

“I Can’t Sell Nails”

Paper Presented to the Indianapolis Literary Club

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I first met Irma Vonnegut Lindener at a luncheon in the Athenaeum arranged by her younger cousin, Catherine Glossbrenner Rasmussen.¹ The year was 1976, and I had met “Catey,” as Mrs. Rasmussen liked to be called, through a historic preservation project that my office, the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission, was conducting with the Junior League of Indianapolis. Under the persuasive influence of Reid Williamson, the new Executive Director of Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, the League had adopted historic preservation as a service area for its volunteers. One of its first projects was nominating the Old Northside neighborhood for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The project would entail considerable historical research. We decided that one way of gathering valuable information would be to conduct oral history interviews with some of the women who had grown up in the Old Northside area during its time of initial prosperity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

When Catey heard about the project, she contacted me, then a 24-year old staff historian, about her interest in family history and in the preservation of some of the family homes in the Old Northside. That led to the luncheon at the Athenaeum with Mrs. Lindener, whom Catey called “Aunt Irma.” Aunt Irma turned out to be the daughter and only living child of Bernard Vonnegut, one of the most prominent and gifted architects in Indianapolis at the turn of the 20th century. I had been learning about the buildings designed by Vonnegut and Bohn, Bernard’s firm, and admiring their style and quality of design. The initial luncheon led to a memorable visit to Irma Vonnegut Lindener’s childhood home (more about that later) and to an oral history interview, in which she opened a fascinating window into the lives of her family and the career of her father when she was growing up.

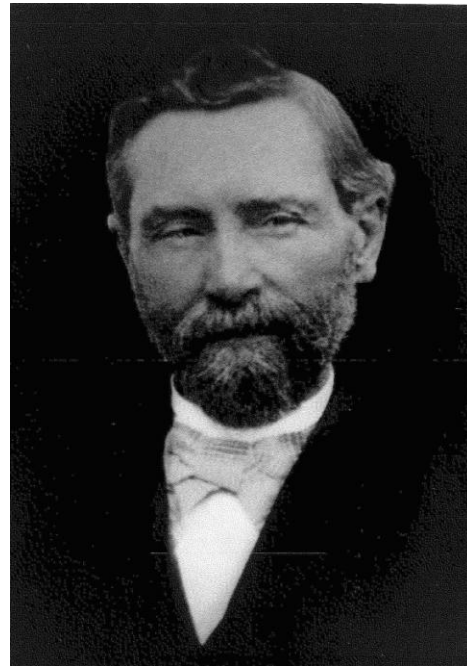
Irma was part of two successful German families in Indianapolis. Her paternal grandfather was Clemens Vonnegut, Sr., founder of a hardware company that became an

¹ Letter from Catherine G. Rasmussen to James A. Glass, 22 October, 1976. In Vonnegut Family File, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

important retailer in the city. Her maternal grandfather was Henry Schnull, founder of a large wholesale grocery firm.



Clemens Vonnegut, Sr., c. 1900ⁱ



Henry Schnull, c. 1890ⁱⁱ

Irma said that her grandfather Vonnegut was much more interested in learning and education than he was in business. He built up the family hardware store and then let his sons Franklin and George develop it. Grandfather Schnull, out of all of Irma's male relatives, was the only one who she believed had a talent for making money. He started in the wholesale grocery business in partnership with his older brother August. By the time the brothers had reached their thirties, they had already made enough money to retire. August was content to return to Germany, from which they had emigrated. There he bought part of an old castle on a hill and lived out his life.

Henry was too restless to retire and soon returned to business in Indianapolis. Among his early achievements was founding the Indianapolis Wholesale District along South Meridian Street. He constructed a building for his wholesale grocery on the street, which had previously been lined with fine residences, and then began to buy neighboring houses, demolish them, and build wholesale business structures on the sites. Within a few years after the Civil War, Schnull's efforts had resulted in the wholesale district taking root between the Union Railroad

Depot and retailers on Washington Street. (Here is a photo of the section in the Wholesale District where Schnull had his business).²

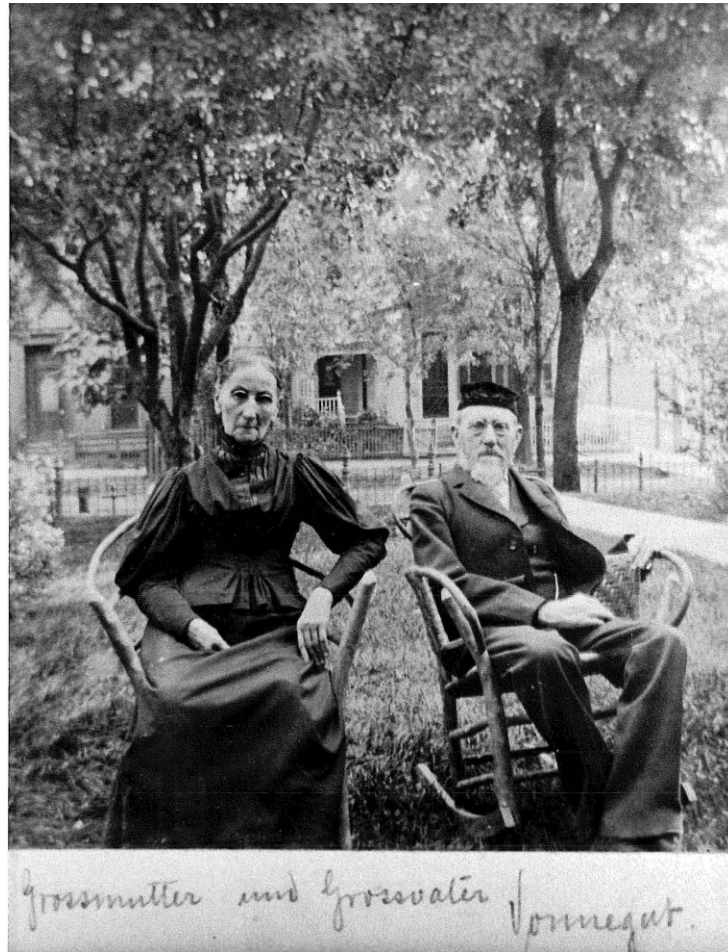


South Meridian Street in the Indianapolis Wholesale District, 1897ⁱⁱⁱ

Both of Irma's grandfathers emigrated as young men from Westphalia, in northern Germany, and perhaps that was a bond that helped bring their families together through marriages. Otherwise, they took very different paths in life. Clemens Vonnegut had little formal education, but loved to read and learn. Irma said that he was a born teacher and tried to teach her Latin and one her brothers French. He helped to found a private German-English school, which the children of many German families attended, and served on the board of the

