

Louis Kircheis, Soldier and Barber

Louis Kircheis grew up in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. His older brother Julius had enlisted in the Army, and was working his way up the ranks (eventually rising from private to Lt. Colonel). Louis was inspired by his brother's example to join the Wisconsin National Guard in 1888. It was in LaCrosse where he met and married Olga Peterson, a Swedish immigrant, in 1892, when he was 22 and she was 21. The pair moved on to Moorhead, Minnesota where he started working as barber.

In Moorhead, Kircheis and some other Guards organized a company to volunteer for service in the Spanish-American War in 1898. The company was not called up, but drilled nightly to prepare themselves.

Later that year, Louis and Olga moved to Billings. He immediately went to work as a barber, at the Bank Barber Shop located in the basement of the First National Bank building at Montana Avenue and North 27th Street. The building later was sold to the *Billings Gazette*, and the shop became known as the Gazette Barber Shop.

Kircheis enlisted the Montana National Guard in 1905 as a drummer for the regimental band. The band was dissolved in 1910, and he moved into Company K.

The shop had a series of owners over the years, but Kircheis eventually purchased it in 1906 from the widow of the previous owner. At the time he bought it, the shop contained five bathrooms, Turkish baths, and seven client chairs. It was a time where highly styled mustaches and beards were in vogue for men, and how their facial hair looked was far more important to his clients than the hair on their head. Kircheis developed his own style with wrapping mustaches in curling papers during the shave to get the right look. The shave and curl cost \$0.15 to the customer.

The Governor called out the Guard to head to Butte in 1914. They were there to quell violent labor riots between rival unions, which required two months to accomplish. Two years later, his Guard unit was sent to the Mexican border. They were there to protect the border during the Mexican Revolution, which had just seen Pancho Villa's incursion into New Mexico. Kircheis spent five months on the border, returning home in November 1916. Just a few months later, in the spring of 1917, the unit was mobilized again, this time for service in World War I. They were assigned to guard railroads until the fall, before being sent to France as replacements to build the strength of units that had suffered casualties. Kircheis came back home in February 1919, and was discharged in March to come home to his family and business.

In 1926, Kircheis remodeled and refitted the barber shop, touting it as the "most modern" and up-to-date shop in the city. An ad in the *Gazette* reflected the fashions of the day, noting that his barber shop paid "especial attention to ladies' hair cutting", with





an illustration showing several women with freshly bobbed hair. The ad showed the price of haircut as \$0.35 and a shave for \$0.25.

Kircheis was honored for his military service by the Montana National Guard in November 1934. He had served ten three-year enlistments in the Army and Guard at this time. He was supposed to retire as soon as he turned 64 in February, but he wanted to attend his 25th Summer Encampment, so kept quiet until after the summer's end. His retirement was quite an event, with a band concert from both a military and the high school band, followed by a battalion parade and review. Guests on a viewing platform included the mayor and the Guard's

Adjutant General from Helena.

Kircheis retired as a barber in 1946, shortly after Olga's death. The shop was closed and the space converted for the use of the *Gazette*'s printing operations. When asked how many shaves he had given over the years, Kircheis couldn't even guess, saying that it had to be over a million. He did remember his notable clients, though. He had shaved P.B. Moss on his first day at work, and he certainly remembered the day when the first heavyweight champ, John L. Sullivan, had gotten the works in his chair. After 48 years in the shop, Kircheis was ready to go fishing near his Rock Creek cabin. Kircheis died in 1955 at the age of 85. He and Olga are buried in Mountview Cemetery.

Sources:

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Billings Gazette, "Guardsmen Will Honor Sergt. Kircheis Tuesday After 30-Year Service", November 4, 1934

Billings Gazette, "Local Man Dies in Miles City", April 4, 1955

Billings Gazette, "Tales of the Town...", August 31, 1946

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Montana Room collection, Billings Public Library

Advertisement "Billings' Oldest Barber Shop Now the Most Modern", June 20, 1926