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Research Articles

***Elfrieda Lang: The Difficult Career Path of a German American
Female Indiana Historian****

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ABSTRACT

Despite not going to high school, a German American woman became a major published history scholar, an assistant editor of the state history journal, and curator of special collections at a prestigious library in an era of patriarchy in the American history profession.

KEY WORDS German American; Hoosier; Southern Indiana; Assimilation; Eisenhower Republican

How did a woman in the early 20th century who did not go to high school become a published professional historian by middle age? This is a puzzle that this article addresses. The woman in question was Elfrieda Lang, a third-generation German American from southwesternmost Indiana. She was born in 1904 and grew up in the rural settlement of Lippe in Posey County.¹ The residents of this rural hamlet had migrated mainly from Lippe-Detmold in northwest Germany (now in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia) to Indiana in the 1830s. Elfrieda Lang was the oldest of six children. Her family spoke German in the home, and she had to learn English in the public schools. In 1913, when Elfrieda was nine, her family moved to the county seat of Mount Vernon, where her father, Henry, built a house and garage at 630 Mill Street, about a mile north of downtown, and became an automobile dealer while also remaining an owner of farmland. Elfrieda Lang graduated from middle school at age 14, then commuted to business school in Evansville 20 miles away on the interurban railroad for two years, studying

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stenography to be a recorder. She then spent three years working for her father and attaining an equivalency for high school through correspondence.

Lang and her family were devoted members of Trinity Evangelical Synod Church in Mount Vernon. Fortunately for her, its minister at the time, Paul Press, who later would be president of the Evangelical Synod and would lead it to merge with the (German) Reformed Church in the United States in 1934, became her patron and helped her to become assistant to the president at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. This was the only college of the Evangelical Synod denomination, a significant German-speaking Protestant organization in the Midwest.²

Figure 1. Elfrieda Lang at Elmhurst, around Age 20



Lang would stay at Elmhurst for 18 years, from age 19 to 37 (Figure 1). The Elmhurst era allowed her to grow in an academic environment. When Lang arrived at the college, it had a small student body of only 200, most of whom planned to matriculate to Eden Seminary in St. Louis to become Evangelical Synod ministers and then serve urban or rural parishes in the Midwest. When Lang arrived at Elmhurst in 1923, the school did not award bachelor's degrees, was weak in the liberal arts, still taught courses mainly in German, and was ethnically singular. This all changed when H. Richard Niebuhr became president in 1924 (Cutright 1995:97–122). A graduate of Elmhurst and Eden, and the younger brother of the famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who also attended Elmhurst and Eden, Richard shook up the college by insisting that students seriously study the liberal arts to get bachelor's degrees, that English become the major language of instruction, that students be trained for more than the ministry, and that women and non-Germans be admitted as students. He burned himself out raising money for the college

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after three years, resigned in 1927, and returned to Eden, later teaching for years at Yale Divinity School as a professor of religion. He published a number of books, including his influential work *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* in 1929, in which he criticized the division of Christians based on class, ethnicity, and race into combative denominations (Diefenthaler 1986). The substance of this argument was already clear in his early work as an administrator at Elmhurst and his contention that the school was too narrowly Germanic for post–World War I America.

Lang apparently thrived during her nearly two decades at Elmhurst (Figure 2). She was in an academic environment and had many coworkers as friends with whom she played tennis, went to sports events on campus, and took tours locally to Chicago, especially Lake Michigan, and to the woods of Wisconsin as well as farther away, to national parks in the far west. Importantly, her time at Elmhurst prepared her to succeed at a major state university as an undergraduate and then graduate student. In 1941, at age 37, she moved on to Indiana University in Bloomington.³

Figure 2. Elfrieda Lang at Elmhurst, Age 29



Lang experienced great institutional change at Indiana University under the leadership of President Herman Wells (president 1937–1962) just as she had at Elmhurst under President Niebuhr. Wells recruited many new younger faculty from renowned colleges; expanded the physical campus north of 10th Street and east of Jordan Avenue with new buildings, including the school’s first dormitories; built Wells and Lilly Libraries; added new programs, including graduate schools with international as well as American students; founded a university press; and increased student enrollment from about 5,000 in 1937 to about 27,000 in 1962. In effect, Indiana University and

Bloomington were transformed into an “academic metropolis” (Capshew 2012; Clark 1977; Wells 1980).