² Transcript of taped interview with Mrs. Irma Vonnegut Lindener by James A. Glass, January 4, 1978. Irma Vonnegut Lindener Interview File, Indiana Historical Society Library; "Death Has Come to Clemens Vonnegut, Sr.," *Indianapolis News*, December 13, 1906, p. 1, c. 7; "Henry Schnull," in Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Memorial Record of Distinguished Men of Indianapolis and Indiana* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1912), pp. 454-55;

Indianapolis Public School system for 27 years. One of his chief interests as a board member was to institute the teaching of the German language in the public schools. Clemens and his wife, Katrina Blank Vonnegut, lived in a simple frame house on Market Street, just east of downtown, and Irma visited them there frequently.³



Katrina and Clemens Vonnegut on front lawn of their home on East Market Street, c. 1900^{iv}

Henry Schnull found satisfaction in operating successful businesses. He built up his primary firm, Schnull and Company, on South Meridian Street, and it became one of the top wholesale groceries in the state. In 1895, its building was destroyed by fire, and Henry promptly re-built on the same site, hiring his son-in-law Bernard Vonnegut to design the building. To

³ Lindener Interview; "Death has Come to Clemens Vonnegut, Sr."

symbolize the business' resurgence, Schnull named one of his primary products Phoenix Coffee, suggesting the idea of Schnull and Co. rising from the ashes.



Schnull and Company Building, 110 S. Meridian Street, c. 1902^v

Henry also wanted his children and grandchildren to be financially secure. One of his daughters married George Mueller, who was not inclined to business. For him, Schnull set up a wholesale drug company and found an able partner to help Mueller run the firm. For Henry's own son Gustave, who would have been much happier as a professor, the father arranged for him to become head of Schnull and Company. To be sure that the firm continued to prosper, the elder Schnull found another natural businessman to serve as Gustave's partner. The other two Schnull daughters both married sons of Clemens Vonnegut. Emma's husband Clemens, Jr., loved music, but went into business as an executive with a casket company and at several points worked for the family hardware store. Nannie Schnull married Bernard Vonnegut, who, as we

shall see, preferred art and architecture to more commercial businesses. Henry helped Emma and Nannie by buying homes for them and their families.⁴

Bernard Vonnegut was the second son of Katrina and Clemens, born in 1855. As a child he enjoyed art and drawing, and Irma reported that he was so obsessed with drawing that his father thought it was “a terrible waste of time” and took away his crayons and pencils. That did not end Bernard’s passion for art, but his father made clear that he expected him to enter the family business when he grew up. Like others in his family, the boy attended the German-English School. When he was old enough, he began work in the hardware store. According to author Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Bernard’s grandson, the young man began to cry one day when they were taking inventory at the store. When asked what distressed him, Bernard replied that he didn’t really like the business at all and wanted to be an artist. His parents decided to relent, and the son entered a local architect’s office as a draftsman. Evidently, the situation in the office caused him further emotional strain, and Bernard sought relief by working a year for a stone contractor, Gerhard Ittenbach, carving architectural sculptures. He then tried an apprenticeship with a manufacturer of mathematical instruments. Ultimately, he decided, with his parents’ support, to enter the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston for architectural training. Upon graduation, Bernard made the unusual move of seeking post-graduate coursework and doing it in Europe. He went to Hanover, Germany and enrolled in the Polytechnic Institute there. He also traveled in Germany and took additional courses at a technical institute in Berlin.⁵

His daughter Irma said that his time in Germany infected her father with a particular love for his ancestral country, its culture, and intellectual development. Some of his relatives later remarked to her that after he returned to the United States, “everything seemed extremely primitive in thought and development, so he was never really very happy in Indianapolis.”⁶

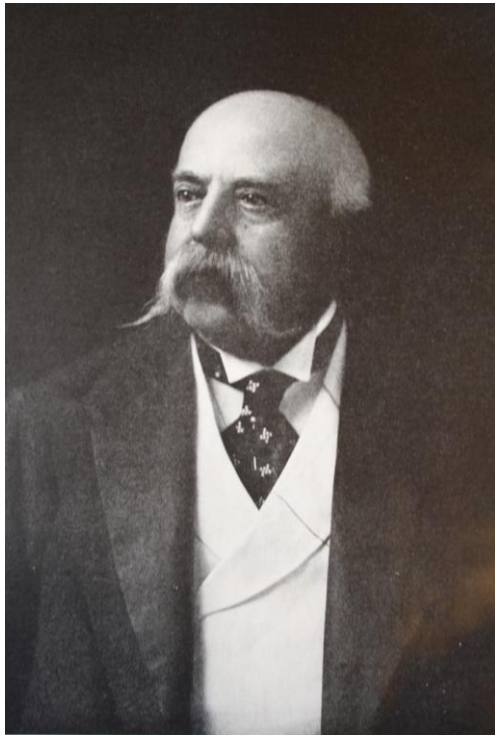
At a time when most architects in the United States learned their craft by working for an established architect, obtaining an architectural degree and taking post-graduate architectural courses in Germany were quite unusual. They gave Bernard Vonnegut credentials that commanded attention when he returned to America and went to New York City. In addition, he had developed notable abilities in the technical (what we would call engineering) and the artistic

⁴ Lindener Interview

⁵ Lindener Interview; “Bernard Vonnegut,” in Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1910), pp. 965-66; Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1919), Vol. V, p. 2174; Cathy Zaring, “Vonnegut—Architect,” *Indianapolis News*, December 27, 1978, p. 8.

