

Christoph “Christ” Mandler (1858-1949)

Christoph Mandler was born on April 23, 1858 in Daubringen, County of Gressen in the Grand Duchy of Hessen, Germany. His parents were Heinrich Mandler and Margaretha Roth Mandler. Known as Christ to most, he began learning the trade of cigar making at a young age. Due to compulsory service, he served in the German army at the age of 21 in the 116th Infantry Regiment of Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany. After serving in the military for a few years, he and a friend by the name of Shaffer immigrated to the United States in 1882. Mandler was the only one of his immediate family to come to America.¹

Three years after coming to the United States and settling in Bloomington, Christ married Bertha W. Warmbir on October 25, 1885. Bertha was born on September 24, 1865 and had come to the U.S. with her father from Germany in 1881. Bertha worked for the Livingston family as a housekeeper. According to June Mandler McCluskey, the granddaughter of Christ and Bertha Mandler, the couple may have met at the Turn Verein or the Krieger Verein. The Turnverein (known simply as the Turners), was a German organization that was a gymnastics and family social club. The Krieger Verein was a club for veterans of the German army. Christ and Bertha had five sons and one daughter: Bertha and Berthold (twins), Heinrich, Paul, Karl, and Christian.²

Mandler spent over sixty years in the cigar business in Bloomington. He began his career in Bloomington working for Tryner and Richardson Cigar Company, one of the more successful cigar factories in town.³ He was first listed as a cigar maker by trade in the 1886 Bloomington City Directory. As of 1883, Tryner and Richardson occupied a three story building located at 116 S. Main Street. Cigars were traditionally rolled by hand which continues in many parts of the world to this day. In fact, all cigars were made by hand until the advent of cigar making machines at the beginning of the 20th century. While Mandler was employed at Tryner and Richardson, he would have made some of their more popular brands such as “Litta,” “Del Molay,” and “The Steer.” The average cost for a cigar at this time was five to ten cents, depending on the blend. The better the quality of tobacco used, the more the cigar cost. Cigars made with tobaccos from Havana sold for ten cents each (or the equivalent of \$2.00 today). At the height of the cigar making, there were between 16 and 19 cigar factories in Bloomington with most of them located in the downtown area. Hundreds of men were employed in the trade producing hundreds of thousands of cigars every year. By the late 1800s to early 1900s, the cigar makers of McLean County formed a Cigar maker’s Union. The group was formed to improve working conditions of manufacturers and for their employees. While there is little information about their impact locally, there were annual union balls held. It is not known whether Mandler was a member.

After working for Tryner and Richardson for about five years, Christ apparently decided to go into business for himself. He began making cigars out of the basement of his home located first at 814W. Olive Street first, and then later at 901 W. Olive Street. In an interview by *The Pantagraph* in January of 1942, the reporter stated that what made Mandler’s business unique was that he was not a man running a machine making cigars, “but a real cigar maker-a man who

¹Julius Dietrich. *Bloomington Deutsche in Wort und Bild*. (Bloomington, IL: Reprinted in 1993 by McLean County Genealogical Society, original publication in 1893 by Julius Dietrich) 113.

² Transcript of June Mandler McCluskey interview, interviewed by Candace Summers, Rachael Masa, Amy Miller, January 28, 2008.

³ Bill Kemp, “Cigar-Making Industry Once Thrived in Bloomington,” *The Pantagraph*, August 12, 2007

makes them by hand.”⁴ Every single cigar he made was hand crafted. Christ’s granddaughter recalled how he made cigars by hand. She stated that “he would sit there and roll it and then he would spit on the wrapper and roll it again... then he had a cutter and he would cut off this end and cut off this end and put it in the box.”⁵ Mandler received the tobacco leaf he used in the cigars he made from I.H. Weaver and Co. in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. They were known for their fine tobacco. At the height of his business, he turned out between 1,500 to 2,000 cigars a week usually averaging about 1,600 cigars a week. He sold brands of cigars such as, “The Twins” (after his twin son and daughter) and “The Clubhouse.” He would also peddle his cigars on foot as he never owned a car throughout his entire life. His granddaughter remembered that first thing in the morning, he would start out with “two or three boxes of cigars underneath his arm and he would go out and peddle [them] to the taverns or... [to] special customers.”⁶ After many years of this, in January of 1942 Mandler was ready for retirement. During his 55 year career making his own cigars, Mandler stated the he made over 4,576,000 cigars. At the time of his retirement, “he still had about 15,000 cigars on hand yet.” When asked what he planned on doing with all those cigars, he simply stated that he still had some private trade, “but what I don’t sell, I can smoke myself.”⁷

