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Clark Countian Gerig had distinguished career

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

Through the years, many Clark Countians have enjoyed distinguished careers in public service. One such man was engineer William Gerig. Although not a native of this county, he came to call Arkadelphia "home."

William Gerig was born in Missouri in 1866. His family came to the United States from Switzerland and had a great deal of experience in the engineering field. For example, William's father assisted in the construction of the Suez Canal. So, it was only natural that William Gerig spent time at many building sites as a young boy. There he became fascinated with surveying instruments and decided to pursue a career in which he could make use of such

equipment. Graduating from the University of Missouri at age nineteen with a degree in Civil Engineering, Gerig began work in his profession, which eventually took him to all different parts of the world.

One of William Gerig's early projects was the construction of a short-line railroad out of Smithton, in Clark County, to serve the large lumber mill operation there. This marked a turning point in his life, for it was in Clark County that he met and then married Minerva Crow in 1890. The couple eventually had two children: Frank, who also worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and Mildred, who married Jacob L. Newberry of Arkadelphia.

Soon after marriage, Gerig went to work for the United States govern-

ment, conducting a survey of the Mississippi River. By 1905, he became a division engineer in charge of constructing a major segment of the Panama Canal. When the canal became operational, it was the largest American engineering project to date.

After the canal project, William Gerig returned to the United States and worked first for a railroad, and then as consulting engineer for the digging of the New York Barge Canal. After that, Gerig worked on a new rail line than ran from Seward to Fairbanks, Alaska. During his lengthy career with the U.S. Army Engineers, Gerig inspected most of this country's river and harbor works, as well as major canals. Interestingly, in 2014 the Barge Canal was added to the National Register of Historic

Places "as a nationally significant work of early twentieth century engineering and construction that affected transportation and maritime commerce for nearly half a century."

William Gerig retired to Arkadelphia in 1938. He died in 1944 and was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery. A couple of years after his death, the Corps of Engineers built a 352-foot sea-going dredge boat and named it the "Gerig" in his honor.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clark-countyhistory.org or 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245-5332).



PHOTO COURTESY CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
William Gerig, while not a native of Clark County, called Arkadelphia home, and he held a distinguished career as an engineer.