Lang was drawn to Bloomington in part because her younger sister Helen was there as a student and it was much closer to her hometown and her extended family. Supporting herself in the first female dormitory as a resident advisor, she completed a bachelor’s degree in history and German in 1943. A year later, she completed a master’s degree in history with a thesis on the Germans in Dubois County in southwestern Indiana. By 1950, with a dissertation on Northern Indiana to 1850, she had completed a doctorate in history under American History professors John Barnhart and Albert Kohlmeier and European historian John Andressohn (Figure 3).⁴ While a doctoral candidate, Lang was asked by President Wells to direct a study of combatants returning from World War II. As a result, she also became a close personal friend of the president, exchanging Christmas gifts even after both had retired.

Lang was of a small minority in a male-dominated profession.⁵ From 1946 to 1950, there were 97 male and 21 female graduate students, including Lang, in history, so she was in a minority cohort of 18 percent.⁶ In 1950, 288 doctorates were awarded to history students in American universities, of which 31 (9 percent), including Lang, were females.

Figure 3. Elfrieda Lang at Indiana University, Age 46, When She Earned Her Doctorate



She published a number of articles in the state history journal, the *Indiana Magazine of History*, even before she received her doctorate. In the 1950s, she became the assistant editor of the state history journal and continued to publish

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journal articles, along with a book on the history of her hometown church for its 100th anniversary: *The History of Trinity Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1853–1953* (Eden Publishing House, 1953). She became curator of special collections for the new Lilly Library in Bloomington when it opened in 1960 (Figure 4) and remained there until her retirement in 1974 at age 70. Even into retirement, Lang continued to publish journal articles and was active in the Indiana German Heritage Society. She died in 2006 at the age of 102.

Figure 4. Elfrieda Lang at Lilly Library in Bloomington, around Age 60



Most of Lang's research concentrated on German American migration to and settlement in Indiana in the antebellum era. A look at the map of German-born people and those of German stock (having at least one parent born in Germany) in 1910 reveals the areas where her research could have been (Figure 5). In fact, one area where her research centered was Northern Indiana, the focus of her dissertation (Lang 1950). She defined the area as the 21 counties north of the Wabash River (of 92 counties in the state), including a six-county subregion near Chicago in northwestern Indiana that included Lake, Porter, LaPorte, St. Joseph, Starke, and Pulaski Counties. A second cluster of Germans was in Allen County in northeastern Indiana, basically the greater Fort Wayne area.

Figure 5. German Americans were present significantly in both rural and urban areas of Northern and Southern Indiana, but only in cities in Central Indiana.

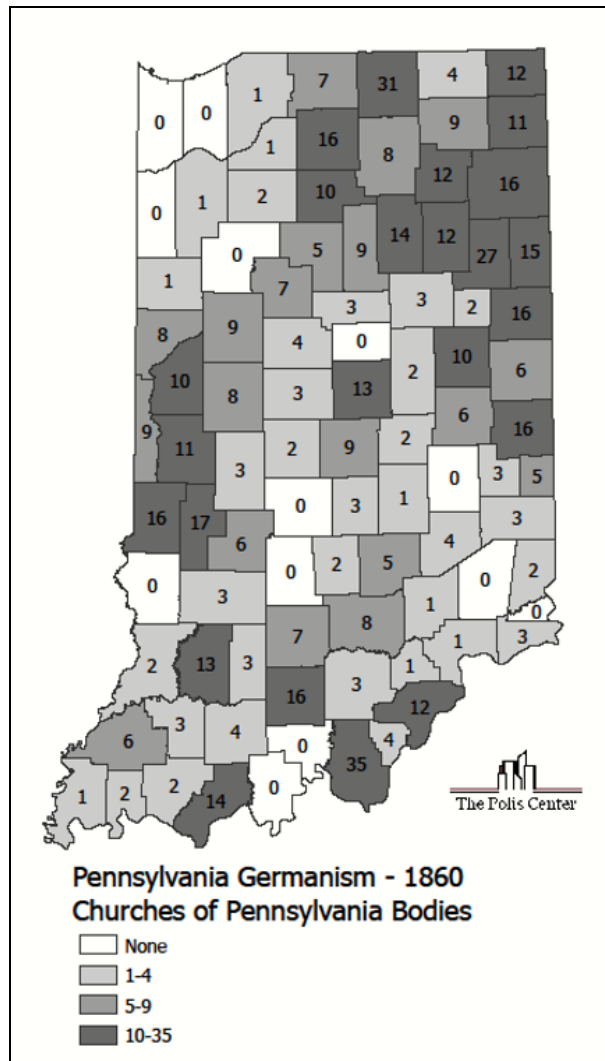


Note: Data from the 1910 U.S. Census.

