
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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A VOICE FROM THE PAST

By Mary Lou Yankaitis

THE INGLATERRA DANCE HALL

By Tom Powers and Jean Lythgoe



This photo of Wilhelm Liebich with his sister was taken about 1900 when he was in the German army.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents "A Voice from the Past", a biography of Wilhelm Liebich written by his daughter, Mary Lou Yankaitis. Wilhelm was not a famous or influential person. Rather, he was a German immigrant who came to Rockford at the turn of the century. He married and raised his family here while running a small business. He represents the many unheralded immigrants who made our country what it is today.

Mary Lou Yankaitis, a Rockford native has written for the Nuggets before. She is the Treasurer of the Rockford Historical Society, a veteran Board member of the Graham-Ginestra House and a member of the Rockford Writers Guild.

The Ing was a Rockford landmark for the better part of a century. First as a dance hall and later as a roller rink, the Ing will be remembered by generations of Rockford natives who spent part of their youth there. Thanks go to Jean Lythgoe for doing the research necessary to write this article.

ROCKFORD HISTORY FAIR JANUARY 15, 2005

On Saturday, January 15th from noon to 4 p.m., the Rockford Historical Society and Midway Village and Museum Center are proud to present the second annual Rockford History Fair. Come and see the best local students have to offer and explore our community's vibrant history.

The History Fair features tabletop exhibits, models, and media presentations researched and created by seventh and eighth grade students at St. Peter's Cathedral Schools. Exhibits in previous years have covered a wide range of topics, including local neighborhoods and landmarks, pioneering women in Illinois, scientific advancements in our state, and more. There is no charge to visit the fair, which is held in the Museum's Lakeview Room.

Winners in the local fair will advance to the Regional History Fair in Dekalb at NIU in March. For more information, call Dave Oberg at 397-9112 ext 105.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

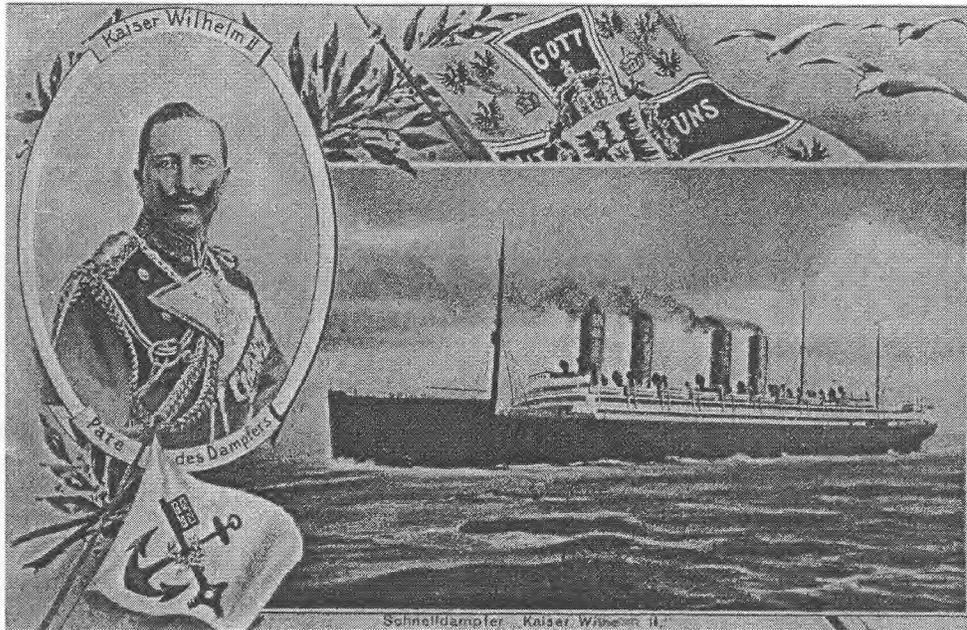
THE BEGINNING

Wilhelm Arthur Liebich, born in 1880 in Zittau, Germany, left Germany in 1903 to begin a new life in Rockford, Illinois. The youngest son with 3 brothers and 2 sisters, his American destination was determined by his two Uncles, Henri and William Reitsch, already residents of Rockford and owners of the Reitsch Lumber Company. Despite his youth, he had been an apprentice carpenter for three years and served in the German Army for two, a time when the new nation of Germany was only ten years old and such service was compulsory. His savings were \$255 and a loan of \$200 completed his finances as he prepared to leave Germany.