⁶ Lindener Interview.

aspects of architectural design. He was also considered “strong as a watercolorist.” In New York Vonnegut found employment as a draftsman in the office of one of the top architects in the country, George B. Post. Post himself directed the efforts of the young man (here a photo of Post and young Vonnegut), and Vonnegut had the opportunity to work on the designs for the Cornelius Vanderbilt II Mansion at 5th Avenue and 57th Street and the New York Produce Exchange Building in Lower Manhattan. The Vanderbilt Mansion, reputedly the largest private house ever built in Manhattan, was a sprawling residence resembling a chateau in the French Loire Valley. The Produce Exchange featured an immense trading floor amply lit by a sky-light above, in the Romanesque and Renaissance styles.⁷

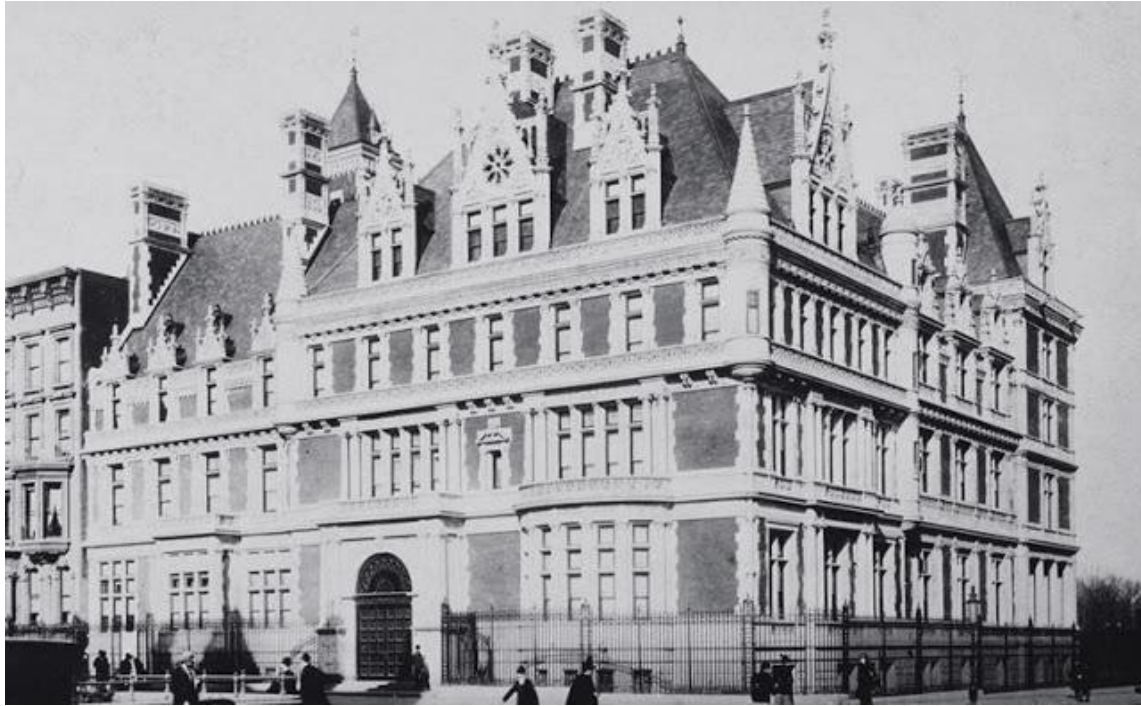


George B. Post, c. 1912^{vi}



Bernard Vonnegut, c. 1880s^{vii}

⁷ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, p. 966; “Then & Now: Remnants of the Vanderbilt Mansion in New York City,” from website: <http://untappedcities.com/2012/02/01/remnants-of-the-vanderbilt-mansion-in-new-york-city/>, accessed April 5, 2014; Carter B. Horsley, “George B. Post, Architect: Picturesque Designer and Determined Realist,” by Sarah Bradford Landau..., from website: www.thecityreview.com/gpost.html, accessed April 5, 2014.



Cornelius Vanderbilt II Mansion, New York City^{viii}



Trading Floor, New York Produce Exchange^{ix}

After several years in New York, Bernard, perhaps reluctantly, felt the pull of his family to return to Indiana. Irma Lindener said that her grandfather Schnull insisted that if Vonnegut wanted to marry his daughter Nannie, he would have to live in Indianapolis. So back he came, and he and Nannie were married in 1883. He then went to work for another local architect and moonlighted on the side. The first commission for a house that he received in Indianapolis was from his father Clemens for the simple frame residence that the elder Vonnegut wanted to build on East Market Street. Possibly because of the moonlighting, Bernard lost his job with the architect. Irma reported that he was disillusioned with architecture and tried to give it up. “Out of pure desperation,” she said, “he started working [again] in the hardware store, but my mother ... [told me] that he came home one night and said, ‘**I can’t sell nails.**’”⁸

He finally decided to start a small practice on his own and slowly began to get clients. In 1884 he met another architect with German ancestry, Arthur Bohn, when the two men taught descriptive geometry in an industrial training school. Bohn also had received architectural training in Germany, and the two formed a partnership in 1888 as Vonnegut and Bohn. Their practice steadily grew, and by 1900 the partnership had become one of the most successful architectural firms in Indianapolis.⁹

The formula for their success is not clear. Relatively little is known about Arthur Bohn. We do not know what his strengths as an architect were, whether he was gifted in winning clients, or if he handled the engineering aspects of projects. We do know that Bernard Vonnegut was highly artistic and capable of designs that were imaginative and aesthetically pleasing. He also was not a social person and did not enjoy the networking and business relationships important to nurturing a practice.¹⁰ It is therefore possible that Bohn maintained and expanded relations with clients and handled the business side of the office. It was not unusual in that period for the principals in architectural partnerships to complement each other.

Irma Lindener said that her father was much more interested in designing homes than office buildings. One of Bernard’s first residential projects after going into partnership was a substantial brick house that he designed for his father-in-law, Henry Schnull. The merchant

⁸ Lindener Interview.

⁹ George Theodore Probst, *The Germans in Indianapolis, 1840-1918* (revised and illustrated edition by Eberhard Reichmann) (Indianapolis: German-American Center and Indiana German Heritage Society, 1989), p. 100; Connie J. Zeigler, “Vonnegut and Bohn,” *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 1389.

¹⁰ So said Irma Lindener, Lindener Interview.

prince had previously lived in a French Second Empire-style house on Alabama Street downtown. By the early 1890s, Schnull wanted to move closer to his daughters Emma and Nannie and their families along 13th Street.¹¹ Bernard created a symmetrical house with an ornamental dormer window at the center of the façade. The dormer window and its base penetrated the hipped roof and were adorned with limestone accents and terra cotta ornaments. The dormer gave an individualized treatment to the exterior, which otherwise was somewhat conventional in its treatment.



Home of Henry and Matilda Schramm Schnull, 1305 Central Avenue, about 1896^x

About the same time, in 1892, Vonnegut designed a home for a German client on Dorman Street, in what is now the Cottage Home historic district.¹² Frederick Ruskaup operated a store on Dorman and wanted to build a large residence next door. Bernard designed a house with some similarities to the Schnull House—brick on high limestone foundation, with a wooden veranda on the front. Otherwise it was different, drawing on the popular Queen Anne style for

¹¹ Lindener Interview.