Lang also wrote articles about the Irish Catholics, Ohioans, and Southerners in Northern Indiana (see Lang 1953a, 1953b, 1954, 1965). The region was one of great cultural diversity, including Yankees from New England, New York, and especially Pennsylvania, including Pennsylvania German Protestants (Figure 6) and Scots-Irish Protestants (see Bigelow, O'Malley, and Nolt, forthcoming). The Pennsylvania Germans comprised seven denominations: Plain Deutsch (Amish, Mennonite, and Church of the Brethren); Church Deutsch (Lutherans and German Reformed); and Bush-Meeting or Revivalist Deutsch (Evangelical Association and United Church of Christ). The Pennsylvania Germans were a separate ethnic group in the antebellum era from the

German immigrants, as they were Americanized from living in colonial Pennsylvania since the 1730s and had a different language (Pennsylvania Deutsch), a different theology (pietism), and a different political style (pacifist or quiescent; Yoder 1988). By 1900, however, the Church Deutsch and Revivalist Deutsch had begun to merge with the 19th-century German immigrants to comprise about 20 percent of the state population, second only to Upland Southerners.

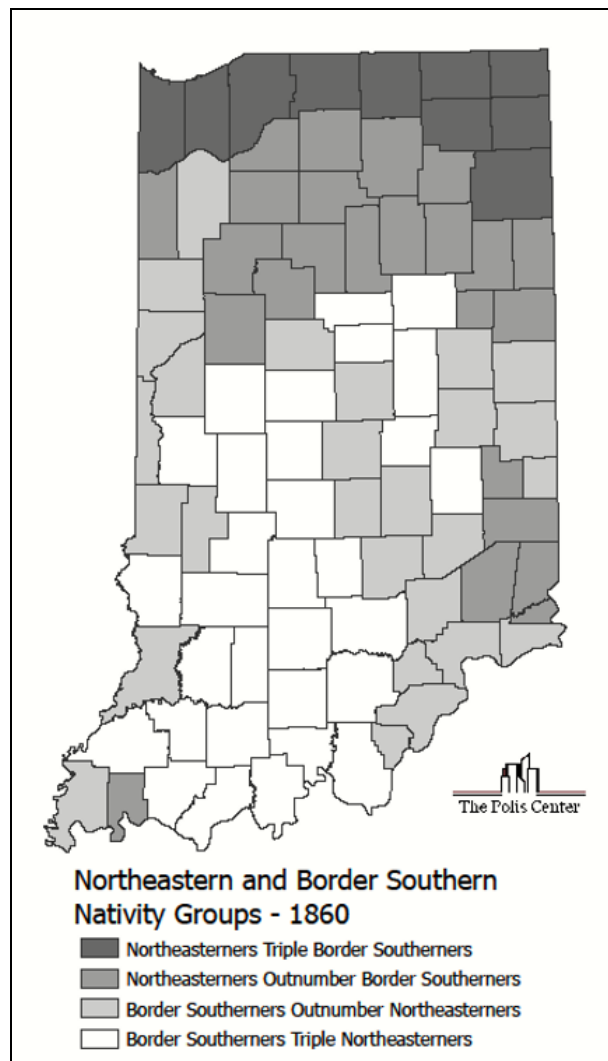
Figure 6. Pennsylvania Germans were stronger in Northern Indiana than in Central or Southern Indiana.



Note: Data from the archives and from an encyclopedia of the seven Pennsylvania German denominations.