THE VOYAGE

His ship, the Kaiser Wilhelm II had been scheduled to leave from the port of Bremen. In a letter dated 1 May 1903, William was notified the ship would be leaving from Rotterdam instead. In the letter he was advised to "be careful... while traveling across Germany....since those destined for America were preyed upon by wayfarers." The Kaiser Wilhelm II steamed out of Rotterdam on May 12, 1903, Captained by D. Hogemann, its first trip since its Maiden voyage on April 14, 1903. The ship's menu reflected the tastes of its mainly German passengers, including Sardine "pie," Roast Duck and Braised Roast Beef. The steamer docked in New York on May 20, 8 days later. William, now 23 years of age, first set sight on Rockford on May 21. He was never to return to Germany, never to see his Mother, Father nor siblings again.

In a letter dated February 19, 1909, he shared his feelings about leaving Germany and coming to Rockford. "I am the only one here in this country from our family. I am the youngest one and our Mother left us just about a year ago for a better world; it is rather hard leaving home, everybody in good health and have somebody slipping out, not to see them any more and especially Mother, our best friend we have in this world, but I believe we all find a place saved even for us, where we will meet again sooner or later."



SETTLING DOWN IN ROCKFORD

Yearning for his own construction company, he and Fritz Ekstedt became partners in the Liebich and Ekstedt Construction Company. Uncle Reitsch, William writes, "gave me many good lessons." The time we started (*the business*) for ourselves, he was glad we did so. He said, "I was dying to tell you so before, but felt it better I did not say anything; that you would decide that for yourself." The partnership continued until Fritz's death in 1918 of Spanish Influenza, a pandemic which was particularly devastating in Rockford. William continued the business alone.

By 1908 William had purchased a dilapidated house at 815 Rockton Avenue. The Liebich & Ekstedt Construction Company was soon located at the rear of this property. Inspiration for renovating the house came when he met his partner's wife's cousin, Mary Lemble of Ann Arbor, Michigan. The courtship, via several visits between Ann Arbor and Rockford and many, many letters, culminated on June 1, 1910 in their marriage.

THE LETTERS

William's letters to Mary in Ann Arbor have survived for almost 100 years. William, at his death in 1948, was survived by his widow, Mary, son George and four daughters, Theresa, Gertrude, Margaret and Mary Louise. It was at Mary's death in 1972 that her children found all that

their mother had so carefully saved. Her letters to William, however, had disappeared--whether discarded by William or later by Mary it is not known. William's letters 1908 - 1910, provide not only a vivid picture of life in a very new Rockford (incorporated in 1852) but a haunting love story, *A Voice From the Past*.

In one of his letters dated Sept. 5, 1909, he wrote about attending the Opera House on North Wyman Street. (*Although operas were performed there, it also showcased vaudeville and, evidently, "girlie shows."*) "...I met Mr. Knapp and we went to the Opera House. It was a pretty good show." A more graphic version of this show is given by William's partner's wife, Marie Ekstedt, in a 1910 letter to her Ann Arbor cousin: "There was a show here but only for men..such a leg show. Mr. Knapp went, he said it was not good; the girls had too many clothes on for such a show. Last year at one of the shows, one man fell down from the Gallery. He wasn't hurt too much. There was a big piece in the paper about it. They said this year they put some more dresses on. I guess so they need not fall out of the balcony. The men did not like it. The Opera House was full, 200 had to stand up. How are the "men shows" in Ann Arbor?"

On October 16, 1909, William seemed to harbor doubts about the wisdom of renovating the house he was preparing, hopefully, for Mary. He wrote, "...you would be surprised if you could see all those bills. I easily could build a nice new house for the same amount. ..When I bought it, the health officer went after the owner so he had to do something right away to the sewer. He did not care to do anything with it, so within 2 hours I had all the papers in my hands." At this time William received advice from his Uncle Henry Reitsch: "You'll have to fix up the house for yourself now and get married, only you should look for the right one who is having good health and will look after her part and stand at your side; otherwise, you could go down quickly--it is not always the face that makes the person." William then wrote to Mary, "I went over to the house today, knelt down and prayed that this would be a good house and that there would be happiness in it."