¹² James A. Glass (compiler), "List of Buildings in Indianapolis Designed by Vonnegut and Bohn," July 10, 1982, in "Vonnegut Family File," Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

its asymmetrical massing, corner turret and projecting bay to the side. Individuality came in a stepped gable, a steep pyramidal roof with German Renaissance dormer, and a recessed second story porch.



Frederick Ruskaup House, 711 Dorman Street, c. 1908^{xi}

Probably Vonnegut's favorite home was the one he designed for his brother-in-law and sister-in-law, Gustave and Matilda Mayer Schnull. The story of its design comes from Irma Lindener's first cousin, Gertrude Schnull Rauch, whom I interviewed in 1976. Gertrude was the oldest of Gustave's and Matilda's daughters and lived in the family home for many years after her parents. Gustave and Matilda had at first lived downtown in a house they had inherited from Matilda's father. The Schnulls wanted to build a home of their own, and in 1901 they drove out in a horse and carriage to look at lots north of Fall Creek, beyond the fashionable residential district. When Gustave told his father, Henry Schnull, that he had bought a lot north of 30th Street, the father said to him in German, "*Junge, bist du verrückt!*" (or "Boy, are you crazy?").

Henry, living at 13th and Central, couldn't conceive anyone wanting to live far out of the city, in what was then still country.¹³

It was natural for the Schnulls to turn to their brother-in-law, Bernard Vonnegut, to design their home. In Gertrude's words,

"...Mother and Uncle Bernard got together evening after evening, day after day, and planned this house, exactly the way that [Mother] wanted it. When it came time to select chandeliers, Uncle Bernard would have a catalogue, and turn pages. Mother would say, 'Oh, I like that one. I think that would be nice in the living room,' [and] Father would say, 'How much is it?'"¹⁴

Irma Lindener commented that her father was very fond of Mrs. Schnull, and "I think he laughed and was happier in her company than anyone else...they really enjoyed designing that home according to her wishes."¹⁵

In the fall of 1902 construction of the house was started, and the stone foundation was put in. Bernard wanted the foundation to sit the whole winter and settle, because the ground was sandy and gravelly. He didn't want any cracks to develop in the ceilings when the house was built. Masons began to lay buff-colored bricks in the spring and finally, the home was finished in the spring of 1904. The design showed a mixture of historical elements that Bernard had not used before in a house. Matilda Schnull desired a tower, so he placed a massive, rounded tower at one side of the façade. The roof, covered with red tile, had up-turning eaves, suggesting Chinese traditional architecture. The covered entry porch had crenellations, as in a medieval castle. Inside, Vonnegut used oak for the trim and ornamentation throughout most of the house. Irma Lindener repeatedly remarked that one of his favorite decorative elements was shields, which he used in all of his buildings, and there was an abundance of oaken shields in the main corridors and in the stairway of the Schnull-Rauch House.¹⁶

¹³ "Oral History Conversation #3—Mrs. John G. (Gertrude Schnull) Rauch," transcript of recorded interview with Mrs. Rauch by James A. Glass, November 24, 1976. "Gertrude Schnull Rauch" file, Indiana Historical Society Library.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lindener Interview.

¹⁶ Rauch Interview and Lindener Interview.



Home of Gustave and Matilda Mayer Schnull, 3050 N. Meridian Street, 1908^{xii}



Stair hall, Schnull-Rauch House, 2013^{xiii}



Oak entablature with shield, second floor corridor,
Schnull-Rauch House, 2013

In 1905 Vonnegut obtained the commission to design a very different mansion at what is now 29th Street and Meridian.¹⁷ Louis H. Levey, head of a large printing firm in the city, also wished to build a home north of Fall Creek. Bernard showed his versatility in creating a design based on the precepts of the French *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Paris, in which modern buildings were designed with the architectural language of Roman and Italian Renaissance architecture. The façade of the house, in dazzling white limestone, was symmetrical. The focal point was a grand arched entrance with a heavily ornamental segmental pediment overhead. The cornice consisted of Classical consoles and dentils, with a balustrade lining the roof. Inside, the main stairway dominated the center of the house, with wood paneling and columns. Originally the music room contained a pipe organ.

¹⁷ Lindener Interview.



Louis H. Levey House, 2902 N. Meridian Street, 1908^{xiv}



Main stairway, Levey House, c. 1910^{xv}



Pipe organ in Music Room, second floor of Louis Levey House, c. 1910^{xvi}

Despite his preference for residences, Bernard Vonnegut today is probably best known for his non-residential buildings. The largest and most important of these was *Das Deutsche Haus*, the German House, known today as the Athenaeum. It is perhaps not surprising that Bernard received the commission. The *Socialer Turnverein* organization that built *Das Deutsche Haus* was made up of a large number of families in the German community of Indianapolis, and much of the extended family of the Vonneguts and their friends were members. The turner movement, stressing sound bodies and sound minds, had been founded by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn in Germany and become very popular among the liberal German intellectuals who immigrated to the United States after the revolutions of 1848 failed in Europe. Turnverein members exercised their bodies through gymnastics and cultivated their minds through intellectual discussions, music, theater, and socializing. Among the leaders of the *Socialer Turnverein* that constructed *Das Deutsche Haus* were Henry Schnull and Bernard's brother, Clemens, Jr., second and third from the right in this photograph. Another was Herman Lieber, owner of a picture framing

factory and art gallery downtown, sometimes called “the Father of the German House,” at the right in the photo.¹⁸



From left: William Haueisen, Robert Kipp, Henry Schnull, Clemens Vonnegut, Jr., and Herman Lieber, c. 1895-98^{xvii}

The turners created a stock-holding company and sold shares to the members to raise funds for construction. To ease the financial burden, the building was built in two stages. The east wing, built in 1892-93, contained the gymnasium, dining room, library, card rooms, billiard room, ladies' parlor, bowling alley, and *kneipe* (pub).¹⁹ The exterior was clearly a modern building, with large arched and rectangular windows without adornments providing abundant natural light for the activities inside. Its design also drew from history. The corner tower with conical roof was medieval-looking, and such features had become popular for many types of

¹⁸ Lindener Interview; Probst (and Reichmann), pp. 21, 112, 114; Theodore Stempfel, *Festschrift: Fifty Years of Unrelenting German Aspirations in Indianapolis, 1848-1898* (Indianapolis: Bi-Lengual Edition, edited by Giles R. Hoyt, Claudia Grossmann, Elfrieda Lang, and Eberhard Reichmann. Published by the German-American Center and Indiana German-American Heritage Society, Inc., 1991), pp. 62-105.

¹⁹ Stempfel, pp. 101, 104.

