately searched for an old family book written in Polish. Stuck inside the front cover



Catholic prayer book written in Polish



Lorette Pochert Geisler's German Bible

was a stamp that read, Christmas greetings, American Red Cross, Happy New Year 1918. The well-worn, leather cover of this Catholic prayer book is beginning to deteriorate. As I open its delicate pages, I wonder if this book may have belonged to someone in Allen's family for many Poles and Jewish people lived in Prussia in the early 1800s. According to an article entitled "Journey to America," found on an online education site, "Most German immigrants were Protestants, with Lutheranism by far the most popular denomination; perhaps a third of German immigrants were Catholics and around 250,000 were Jewish."

Who knows? We may even have Jewish blood in our family line. It

fascinates me to consider what factors may have caused Allen to leave Prussia to begin a new life in America. If he lived off the land, he may have experienced famine or loss of income due to crop failure as the nation that once focused on agriculture became an industrialized country. Allen was twenty-three years old in 1848 when protests and demonstrations broke out in Prussia as fellow

countrymen challenged the current political structure. The 1848 revolution failed to unite the German state into a single nation and dashed the hopes of the people. Perhaps Allen had become disillusioned with the direction his country was taking and longed for more freedom.

Even though I am unable to read German, I enjoyed looking through my great grandmother Lorette Geisler's 1852 Bible she brought with her when she came to this country. Printed in Frankfurt in fancy script, Dr. Martin Luther's name appears on the first page followed by yellowed, water-stained pages, void of pictures or ornate decorations. I wish I could read it.



Lorette Pochert Geisler

The 1870 census indicated that Lorette was born in Prussia to Fredrich Wilhelm Pochert and Johanna Louise Walther and christened on September 30, 1838 in Goldlauter Sachsen, Preussen (Prussia). Goldlauter is located in the southwestern part of what used to be East Germany, and Sachsen is now referred to as a province. Since many of these records are in German, it has been difficult to go into more in-depth research.

In a picture I have of Lorette as an adult, she is seated with four of her children gathered around her. In the background is an old, ornate organ with sheet music open, waiting to be played. The few pictures I have of Lorette show a woman whose eyes were firmly fixed, her jaw line set with a look of strength and determination. She lived nine years after the death of her husband. She birthed seven children-Willie, Ralph, Edward, Augusta, Rose, Louise and Allen Junior. Willie died shortly after his third birthday, and



Lorette Geisler family: Allen Jr., Edward, Louise, Lorette, Rose