Sports were featured in many of the letters since the University of Michigan was located in Mary's home town of Ann Arbor. In a letter dated Oct. 25, 1909, he teases Mary, "What do you think of our football team 43 to nothing? This is better than you can do. So don't think too much of yours. By the time you will play Illinois, you may get in trouble." On Nov. 29 he wrote, "Well, Rockford closed the season Thanksgiving and earned the championship of Illinois. They beat the strongest team 41 to 8. Pretty good, I think."

Weather was mentioned frequently. In February, 1909 he is looking forward to Spring, "as the weather is quite warm now and this little snow, what is left, will soon go too. But we may have to expect maybe another good snow storm before our real Spring comes. I'd rather see it get warm now, since I got back from California, the winter looks so long to me now. I'd rather go there and pick my oranges than stay here and get my coat on to stay warm." In this letter, too, he talks about Freeport, whose population was 28,000 and about 30 miles distant, being connected to Rockford by streetcars. "Rockford which, this winter, achieved 50,000, has many factories, also many trees around the streets which give us the name Forest City. Everything is closed on Sunday...a few weeks ago they opened a new theater that gives us 3 now, besides all those little shows."

On Jan. 10, 1910, returning to Rockford from a visit to Ann Arbor, he wrote, "We came in to Chicago 10 minutes before the 6 o'clock train, and as I could not do anything as the stores would be all closed that night, I went right home. I came in to Rockford a little after 9. They had a wreck again on the IC, one got killed. This is what delayed our train so long. We had an awful snowstorm again that night. I could not see any streetcar running so I started to walk to State Street. There I found Rockton Avenue was running, together with West End. They were the only two lines operating. Out on 18th avenue, they were shoveling snow the whole following day to clear the track. I don't think you would believe the amount of snow we have on the ground now. On the sidewalks we only have a small path--just enough for one to go and on each side, from it. The snow is banked up pretty high. Also, there is quite a scarcity of fuel here as the railroad was unable to bring any in for quite awhile. For two mornings, we had 17 and 18 below registered and it was in quite a few places considerably colder yet."

Planning for their wedding consumed most of an April 3, 1910 letter. "I think the 24th would be all right, as I have no reason that I would have it on the 12th as this was my birthday and the same day I left on the steamer for this country. The 21st of May seven years ago I saw Rockford for the first time. But then, Mary, I just as well would see Thursday, the 26th. I have no reason for it and if you would rather wish the 24th, it would be just the same to me so you'd better tell me now which day you wish. (*Note: Mary and William were married on June 1st!*) With the wedding less than two months away, in an April 12 letter, William has a plaintive request for Mary. "Would you do this for me--not to have so big a wedding as you were telling me last

Christmas Pa would like to have?"

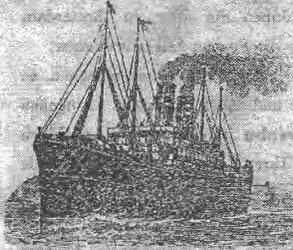
William seemed determined to make sure his prospective bride learned how to cook, preferably, "*German cooking.*" In the April 12, 1910 letter, he instructs her on how to make noodles: "Just take a little flour and then milk and water and an egg and mix them together and then put them in boiling water. Something like that." (*Mary did go on to make "home-made noodles" every Sunday the rest of her life--whether helped by this "recipe" is in doubt.*) William seemed a bit unsure about his own cooking skills, writing, "I am glad to hear you would come to my first dinner in Rockford but at present I have no cook and if I should do the cooking, I think I never would see you again."

Murder was relatively rare in Rockford in 1909...but justice was swift. On September 11, 1909 William wrote, "I have seen in our paper about the terrible murder and I feel sorry for the Mother and Brother as we always feel it so much more if something like that happens so near us....we only think to give them the right punishment but this case must be frightful and...they never have found the guilty one yet." But find him, they did, and on April 15, 1910, William writes, "Poor St. Clair got hung this morning 8:30. He did not feel so bad after all. I don't know how he could possibly stand it that way. Seems it must be awful hard to go this way with such a burden on his back, but some people have very little feeling about others and for themselves." (*This was the last public hanging in the Court House Square.*)

The progress of this courtship, via letters, can be seen by the salutations and signatures. All are addressed to "Miss Mary Lemble, 530 Forest Ave. Ann Arbor Michigan" and, at first, begin, "Dear Mary," and soon progress to "My Dear Mary." William's first letters are signed, "Yours, William," which very soon become "Love and Kisses from Your True William."