American buildings in the early 1890s. The sharply pointed triangular gables, culminating in a pediment and a lunette-shaped accent, drew from German Renaissance architecture.



East wing of *Das Deutsche Haus*, about 1896^{xviii}

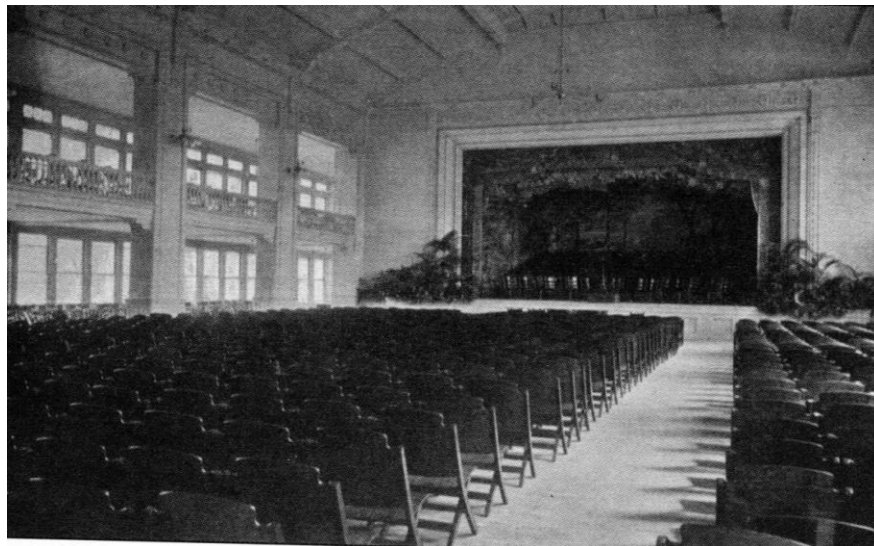
By 1897 the *Socialer Turnverein* had the funds to complete *Das Deutsche Haus*, and Vonnegut designed the west wing. The new wing afforded ample space for the cultural side of the turnverein. On the first floor were an auditorium and stage for lectures and smaller musical performances, a music room, and parlors for ladies' club meetings. On the second floor was a combination theater and ballroom, and in the basement were a second bowling alley and a sizeable storage space for bicycles, then the craze for exercise across the country. To the rear of both wings was a *biergarten*.²⁰ The exterior design, which we see here after completion in 1898, again bespoke a modern building, a multi-storied structure with simple, large windows providing natural light within. The rectangular shape, high pitched roof, and small dormer

²⁰ Ibid.

windows with finials resembled those of civic buildings of late 16th century Germany. For the façade of the west wing, Vonnegut harmoniously combined a gable derived from German Renaissance buildings with Italian Renaissance pilasters, columns, and a Palladian window. Stained glass windows were used throughout the building with motifs related to the physical and cultural activities taking place.



Ladies' Parlor, West Wing, *Das Deutsche Haus*, 1898^{xix}



Theater and Ballroom, West Wing, 1898^{xx}



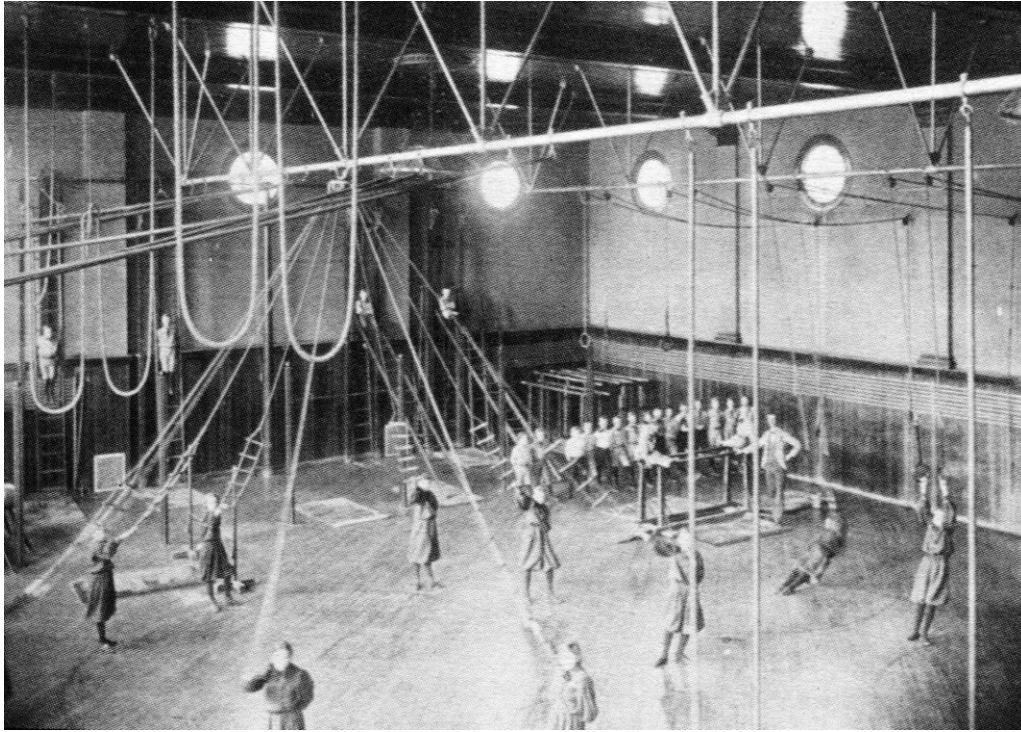
Bowling alley in basement of West Wing, 1898^{xxi}



Das Deutsche Haus with West Wing, 1908^{xxii}

Irma Lindener recalled that as a girl, she and the other German children went to “turning school” at the German House to learn gymnastic routines and get regular exercise. *Das*

Deutsche Haus was the social center of much of her family activities. Her father and mother both sang in the choir, and her Uncle Clemens was a violinist in the orchestra. Irma enjoyed the four bowling alleys, in which little boys set up the pins before there were automatic pin-setters.²¹

