

The Milwaukee Austrians

History in Milwaukee

Who are the Austrian Americans? That has not always been easy to define. Between 1804 and 1867, Austrians were generally regarded as people living within the Austrian Empire. This Central European empire comprised multiple ethnicities, which could have included Germans, Croats, Slovaks, Serbs, Hungarians, Ukrainians, and more (see map¹). However, few of the subjects of the Austrian Empire immigrated to the United States during this period due to policies of Austrian rulers that made emigration nearly impossible. No census data were recorded for Austrian-born immigrants

"In Milwaukee, it was hard for my ancestors to say they were Austrians because they spoke German, so everyone, sort of, called us Germans. But the Germans pretty much overtook us. Some of the Germans here don't even regard Bavarians as Germans. It was hard to stress anything Austrian because everyone just kind of grouped us together—that is, everyone but the Milwaukee Germans."

"In Milwaukee there was the threat of the German culture and German Austrian clubs have to fight to the death to keep the culture going."

Quotes of Austrian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.



until 1850. At that time, records list 946 Austrian immigrants to the United States and 61 to Wisconsin.

When the Austrian Empire adopted a new constitution in 1867 which put Austria and Hungary on equal footing, the Austro-Hungarian Empire (or Dual Monarchy) emerged.

The new empire dissolved following World War One when its member states proclaimed sovereignty and independence. With some

constraints removed, emigration during this period increased. In addition, with the establishment of the much smaller nation of Austria, emigrants from the area comprised a more limited field of ethnicity. According to Bill Reck in the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee, “The current common understanding is that Austrians are Central European people who are similar ethnically to Germans, most specifically [to] Bavarians in the southern parts of the German lands, and speak a German dialect.”

While this definition narrowed the ethnic boundaries, it also may have contributed to the disappearance of self-identified Austrian Americans in Milwaukee—historically a heavily German city. Reck cites census numbers of Milwaukeeans who claimed Austrian ancestry between 1910 and 1940 that show the disappearance of nearly half of the 24,000 from 1910. However, despite their somewhat obscure ethnic identification, the Milwaukee Austrians left their marks in many local institutions. See some of these examples below.

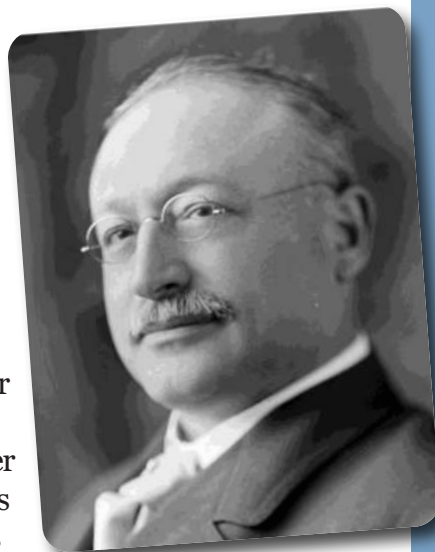
Meet some of your past Austrian neighbors

Victor Bergerⁱⁱ

Born into a Jewish household in Austria in 1860, Berger moved with his family to Leutschau in Hungary when he was seven. Later, in an effort to avoid conscription in Franz Joseph’s army in 1878, Berger immigrated to the United States and to Milwaukee.

In Milwaukee, Berger became active in the labor movement and joined the Socialist Labor Party which was then headed by Daniel de Leon. He took a job as a German teacher in one of Milwaukee’s public schools. By the early years of the twentieth century, he’d married wife Meta Schlichting, had two children, was living on North 2nd Street, and served as the editor of the *Vorwärts* [Forward]. He would also serve as chief editor of *Die Wahrheit* [The Truth].

Victor Berger became a founding member of the Social Democratic Party of America and its successor, the Socialist Party of America. He is also credited with being an architect of the Milwaukee Socialists—also known as the Sewer Socialists because of their emphasis on pragmatism over ideology.



“And the Germans view the Austrians as not too hard-working, sort-of laid back. So, they’re the hard-working industrious Germans and we’re the cousins that don’t do anything but drink beer.”

“I worked for an Austrian company near here, and most of the employees were Germans. And the only battle we ever had with them [Germans] is the fact that they like to run things their way and we wanted it done our way. And depending on how strong the leadership was within the company, and how much the parent company will let you do, we survived there.”

