

# CANAWLERS AT REST

## CAPT. WILLIAM ROPA

b. December 8, 1834

d. May 3, 1918

William Ropa was born in Prussia on December 8, 1834. At age 19 he left home, sailed to the U.S. and upon arrival traveled directly to Ft. Wayne. There he began working on a canal boat on the Wabash & Erie Canal in the early 1850s. He soon became captain and owner of a boat that traveled between Fort Wayne, Toledo and Cincinnati.

William married Sophia Gerke (b. ca. 1843, d. 3-28-1875) of Adams county on September 25, 1862 in Fort Wayne. William was 28 and Sophia was 19 years old. Together they had seven children: Herman, Frederick, William, Mena, George, Henry and Julia. Sorrow came to the family when Julia, who was less than eight months old, passed away. Death struck again about a year later in 1875 taking Sophia at age 32.

With a family of six young children to rear, William married Sophia Emme (b. ca. 1840, d. 6-22-1899) on February 6, 1876. William was 42 years of age and Sophia was 36. Besides acquiring a new wife in 1876, Fort Wayne's mayor, Charles H. Zollinger, appointed William to a minor office, that of Market Master sometimes called Weigh Master. He served in that office from 1876-1910. He was listed as a wheat buyer in the 1880 Federal Census.

Sorrow again befell the family in 1899 with the untimely death of Sophia Emme Ropa only nineteen years after her marriage to William. It was quite a shock to the family and the community. Her obituary carried the grizzly story of her death:

*The Fort Wayne News* Thursday June 22, 1899

**A FOUL MURDER.**  
MRS. WM. ROPA EXPIRES FROM  
THE EFFECTS OF A CRIMINAL  
ASSAULT.  
**CHOKED BY BURLY TRAMP.**  
UNABLE TO SPEAK AFTER HER  
TERRIBLE EXPERINECE WITH

INHUMAN MONSTER.  
**SHERIFF IS ON HIS TRAIL.**  
TERRIBLE STORY OF AN AGED WOMAN'S  
DEATH AT THE HANDS  
OF A MURDERER.

Mrs. William Ropa, wife of the market-master, died today from the effects of a villainous assault committed in the barn at her home by an inhuman brute who is at large.

The entire police and sheriff's forces are working on the case, but there are small hopes that the fiendish brute will be apprehended, as he has such a long start of the officers.

Mrs. Ropa is an aged woman, who has been in ill health. She went to the barn this morning to feed the chickens, when a fellow jumped from the loft and seizing her by the throat, choked her and otherwise maltreated her.

For a long time she lay in the barn unconscious, and when she finally crawled into the yard and was discovered by a neighbor she was unable to tell the sad story in detail. Drs. Porter and Sweringen were called and exhausted the resources of medicine in her behalf, but to no avail. At 1:30 this afternoon she died from shock and fright. Never in the history of Fort Wayne has such a fiendish murder been committed.

### TRAMP IN THE BARN.

For several weeks a tramp has been sleeping in the barns near the Ropa residence, 27 Wall street. He has been sleeping in the barn of Mr. Zimmerman, and yesterday Mrs. Zimmerman ordered him off the premises and said that if he returned he would be arrested. The tramp retired with a threat. The fellow is described as of good height, smooth faced and wearing a dark suit of clothes. It is thought from the evidence that this is the murderer and that he thought he was wrecking vengeance on Mrs. Zimmerman when he assaulted Mrs. Ropa.

### THE TERRIBLE STORY.

Mrs. Ropa, who is 59 years of age, was noted for her kindly nature and love of pets. She looked after her chickens every day, and although she had been in feeble health she went every morning to feed them. This morning at 7:30 she went to the barn for this purpose. She was so engaged when suddenly she felt herself grasped from behind and the dirty fingers of the burly tramp closed around her throat, stifling the screams of horror that she was about to utter. Mrs. Ropa made a feeble resistance to the fiendish brute and remembered no more. At least she was not able to tell it.

### DISCOVERED BY A NEIGHBOR.

Just how long the unfortunate victim lay in the barn is not known but she finally regained enough strength to crawl out into the yard and stagger against the fence. Mrs. Miller, a next door neighbor, saw Mrs. Ropa and surprised at her appearance, said to her:

"The heat seems to affect you, Mrs. Ropa."