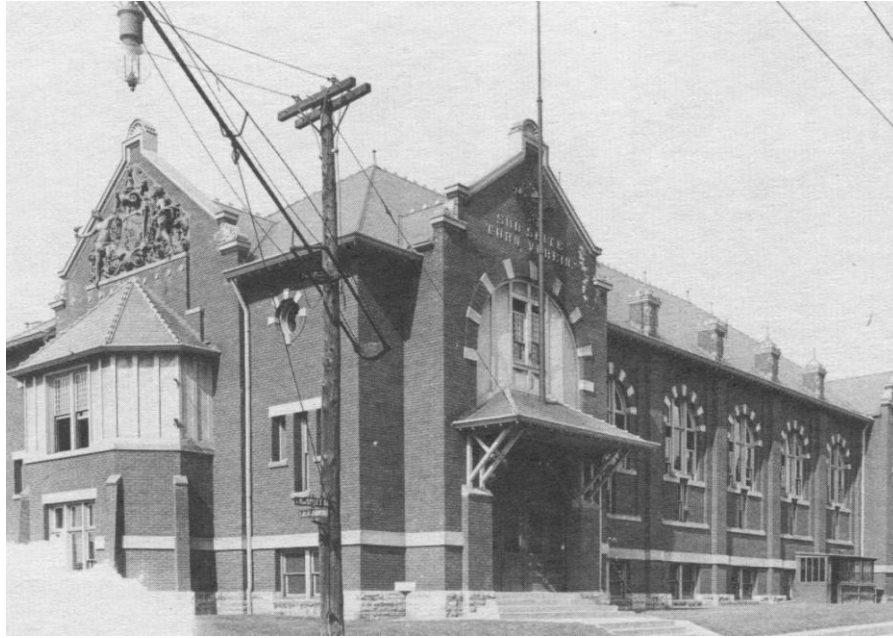


Female gymnastics in gymnasium of East Wing, *Das Deutsche Haus*, 1898^{xxiii}

Probably because of the impressiveness of *Das Deutsche Haus*, home of the northside German families, the South Side Turnverein organization hired Bernard Vonnegut to design their new building in 1900.²² A much smaller structure, the Southside Turnverein building resembled the west wing of *Das Deutsche Haus* in some respects. It was a large rectangular structure with a hipped roof, prominent brick gables, and large arched windows. The primary space inside was the gymnasium. Otherwise simply detailed, the building had an impressive artistic feature on its west gable: a stone sculpture by German sculptor Rudolf Schwarz honoring Father Jahn as founder of the turner movement.

²¹ Lindener Interview.

²² Glass, "List of Buildings in Indianapolis Designed by Vonnegut and Bohn."



Southside Turnverein, 306 Prospect Street, c. 1905^{xxiv}

One of Bernard Vonnegut's most lavishly ornamented and distinguished designs, alas, was demolished long ago. The Pembroke Arcade was the brainchild of Dickson and Talbott, operators of the most prestigious theaters in town. Enclosed shopping corridors, or arcades had become popular in London and other cities in Europe and were being constructed in other American cities. Dickson and Talbott thought that Indianapolis was ready for the concept. In 1894, they commissioned Vonnegut to design an angled structure that would have two facades—one on East Washington Street, and the other on Virginia Avenue. A two-story corridor would run south from Washington and turn southwest to meet Virginia. Stores would line both the first floor and the mezzanine level. Vonnegut created an immense archway for each of the two entrances to the arcade. Within each archway, he designed intricate organic details within circles. Stained glass artist Louis Millet of Chicago was hired to design three levels of stained glass windows above the two entrances. Millet had won wide attention for his works of stained glass at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893.



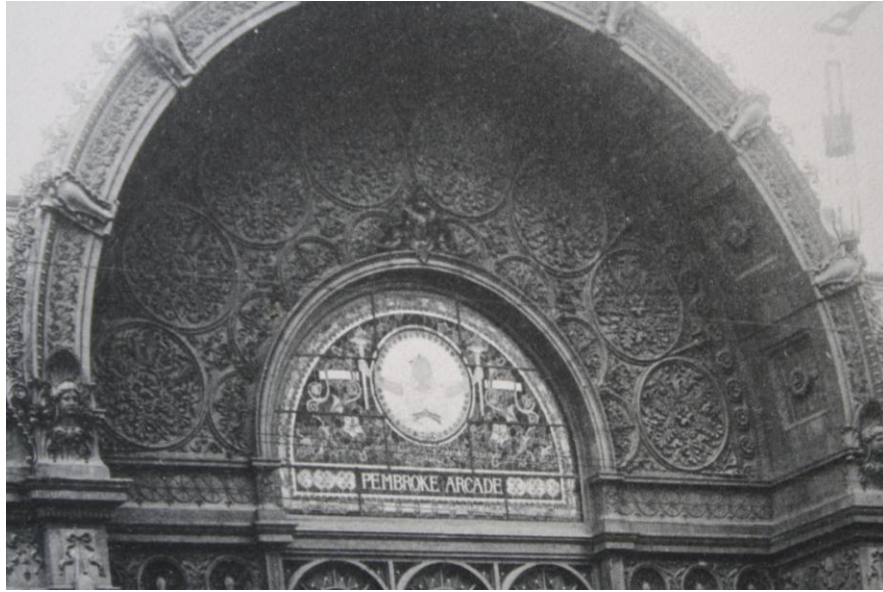
Corridor inside the Pembroke Arcade, c. 1895^{xxv}



Virginia Avenue façade of Pembroke Arcade, 1896^{xxvi}

Below are photos of the arched stained glass lunette showing a goddess with two torches and below it, arched panels of art glass. On either side of the archways, Vonnegut designed

symmetrical limestone facades consisting of pilasters, large round windows, and the heads of goddesses above the pilasters. Unfortunately, the thousands of shoppers that Dickson and Talbott had hoped for never materialized, and the Pembroke Arcade began a slow decline, ending with demolition in 1943.²³



Detail of Virginia Avenue archway, 1896^{xxvii}



Detail of stained glass windows and entry, 1896^{xxviii}

²³ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, p. 966; "Schloss Bros. Buy Pembroke Arcade," *Indianapolis News*, May 4, 1925, p. 17, c. 1; Anton Scherrer, "Our Town," *Indianapolis Times*, May 17, 1937, p. 9, c.7; Anton Scherrer, "Our Town," *Indianapolis Times*, May 22, 1937, p. 9, c. 7; "Pembroke Arcade, City Landmark, Will Give Way to a Parking Lot," *Indianapolis News*, October 13, 1943, part 1, p. 1, c. 4.

The culmination of Bernard Vonnegut's career as an architect was probably his design of the original section of the L.S. Ayres and Company department store at Meridian and Washington. In 1904 Frederic M. Ayres, head of the company, decided to build the first modern department store in Indianapolis, modeled on the stores that were rising on State Street in Chicago and many other American cities. For him, Vonnegut, with the collaboration possibly of Arthur Bohn, designed an 8-store structure in which each type of merchandise sold by Ayres could be given its own space.