Quotes of Austrian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

In 1910, representing a Milwaukee district, Berger became the first Socialist ever to be elected to the House of Representatives. Later he publicly opposed World War One, was convicted of violating the Espionage Act, and was subsequently denied his seat in the House. The verdict was ultimately overturned by the Supreme Court and Berger was elected to three more terms in the House of Representatives in the 1920s. He continued his work in journalism while holding political office.

Lawrence J. Timmerman

Milwaukee's Timmerman Airport was named after Lawrence J. Timmerman, who served on the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors between 1923 to his death in 1959. He was born in Milwaukee in 1878, the son of an immigrant mother from Austria and an immigrant father from Holland.

In 1906 he married Frances Leutermann, with whom he had two children. The couple lived on North 5th Street where Timmerman worked as a railway postal clerk.

During the early years of his marriage, Timmerman worked his way through law school, receiving a degree from Marquette in 1909. He opened up a law office at 114 Grand Avenue (later renamed Wisconsin Avenue). A few years later, he ran for the Wisconsin State Assembly and was elected. He then ran for the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors where he was also elected and served for 35 years. (See his campaign adⁱⁱⁱ in 1932.)

Sometime in the 1930s, the Timmerman family purchased a home at 2326 North 38th Street in the Metcalfe Park neighborhood. In 1936, he was named chairman of the Milwaukee County Board. He took an active interest in air travel and during his years as chairman, the County Board oversaw the purchase of Curtiss-Wright Field—then located in Granville. In 1959, the year of Timmerman's death, the County Board renamed Curtiss-Wright Field the Lawrence J. Timmerman Airport which was ultimately located in Milwaukee when the City annexed most of Granville.



"I think that Austrians are more influenced by the Catholic faith, which makes us different from other German speakers. At least some. We do have our own customs like the Easter egg fight that distinguish us. But it's still part of our Christian traditions. Here in Milwaukee we haven't done much in that regard, but we aren't very church-going. My family. But I did see the custom of stealing the bride at a wedding. That's Austrian. [INTERVIEWER: Can you explain that?] It's friends sneaking in at a wedding and capturing the bride and then the groom tries to find her."

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Frank Rieder

When Frank Rieder opened his tavern at the corner of Farwell and North in the 1930s, he probably had no idea that it would one day become a Milwaukee landmark.

German speaking Frank Rieder was born in Salzburg, Austria in December, 1887. He and his wife Mary (nee Pernusch) immigrated to the United States and Milwaukee in 1912. Almost immediately the couple took up residence in a building near Farwell and North, where Frank also worked as a baker. The couple did well. They had three children: Frank Jr., Mary Jane, and Robert. Within a few years Frank became a real estate broker and purchased his own building. He also erected another at that corner in 1929, where he would ultimately open Reider's Cocktail Lounge.

Reider's became an upscale bar featuring imported beers and a juke box that only played Austrian, other European, and classical music, but Frank likely had no clue what the future of the establishment would be.

Frank operated the lounge until 1978, when he sold it to Karl Lotharius. However, he would not allow Lotharius to keep the name of Rieder's. Lotharius, a German immigrant, had hailed from the city of Trier (see the city's market-place in the photo above^{iv}). He experimented with names such as Karl Von Trier, then tried it with the initials of KVT, but neither really caught on. He eventually settled on Von Trier, and completed the décor that Rieder had begun (see photo, right). However, the ambience of the bar changed radically. A cocktail lounge that had once been infused with Austrian symbolism was now seen as an archetype of Milwaukee's German past.



Later history

While the Austrian American identity has always had problems with fluid boundaries, there have been efforts over the past decades to strengthen the cast. Founded in 1980, The Austrian American Society of Milwaukee has sponsored a number of ethnic events, including Austrian classical concerts. They have a Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/pg/austrianclubmilwaukee/about/?ref=page_internal.

The Austrian Express, hailed as Wisconsin's #1 Oktoberfest Party band, also has increased the Austrian presence in Milwaukee, playing Alpine Rock, as well as polkas, waltzes, 50s and 60s American rock, and country music.

References

Reck, B. *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee* <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/austrians/>
Urban Anthropology Inc. <http://neighborhoodsinmilwaukee.org/>

ⁱ Photo attribution: public domain

ⁱⁱ Photo from public https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Victor_L._Berger.jpg

ⁱⁱⁱ Photo attribution: *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle-Milwaukee*, March 11, 1932

^{iv} Photo attribution: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trier_Marktplatz1.jpg