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Rotterdam, 1. Mai 1915

128 Wijnsraat.

Prep. No. *20341* 1-12-10
Diese Nummer ist in allen Correspondenzen
anzuführen.

An
Herrn Wilhelm Lebach & Ernst L.
in Schiedam
bei Dordrecht

Wie Ihnen schon *edemals* von Ihren Verwandten mitgeteilt wurde, ist bei uns für Sie die Reise von Rotterdam nach *Stockholm, etc.* freigegeben und können Sie darum, ohne weiters Anfragen an uns zu richten, die Reise nach Rotterdam sofort antreten. Bei Vorzeigung dieses Briefes und Rückgabe der Ihnen aus Amerika zugesandten Anweisung werden wir Ihnen hier unentgeltlich die Schiffskarte für erwachsene Person Kinder von 3 bis 12 Jahren Kinder von 1 - 3 Jahren und Kinder unter 1 Jahre ausliefern.

Das Bahngeld von Bremen bis Rotterdam werden wir Ihnen (Mk. 7.00) hier wiedererstaten. Über Bremen aber werden Sie nicht fahren und benutzen Sie nur die hier angegebene Eisenbahn.

Die nächsten Schiffe werden von Rotterdam am *jeden Sonnabend* abgehen und müssten Sie *7* Tage zuvor von zu Hause abreisen, um rechtzeitig hier zu der Einschiffung anzulangen.

Die beste Reiseroute aus Ihrer Heimath nach Rotterdam ist über *Leipzig* Salzbergen und Oldenzaal.

Auf der Station in Oldenzaal treffen Sie unseren Angestellten, der Ihnen bei der Weiterreise nach hier behilflich sein wird.

Die einzelnen Bahnbillets müssen Sie an den hier angegebenen Stationen lösen und zwar 3ter Classe bis *Leipzig* und von dort 4ter Classe bis Salzbergen. Von Salzbergen bis Rotterdam fahren Sie wieder in der 3ten Classe.

This document includes detailed travel instructions for Wilhelm and information about immigration requirements to the U.S.

AN ADDENDUM STRANGER THAN FICTION

It would be forty-five years after William left Germany that his only son, George, was in that country with the American Army fighting Nazi Germany. Following in his father's footsteps, George then became a Carpenter in Rockford. Injured in a 15' fall while working on a job at a local hospital, George could no longer work at his trade. Undaunted, he soon became Business Agent for Carpenter Local #792. His nephew, Bill, was next to work in construction, for Mark Fridly Construction Company. In 2002 Mr. Fridly closed his business and Bill helped in clearing out his warehouse. One day, the task almost completed, Bill noticed several pieces of paper tacked to the ceiling. Curious, he took them down, glancing at them. One of them, yellowed, frayed, dated March 30, 1959, was a letter from Local #792 advising Mr. Fridly and other contractors of a new contract with new wage scales. Carpenters and Pile Drivers were to be increased to \$3.40 per hour plus 10 cents per hour Health and Welfare and Millwrights to \$3.60 per hour plus 10 cents per hour Health and Welfare.

The letter was signed, George Liebich, Business Representative.

What are the odds that this letter, written over forty years ago, would be discovered by George's nephew (and William's Grandson), Bill?

The Rest of the Story (in place of a Bio):

My father, William, died when I was 20 years old. Therefore, it is through these letters I have learned to really know him. It is difficult for me to realize the quiet, home-loving man I knew, as a self-centered youth, had left his homeland, parents and siblings when he had been only 4 years older than me, never to see his parents, siblings, or homeland again. To journey to a strange country, and, although ten years older than Mary, to win the heart of a pretty 18 year old Ann Arbor girl, to build their home and establish his own business.

To weather the Depression of the 1920's - 30's while caring for his family of five growing children. And then to know his only son was in his homeland as an American soldier, fighting the Nazis, possibly facing some of his own family. An enduring memory of him I do have, is that of him sitting, every evening, before the radio listening to the evening newscast of Gabriel Heater...*"There's Good (or Bad) News Tonight."* What devastating news it must have been when the evening newscast spoke of the invasion of the Sudetenland...and he knew his home town was no longer free.

It would be almost thirty years after his death that the house at 815 Rockton he so carefully worked on, the shop which housed Liebich & Ekstedt Contractors was no longer there, but now a part of the Terry Lee Wells Park. It would be another ten years before his home town of Zittau was freed from East Germany.

THE ING IS GONE!