Original section, L.S. Ayres and Company department store, about 1905^{xxix}

The design featured a maximum amount of windows to provide natural light for showing the merchandise to best advantage. Along the first floor were big display windows. The brick exterior had little detailing or ornamentation, except along the first and top stories. Vonnegut incorporated his trademark shields along the cornice, each with the capital letter “A”. Inside the

first floor, he designed a high-ceiling room with elegant Corinthian columns and plaster moldings adorning the ceilings.²⁴



“A” shields along Washington Street cornice, L.S. Ayres and Company, about 1994



First floor shopping room with Corinthian columns, 2010

²⁴ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, p. 966; Lindener interview; Ken Turchi, *L.S. Ayres & Company: The Store at the Crossroads of America* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2012), pp. 18-19, 23.

Now, let's return to Bernard's family. Nannie, his wife, was interested in music, as was her husband, and took an interest in the plight of orphans at the Indianapolis Orphan Asylum, located nearby. Nannie and Bernard had three children: Kurt, Alex, and Irma. What was it like for Irma and her brothers to grow up in the Vonnegut household? I am going to let Irma Lindener describe it in her own words:

“Our family moved into the house [at 630 E. 13th Street] in 1892. I know little of its history before that, except that a brother of Lew Wallace, the writer of *Ben Hur*, was the owner who lived there before my grandfather Henry Schnull bought it for his daughter, my mother. My father, Bernard Vonnegut, who was an architect, would probably have preferred to build his own house, but wasn't given that chance. I remember that he not only designed buildings, but was very skillful in using the tools of a carpenter. In the barn behind the house he had a big work bench and a wall hung with all kinds of tools carefully locked behind a door. That barn was never used for a horse and carriage in our days, but for our five bicycles in a proper stand which Father made for them. It was much later that our electric automobile was charged there at an imposingly complicated machine every night.



Alex Vonnegut and father Bernard bring home Christmas tree on bicycles,
c. 1898^{xxx}



Alex Vonnegut in parlor with Christmas tree, c. 1898^{xxx}



Irma and Alex Vonnegut with bicycles at home, c. 1900^{xxx}

[Irma continues,] What kind of neighborhood was round about us when we were children? All of our neighbors seemed to belong to the same category insofar as none were either rich or poor. We as children knew nothing of such matters. Our neighbor across the street, Miss Tarquinia Voss, who had the only horse and carriage in the immediate neighborhood and was rumored to have lived in Paris, might have been the only exception...

[Our] neighbors to our west... [were] the Newnams, Lauters, Potts, Shaws, and my grandparents, the Schnulls, between Park Avenue and Central. My father for some time thought it unnecessary for us to have a telephone in the house because the grandparents only two blocks away had one which we could use at any time. All the children of the neighborhood went to School Number 10, as did we all, located at [13th Street] and College... The College Avenue street car was our chief means of transportation. I remember my father taking the car downtown to Washington Street to his office every morning.

What do I remember of our old house? I think of it as having been comfortable and warm, though my brother Alex remembered it as having been very cold in the winter. We burned natural gas and had fireplaces in the living room and parlor until through great carelessness, the supply of gas was exhausted for Indianapolis and surroundings. Then anthracite coal was carried across our yard by men who carried the heavy sacks on their shoulders and emptied them into the cellar through a little window under the sitting room bay window. Father and my two brothers were the stokers. Besides the furnace there was a primitive little dark room for developing photographic plates down there. In another room off the cellar was something that must have been built as a wine cellar, ...[but] I don't remember ever having seen a wine bottle opened in our house except on one or two rare occasions when my parents gave a dinner party. I think their guests were probably members of the Portfolio Club, the only club besides *Das Deutsche Haus* [or German House] which my father enjoyed.

In much later years, I was told that we and our German relatives were thought to be very snobbish. It is true that all of us, eleven grandchildren of the Schnull family and the twelve of the Vonnegut grandchildren knew scarcely any other playmates except our

cousins. Our elders were all members of *Das Deutsche Haus*, where they associated primarily with the Liebers, Hollwegs, and other German families.”²⁵

After completing the grades at School 10, Irma was sent by her parents to the Girls Classical School. It was a private school on Pennsylvania Street founded by one of the great intellectual leaders of the city, May Wright Sewall. Irma recalled that Mrs. Sewall’s English lessons “were so thrilling, one came out of her classes thinking one had been in another world.”²⁶

In 1908, at the top of his success as an architect, Bernard Vonnegut died of cancer at age 53 (here is a photo of him, about 1906). His and Nannie’s children all were still living at home. Kurt, like his father an artist by preference, followed Bernard’s example and became an architect. Alex and Irma continued to reside with their mother. The family traveled to Germany and stayed in Berlin for a year immediately after Bernard’s death. Irma lived with her mother at 630 E. 13th until 1922.



Bernard Vonnegut.

Bernard Vonnegut, c. 1906^{xxxiii}

²⁵ Written statement by Irma Vonnegut Lindener, January 4, 1978, part of Lindener Interview transcript.

²⁶ Lindener Interview.

Here is their home about 1920. Bernard had added the Arts and Crafts porch, and his son Kurt had enlarged the front room to include part of the porch.²⁷



Vonnegut Home, 630 E. 13th Street, c. 1920^{xxxiv}

When Irma was 32 years old, she moved to Germany and married a German veteran of World War I, Kurt Lindener. She lived in Germany for the next 35 years, raising a son and enduring the hardships of World War II. After her husband's death, Irma returned to Indianapolis and re-connected with her Indiana family.²⁸

The final chapter of our story begins with that luncheon that Catey Rasmussen arranged for me with "Aunt Irma" in 1976. At that time, as mentioned earlier, I was working as the staff historian at the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission, which was working with Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana and the Junior League of Indianapolis to encourage the preservation and revitalization of the Old Northside neighborhood. The area had suffered great

²⁷ Lindener Interview; Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, pp. 965-66; Notes by James A. Glass from conversation with Irma Vonnegut Lindener, August 14, 1977, in "Vonnegut Family File," Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

²⁸ Lindener Interview.

deterioration, disinvestment, and much demolition of its houses since the 1960s. Through historical research on the remaining houses, we became aware that 630 E. 13th Street had been the home of the noted architect, Bernard Vonnegut. The former Vonnegut house had suffered great travail. It had been broken into ten rental apartments, and multiple additions had been made at peculiar angles, disguising its original design.



630 E. 13th Street in 1977^{xxxv}

Next door was a frame house of the same age that had also suffered considerable deterioration. Both houses were vacant and had been condemned for demolition by the City Health and Hospital Corporation. My boss, Jim Kiesling, after learning of the significance of the Vonnegut House, proposed to the Preservation Commission and the Department of Metropolitan Development that the City should try to save the houses.