"It is not the heat, a man has choked me," gasped out Mrs. Ropa and again collapsed.

### NEVER REGAINED REASON.

Mrs. Miller quickly gave the alarm and the surprise of the occupants of the house who had been unconcerned while the beloved wife and mother was the victim of this awful tragedy, only a few feet away, can hardly be imagined. Loving hands carried her into the house and physicians were quickly summoned. Mrs. Ropa seemed dazed and there is reason to believe that she was never fully conscious of what was going on about her. All she could tell of the occurrence was that as she was seized she heard a voice say:

"I'll get even with you."

She was unable to give a description of the fellow and

her condition was such that it was cruel to press her. Drs. Porter and Sweringen could give but little hope. They administered medicines to no effect. The villain had done his work well and at 1:30 surrounded by her sorrowing family Mrs. Ropa passed away. Her end was peaceful after the indescribable suffering that she must have gone through.

**THE BEREAVED FAMILY.**

Mrs. Sophia Ropa was the wife of Market Master Wm. Ropa. She was born in Germany, but has long been a resident of Fort Wayne. She leaves besides her husband a number of grown children. They are: Herman, who is in the west, Frederick, William, Mrs. Minnie, wife of Christian Daseler, George and Henry, all of this city. She also leaves one brother, William Emme, of this city. She was a devoted wife and mother, a woman of many noble qualities of mind and heart and the whole community will sympathize with the family in their sudden awful bereavement.

**WORKING ON THE CASE.**

Sheriff Melching and a posse of deputies and Lieutenant Lapp were working on the case this afternoon. The only clue to the direction taken by the murderer was given by a number of small boys who saw a man about 7:45 running across the flats and across McCulloch's park in the direction of the railroad. It is extremely probably that this was the brute sought for. The officers will spare no trouble to apprehend the fellow.

In the 1900 Federal Census William was the head of the household. His son Henry, daughter Minnie Daseler, and son-in-law Christian Daseler were living with him. It is not known when William broke up his household, but the 1910 Census shows him living with his daughter and son-in-law Christian Daseler.

Death again visited William Ropa's family in 1905 when his son George died. In 1915 his son Frederick died.

William underwent an operation for a tumor on May 3, 1915 and succumbed. His obituary follows:

*The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*  
Saturday Morning, May 4, 1918

**OLD PIONEER CANAL BOAT CAPTAIN DIES**  
William Ropa, who Came to Fort Wayne

in the Early Forties (Fifties), passes Away.

William, Ropa, old-time canal boat captain in the days when Fort Wayne was just beginning to reach the dignity of a city, and for twenty-four years market master, died at 7:30 o'clock last evening at the residence of his daughter, Mrs. C. L. Daseler, 2144 Broadway, with whom he had made his home for some time. Mr. Ropa was born in Germany on December 8, 1834, and came to the United States when nineteen years of age. He immediately came to Fort Wayne and during the early forties (fifties) was captain of a canal boat on the old Wabash and Erie canal, plying between Fort Wayne, Toledo and Cincinnati. He also served long and faithfully as market master, being appointed by Mayor Charles H. Zollinger, and served continuously for twenty-four years, until eight years ago, when he retired. He was married to Sophia Gerke, of Adams county, who died forty-three years ago, and was then united in marriage to Sophia Emme, who died nineteen years later. Four children survive. They are Herman Ropa, in the west; William F. Ropa of Fort Wayne; Mrs. C L. Daseler and Henry W. Ropa, of South Wayne avenue. Mrs. Charles Waitemath, of Lafayette street, is a sister, and Mrs. George Ropa, of this city, is a daughter-in-law.

Mr. Ropa was operated upon for a tumor Friday morning and never rallied. He was widely known throughout northern Indiana and was known everywhere as Captain Ropa during his sixty-five years of continuous residence here. The funeral announcements will be made later.

*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*  
May 6, 1918

**CAPT. WILLIAM ROPA.** This afternoon at 2 o'clock from the late residence, 2144 Broadway, and at 2:15 o'clock at the Emmaus Lutheran church. Rev. Philip Wambsganss officiating. Interment in Concordia cemetery.

