

idea of the spoken language than any book could give me.” They were often amused by Fred’s pigeon speaking, but always were polite and gave great help.

In the *Washington Daily News*, Rodney Dutcher noted that Fred “rides to work every day on a bicycle, lives largely on the fruit known as the pawpaw, thrives on a diet which cost 25 cents a day and became an accomplished horticulturist while carrying around at least 100,000 words in his head. This is more than Woodrow Wilson knew, for his vocabulary and been estimated at 62,000.”

Fred responded to that article, which was published in the *Shakopee Argus*, by saying that he was not dwelling in a tree, that he did not feed on pawpaws, and he lives on “at least \$100 a month on an average for the last 30 years, or perhaps nearly \$200 counting fads and follies.”

William Hinds noted “It is open to you to introduce to Shakopee, the greatest man born there, and, to my notion, the most conspicuous linguist known to Western Hemisphere, and you may include the world.”

Wilfred Fred Stevens died in 1939 at age 65.



The Shakopee Courier Building, Shakopee Minnesota, 1875 from the Minnesota Historical Society. This was the building where Wilfred Fred Stevens learned the printing business from his father, Charles A. Stevens.



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## SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



**Wilfred Stevens**  
1874-1939

Compiled and written by David R. Schleper, Shakopee Heritage Society © 2020





Wilfred Fred Stevens was born in Shakopee on March 16, 1874.

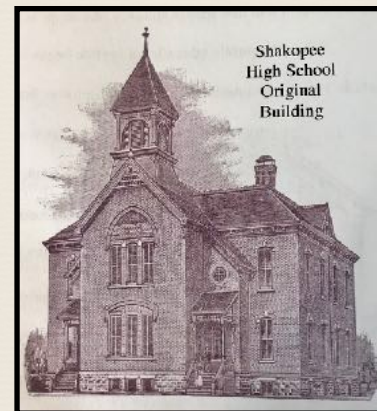
Fred attended German Lutheran School in Shakopee, and then the Union School. While attending school, he learned the intricacies of the printing business in the print shop of his father, Charles Stevens, publisher of the *Shakopee Courier*.

Fred started learning languages when he was ten years old. He used to follow people in Shakopee who spoke German, French, and Italian, and made them talk to him. He did the same thing with the Dakota Indians in Shakopee.

In 1894, Fred Stevens went to Washington, DC and took a position in the government printing office. Since he was in school in Shakopee, Fred was very interested in languages, and when he moved to DC, he continued his study. Fred was then recruited into the War Department, where he was a librarian and translator in the office of the adjutant general.



On left is the German Lutheran School, which was located on First Avenue in Shakopee, and is now at The Landing in Shakopee. On right is the Union School, which was the first high school in Shakopee, and was located on Fifth Avenue and Holmes Street. These were the schools that Fred Stevens attended in Shakopee.



Around 1929, his annual accomplishments came to light. About his abilities as a linguist, it was found he had a passion for nature, and often wandered barefoot through the countryside, indulging in his hobby as a naturalist. "People sought him out in his office on the fifth floor of the old State War and Navy Building. There at a desk littered with strangely lettered manuscripts and dictionaries in many tongues, they found Mr. Stevens, a mild, bearded, preoccupied man" said R.M. Ring.

After 7 years at the War Department, Fred was transferred to the department of state, where he worked as a translator until 1924. He retired, then returned again in 1930 to work one more year.

Fred Stevens was able to translate over 30 different languages. Though many people would be amazed by this, Fred minimized this. "If I can translate 30 languages, what is that? There are

about 3,300 languages in all, so you see that 30 languages is not even a drop in the bucket."

The languages at Fred Stevens command, included several that he spoke with fluency, included English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Dutch, Sioux, Russian, Polish, Bohemian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Slovak, Bulgarian, Greek, Hungarian, Finnish, Latvian, Armenian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Esperanto, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, and Latin.

Although he was recognized as the outstanding linguist of the United States, and one of the greatest in the world, he worked as a translator for an annual salary of less than \$3,000!

Fred learned more languages by going among the people, including people in Washington, DC. "They are general and affable, answering all my questions in their own language, so that I get a clearer