The Commission approved the idea, the department gave its encouragement, and we approached the Division of Urban Renewal for assistance in acquiring the property. The former Urban Renewal director, Archie Kuoppola, was a skilled negotiator at purchasing properties for renewal, and he went to work negotiating with the absentee owner. Archie finally persuaded the owner to convey the house to the City. Jim Kiesling then applied to the Federal Economic Development Administration for a \$75,000 grant to pay for the exterior rehabilitation and

restoration of the two houses. To our great surprise and delight, the EDA made the grant to the Preservation Commission, and an architect was hired to prepare drawings showing the existing lay out of the structures.²⁹

We had no idea of what the original floor plan of the Vonnegut House had been, because of the radical alterations that had been made. How to restore it? At this point, in 1977, I contacted Irma Lindener and asked her if she would consider meeting Jim and me at her childhood home and help us try to reconstruct what the house had been like when she lived there. One morning, Irma, then 87 years old, met us at the house, driving an old Mercedes-Benz. She fearlessly walked with us into the house, which was, to say the least, in very poor condition, with warped floors, falling plaster, and the smell of mold. Jim had brought along the floor plans, and as we walked through, Mrs. Lindener began to visualize the original lay out. We would stop periodically, and she, still the architect's daughter, would sketch the original walls and doorways onto the floor plans.

After the visit, Jim, an architect himself, had enough evidence to reconstruct the layout of the house and to strip off the many additions. In the next year, the house went through what seemed to be a miraculous transformation, as the house of the Bernard Vonnegut family re-emerged with all of its architectural detail. Here are photos of the house as it went through its metamorphosis.



630 E. 13th Street under rehabilitation, 1977-78^{xxxvi}

²⁹ Correspondence from 1977-78 in Butler-Wallace-Vonnegut House file, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.



630 E. 13th Street, with exterior rehabilitation nearing completion,
1978^{xxxvii}

The EDA grant was only sufficient for an exterior rehabilitation of the two houses, so we then anxiously waited to see what the response would be when they went on the market. Fortunately, in October, 1978, Elizabeth and Ora Hight purchased the Vonnegut House and committed themselves to complete the restoration. By that point, a momentum for rehabilitation in the Old Northside had begun to develop. Elizabeth and her husband saw possibilities where previously there had been only an eyesore. “We’ve been waiting to do this for a long time,” she said.³⁰

Today, the Butler-Wallace-Vonnegut House, to use its full historic name, is a well-cared for house in a neighborhood that again has become prosperous. It gives me great satisfaction to see it and recall its history and preservation.

³⁰ Susan M. Anderson, “Excited Family Buys Butler-Vonnegut House,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 6, 1978, p. 53.



Butler-Wallace-Vonnegut House, 630 E. 13th Street, 2010

ⁱ Source: "Death Has Come to Clemens Vonnegut, Sr.," *Indianapolis News*, December 13, 1906, p. 1, c. 7.

ⁱⁱ Source: Biographical Photo Notebooks, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: *Hyman's Handbook of Indianapolis* (Indianapolis, 1897).

^{iv} Source: Vonnegut Family File Folder, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.

^v Source: *Journal Handbook of Indianapolis* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Journal Newspaper Co., 1902).

^{vi} Source: Montgomery Schuyler, "George Browne Post," *The Brickbuilder*, December, 1913, p. 289.

^{vii} Source: "Bernard Vonnegut, Sr.," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Vonnegut,_Sr., accessed 4-5-2014

^{viii} Source: <http://thegildedageera.blogspot.com/2012/07/the-cornelius-vanderbilt-ii-mansion-new.html>, accessed 6-4-2014.

^{ix} Source: Review by Carter B. Horsley, *George B. Post, Architect, Picturesque Designer and Determined Realist*, by Sarah Bradford Landau, found at www.thecityreview.com/gpost.html, accessed 4-5-2014

^x Source: *Art Work of Indianapolis* (Chicago: W.H. Parrish Publishing Co., 1896).

^{xi} Source: *Art Work of Indianapolis* (Chicago: Gravure Illustration Co., 1908).

^{xii} Source: *Ibid.*

^{xiii} All color photos, unless otherwise noted, were taken by James Glass.

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- ^{xiv} Source: Ibid.
- ^{xv} Source: *Indianapolis Architecture* (Indianapolis: Indiana Architectural Foundation, 1975), p. 100.
- ^{xvi} Source: Ibid, p. 101.
- ^{xvii} Source: George Theodore Probst, *The Germans in Indianapolis, 1848-1918*. Revised and Illustrated Edition by Eberhard Reichmann (Indianapolis: German-American Center and Indiana German Heritage Society, 1989), p. 114.
- ^{xviii} Source: *Art Work of Indianapolis*, 1896.
- ^{xix} Source: *Theodore Stempfel's Festschrift: Fifty Years of Unrelenting German Aspirations in Indianapolis, 1848-1898* (Indianapolis: German-American Center and Indiana German Heritage Society, 1991), p. 90.
- ^{xx} Source: Ibid, p. 86.
- ^{xxi} Source: Ibid, p. 99.
- ^{xxii} Source: *Art Work of Indianapolis*, 1908.
- ^{xxiii} Source: Stempfel, p. 74.
- ^{xxiv} Source: Probst, p. 135.
- ^{xxv} Source: Pembroke Arcade, reproduction of image from *Inland Architect*, c. 1895 on website of Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Archival Image Collection, Art Institute of Chicago. <http://digital-libraries.saic.edu/cdm/search/collection/mqc/searchterm/Pembroke%20Arcade/mode/exact>, accessed 6-4-2014
- ^{xxvi} Source: *Art Work of Indianapolis*, 1896.
- ^{xxvii} Source: Ibid.
- ^{xxviii} Source: Ibid.
- ^{xxix} Source: *Hyman's Handbook of Indianapolis* (Indianapolis: Max R. Hyman, 1909).
- ^{xxx} Source: Vonnegut family photograph, in Vonnegut Family File, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission
- ^{xxxi} Source: Ibid.
- ^{xxxii} Source: Ibid.
- ^{xxxiii} Source: Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1910), Vol. 2, p. 964.
- ^{xxxiv} Source: Vonnegut family photograph, Historic Building Photo Notebooks, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.
- ^{xxxv} Source: File on 630 E. 13th Street, Old Northside, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission.
- ^{xxxvi} Source: Ibid.
- ^{xxxvii} Source: Ibid.