At the time of Mandler’s retirement, there had been a steady decline in the popularity of cigars which began around the time of the First World War. Many soldiers preferred a quick smoke of a cigarette as opposed to a long leisurely smoke of a cigar. As a result, the habit carried through the years to World War II. In addition, fewer and fewer ads appeared for cigars in local newspapers. In their place, ads for pipes, pipe tobacco, and cigarettes could be found. Eventually, the number of cigar makers in Bloomington dwindled as many moved production elsewhere or took up a whole other business.⁸ Although the cigar trade had its ups and downs, Mandler continued to make cigars through these hardships.

Beyond cigar making, Christ ran a good German household. As his granddaughter put it, “he was a very stern and strict German father,” though she claimed he mellowed when the grandkids arrived. As a family, they played pinochle and Bunco among other card games. The children were all taught German and were fluent in both English and German. His wife Bertha would fix traditional German food with a Thanksgiving duck taking the place of a turkey. Mandler was also known to have a beautiful voice. His favorite song was “O’ Tannenbaum” and along with Morris Quosigk, a friend of the family and future in-law, would recite poems, sing, dance, and perform not only inside the home, but at organizations such as the Turnverein, the Kreiger Verein, or the Maennerchor all of which he was a member.⁹ These societies were among the German organizations in Bloomington.

Christ was a long time member of the Bloomington Turnverein. The Turnverein was formed August 30, 1858 in Bloomington. Its roots were in Berlin, Germany. Founded in 1811 by Ludwig Jahn, the focus of the Turners was physical education and improvement to national health and strength. The origin of the name comes from German words “turnen” (to practice gymnastics) and “verein” (club or union).¹⁰ The club also promoted libraries, reading programs,

⁴ Ralph Baird, “Retires after Making 4,576,000 Cigars,” *The Pantagraph*, January 9, 1942

⁵ McCluskey interview on Christ Mandler

⁶ McCluskey interview on Christ Mandler

⁷ Baird, “Retires after Making 4,576,000 Cigars.”

⁸ “Cigar Makers of the City are Fewer,” *The Pantagraph*, December 18, 1924

⁹ McCluskey interview on Christ Mandler

¹⁰ William Adams. *The Turners in Bloomington*. (Normal: William H. Adams, 1998) 1

lectures and gymnastics. In the United States, the club focused not only on gymnastics, but also on social clubrooms and family picnics. The organization was a way for members of the German community in Bloomington to come together and socialize with each other. To become a member, a person had to be born in Germany or the child of a German descended member. Women were considered associate members and non-German spouses of members could join the club as social members.¹¹ The decline of the Turner society began at the start of World War I and continued to slowly decline with the sale of the Turner Hall until it finally ended in 1948.

The other German organizations Christ belonged to were the Krieger Verein and the Mannerchor. The Krieger Verein required its members to be past servicemen in the German army; often those men who served during the Franco-Prussian War. The Maennerchor was a singing association of men and women that was formed on October 12, 1874.¹² In addition to singing, they also performed plays.¹³

Throughout the mid to late 1800s and early 1900s, the German population in Bloomington continued to grow. By 1870 there were about 15,000 Germans living in Bloomington. They were a welcomed part of the community (for the most part) prior to the First World War. They ran many businesses on the square in downtown Bloomington and were active contributors of the local economy through trades such as cabinet making, brewing, railroad work, and jewelry making, among other trades. The Germans in Bloomington also published a German language newspaper, *The Bloomington Journal*.