By Tom Powers and Jean Lythgoe

The Ing Skating Palace, a long time landmark of downtown Rockford is no more. During the week before Thanksgiving, the Ing was torn down to make way for a parking lot for the Fran Kral Lincoln Mercury dealership. Many of you probably skated or danced there in years past, perhaps without knowing about its history.

The Ing was originally known as the Inlaterra Dance Hall. It was built in 1918, in part to provide recreation for the soldiers stationed at Camp Grant during World War I. The word Inlaterra is Spanish for "England". Why they choose that name is unknown.

Ross P. Beckstrom was President of the Ross P. Beckstrom Construction Company and erected the Midway Theatre, the Inlaterra, the City water pumping station on Tay St., and the water department reservoir on River Drive, among others. He was a member of the Rockford committee which went to Washington D.C. and succeeded in getting Camp Grant located near Rockford. Some of the original Camp Grant buildings were built by his company. The first concrete highway in the Rockford area, from Belvidere to Rockford on Illinois route 5 was built by Mr. Beckstrom. He also served as superintendent of the Rockford water department after a severe typhoid epidemic.

When the Inlaterra was opened in 1918 Charles O. Breinig was the manager. He operated not only the Inlaterra but also the Central Park Amusement enterprise. He would remain as manager for the next twenty years. Ross Beckstrom was the Vice-President and Paul Stich was the Secretary and Treasurer.

According to a Register-Star article dated Feb. 23, 1986 by Leona Carlson, in the 1920s and 1930s young folks flocked to the Inlaterra to dance the night away. Larry Nordstrom remembered the Ing in the early days. It was "a beautiful place and a nice place. There was not a nicer place to dance in the whole vicinity." His band, Laurie's Orchestra, often played at the Ing. He said, "Most of the fellows and girls would go 'stag'. The fellows would ask the girls for a dance and buy 10 tickets for \$1." Another person who attended dances at the Ing in the 1920s remembered that everyone dressed up, and most were between 18 and 25 and attended 'stag'.

In the same article Morry Hill remembers, "For each dance, we would play an introduction and three choruses, then two choruses for the encore...I think we would play (each tune) 2 ½ minutes. Charlie (Breinig) would sit in the balcony and have his watch out."

Ken Flodin was a vocalist-guitarist with the Bill Engberg band in the 1930s and 1940s. He was known for his renditions of novelty tunes such as "Sam, You Made the Pants Too Long." He also remembers a period when the Ing was called Casa Loma.

In 1923 the Rockford Auto Show was held at the Inglaterra. A record attendance was expected. According to the article in the Register Republic (January 31, 1923), "The 1923 models ...are at the peak of their efficiency this year."

In 1935 the Inglaterra Dance Hall became the Inglaterra Ballroom. In 1939, it is listed in the city directory as the Ing Skating Palace and Otto A. Fuchs was the new manager.

Doddie Gilbertson, owner of the Lighthouse Restaurant and Lounge, said that the Ing was always closed on Mondays, but open the remaining six days of the week. She also said that in the 1940s, there were about 150 teenagers who came regularly to the Ing and they all knew each other. They'd skate from 7 to 10 p.m., and then go to a soda bar and drink Green Rivers and cherry Cokes. In October of 1993, Doddie Gilbertson organized a reunion at the Ing for people who were regulars between 1947 and 1952. About 50 people attended.

When David Machek bought the Ing in 1960, he found photographs of the Ing marquee naming Lawrence Welk, Jimmy Dorsey and other big name bands. Machek said "Back in the '60s, the boys came dressed in black pants, a white shirt and tie, and the girls all wore dresses. There was an organ player, and over the years we'd have dance competitions and skating competitions."

From 1987 - 1993, the Ing was open for private functions. Beginning in October 1993, it was to go to being open on the weekends. In 1993 Charles Rankin bought the Ing from David and Katherine Machek, who had owned it for over 30 years.

In recent years the Ing was open for special events. Charles Rankin lost the Ing through a bank foreclosure about two years ago. Fran Kral Lincoln Mercury Volvo bought the property and will use it as a lot for new and used cars. The building was in bad shape and was reportedly beyond repair.

SOURCES

Rockford City Directories: 1918-1939
Rockford Republic: January 31, 1923
Rockford Register Star: February 23, 1986 page 1B
Rockford Register-Star: December 9, 1993 page 12A
Rockford Register-Star: November 23, 2004

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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