William's undertakers were Wellmann & Ulmar. Old Concordia Lutheran Cemetery is located on Anthony Blvd. between Washington and Jefferson in Fort Wayne.

The following is a little information about some of William and Sophia Gerke Ropa's children:

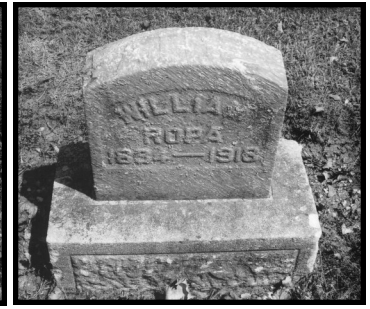
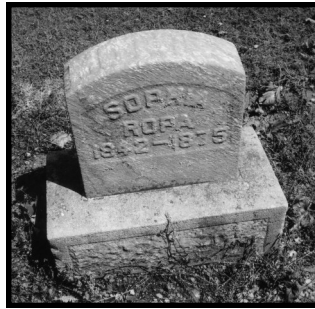
Name	U.S. FEDERAL CENSUS							
	1870		1880		1900		1910	
	age	occupation	age	occupation	age	occupation	born	age
William Ropa	35	Boat Captain	46	Wheat Buyer	65	Market Master	12-1834	74
1. Sophia (Gerke) Ropa ( b. ca. 1843, d. 3-28-1875) m. 9-25-1862 children:	27	Keeps House						
Herman (b. ca. 1864, d. )	6		16					
Frederick (b. ca. 1865, d. 11-7-1915)	4		14					
William F. (b. 2-6-1868, d. )	2		11					
Mena (Minnie) (b. 11-/-1869, d. )	6/12		10		30	m. Christian Daseler		age 39
George (b. ca. 1871, d. 3-18-1905)			9					
Julia (b. ca. 1874, d. 1874 age 7m. 5d. buried in Section K Lot 129 Grave 1)								
Henry W (b. 3-?-1875, d. )			5		25	Clerk R. R. Shop		
2. Sophia (Emme) Ropa (b. ca. 1840, d. 6-22-1899 murdered) m. 2-6-1876			37	Keeps House				

Herman Ropa (b. ca. 1864, d. ?) in 1880 Federal Census was working in a foundry.

Frederick W. Ropa (b. ca. 1865, d. November 7, 1915 died at age 50). In the 1880 Federal Census he was listed as age 14, a cigarmaker. He was a machinist at the Wabash shops for twenty years and died at the company's hospital at Peru after a five day illness due to diabetes. He had worked at the Pennsylvania shops and learned his trade at the Bass machine shop. His wife died 3 years prior. He had one living son.

William F. Ropa (b. 2-6-1868, d. ?) married Clara M Keer or Kerr on 2-5-1895, then on 1-22-1912 he married Minnie Wiehe Beuchel (b. ca. 1871, d. 5-15-1931). He was her second marriage and she his. Children: Tina Dondero, Clara Meier, Herbert Ropa, Paul Beuchel.

George Ropa (b. ca. 1872, d. 3-18-1905) died at age 33 of pneumonia and infection-of-the-heart. He was an instrument maker at the electric works where he began as a mere boy. He was a member of Ft. Wayne Electric Relief union, Bruederliche Unterstetzungas Verein and Packard Mutual Benefit Association of which he was the secretary. He had three children.



**SOPHIA ROPA  
(GERKE)  
1842-1875**  
First wife  
Section K Lot 129 Grave 5

**SOPHIA ROPA  
(EMME)  
1840-1899**  
Second wife, age 59  
Section K Lot 129 Grave 6

**WILLIAM ROPA  
1834-1918**  
age 83  
Section K Lot 129 Grave 7

Old Concordia Lutheran Cemetery, Ft. Wayne, Indiana  
Photo by Bob Schmidt looking northeast

Sources:

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 Griswold, B. J. *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana*. Chicago, IL: Robert O. Law Company, 1917.  
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 Wilkens, Cleo, Goff. *Obituary Record in Ft. Wayne Newspapers 1841-1900*, 1962.