In honor of their heritage and contributions in Bloomington, the German community would put on a German Days festival, the most notable of which was held in October of 1913. German Days marked the anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig, the “decisive defeat for Napoleon that marked the end of French Dominion in Germany.”¹⁴ During the festival, they recreated the Berlin Boulevard (named “Unter den Linden”), lining the streets with decorations and draping German and American flags from buildings. During this festival, the Germans of Bloomington came together as a whole leaving their clubs and separate identities behind. For three days, all of Bloomington enjoyed parades, German food, and music. In a way, everyone was “German” in Bloomington during German Days. An estimated 15,000-20,000 out of town visitors along with a large portion of the population of Bloomington and Normal attended the festivities. The event opened with several speeches including one from the mayor of Bloomington, James C. Costello, who stated, “we are proud of our German citizens for their ability, worth, and character.”¹⁵ Being a member of three of the five major German organizations in town, Christ and his family most likely would have participated in these festivities.

However, the acceptance of Germans in Bloomington (like elsewhere in the country) would not last. This was due to the escalating tensions leading up to the outbreak of World War I in Europe which pitted Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. As the years passed, accusatory statements, boycotts, and plain hatred filled the minds of the people who once before celebrated the Germans in the community. When the U.S. joined the War siding with the Allied Forces (Great Britain, France,

¹¹ Adams, *The Turners in Bloomington*, 13

¹² Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County*. (Bloomington: 2nd Edition McKnight and McKnight Publishing Co. Sesquicentennial Issue 1968) 412

¹³ Adams, *The Turners in Bloomington*, 13

¹⁴ Bill Kemp, “German Pride Reached its Height with 1913 Festival,” *The Pantagraph*, October 21, 1913

¹⁵ Tina Stewart Brakebill, “From German days to 100 percent Americanism,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, (Summer 2002), <http://findarticles.com/p/articles>. 5

Italy, and Russia) in 1917, anti-German sentiment increased dramatically in the U.S., even against those born in the U.S. that were of German descent. As a result of ever increasing propaganda to gain support for the War effort, the message of “100% Americanism” was pushed forward and groups across the country advocated anti-German legislation and changing of German names.¹⁶ The U.S. government took this even further by passing an amendment to the 1917 Espionage Act which stated that no printed material that concerned the War could be published in a foreign language newspaper unless it was translated and submitted to the local postmaster for approval.¹⁷ This act would force the *Bloomington Journal* (the local German language newspaper) to print in English. The German American Bank also voted to change its name to the American State Bank due to the continued negative national campaign against all things German.¹⁸ Teaching of the German language in schools was also banned in Bloomington and Normal like in many other places across the U.S. Although many German businesses were affected by the War, it is not known how Mandler experienced this wrath. As far as the War was concerned, his granddaughter recalled that the only one called into service was her father, Henry Mandler, the oldest of the Mandler children. He was discharged after a few months due to a heart murmur.¹⁹

For the most part though, Mandler lived a quiet life in Bloomington. However, tragedy would interrupt that quiet existence when his son, Christ Mandler Jr., died suddenly in Chicago, IL in 1910 from either pneumonia or heart trouble. He had been a timekeeper at the Western Electric Company in Chicago.²⁰ Years later in 1937, they would lose another son, Paul, who died suddenly in a car accident. He was traveling on an icy road east of Bloomington when he skidded and crashed into a ditch.²¹ The rest of their children lived out their natural lives.

At the ripe old age of 91, Christ died on December 6, 1949 at St. Joseph’s hospital. He was buried next to his wife, Bertha, (who had passed away eight years earlier) in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Emily Swartz, 2010

¹⁶ Brakebill, 5

¹⁷ Brakebill, 5

¹⁸ Brakebill, 9

¹⁹ McCluskey interview on Christ Mandler

²⁰ “Christ Mandler Jr., Dies,” *The Pantagraph*, October 7, 1910.

²¹ “Paul Mandler Dies of Crash Injuries,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 22, 1937.