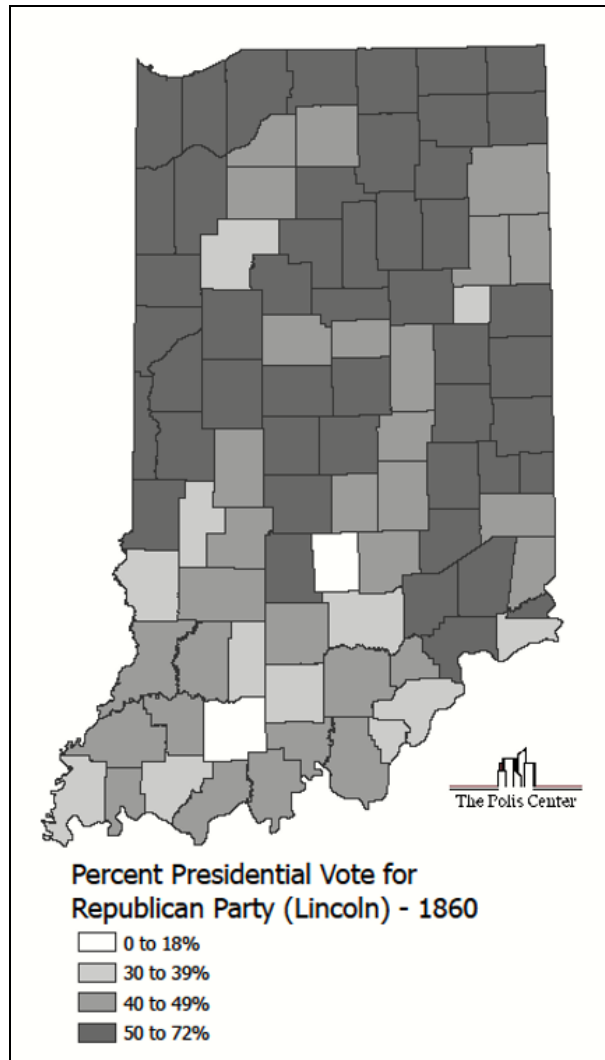
Lang emphasized that the Irish Catholics had built the canals that connected the Great Lakes with the Ohio River in Southern Indiana and were Democrats. She also found a significant number of migrants from the Upland South Democrats in a region that had been mainly settled by Northeasterners to be part of a greater North (Figure 7) that had supported Abraham Lincoln in 1860, unlike Southern Indiana (Figure 8). She also revealed that the Ohioans in Indiana were, for the most part, originally from Pennsylvania, indicating again that Northern Indiana was, to a considerable degree, Pennsylvania extended.

Figure 7. Northern Indiana was part of the greater North; Southern Indiana was part of the Upland South; and Central Indiana was mixed but predominantly Upland Southern.



Note: Data from the 1860 U.S. Census.

Figure 8. Lincoln was strong in Northern and Central Indiana but weak in Southern Indiana. Counties in Northern and Central Indiana that were anti-Lincoln were predominantly German, Irish Catholic, or Upland Southern.



Note: Data from the Indiana Historical Society.

Southern Indiana, or an area comprising the southernmost third of the state, was another area of German clustering. Here, however, the vast majority of migrants were from the Upland South, not the Northeast. The “Hoosiers,”⁷ or Indiana-born residents, there were mainly originally from the Upland South, and the area was strongly Democratic and anti-Lincoln in the Civil War era (Natipn 1997; Power 1942). There were pockets of Germans scattered about the region in both southwestern and southeastern locales. Lang studied two islands of Germans in southwestern Indiana: one in Posey and Vanderburgh Counties in southwesternmost Indiana, her home area, and a second farther

east, including Dubois, Spencer, and Perry Counties. She did not research another cluster of Germans in the southeast on the periphery of Cincinnati, including Dearborn, Franklin, Ripley, and Ohio Counties, nor did she write about Central Indiana's urban Germans of Indianapolis, Terre Haute, and Richmond.⁸

Evansville, in Vanderburgh County, was by far the largest city in the Pocket⁹ and, according to the U.S. census of 2010, is the third largest city in the state, with a population of 118,000 (Indianapolis has 867,000 and Fort Wayne has 268,000). In 1850, Evansville had a large foreign-born population (36 percent), of which two-thirds were Germans. The majority were Catholics, but there was a significant Protestant minority, especially Lutherans and, to a lesser degree, German Reformed, Evangelical Synod, and German Methodist Episcopalians (Koester 2020; Lang 1988). Lang observed that the Catholics created their own institutions, including churches, parochial schools (including high schools), and fraternal clubs, and also were strongly Democratic in politics, like their white Anglo-Saxon protestant (WASP) neighbors. The German Protestants also had their own churches, parochial schools, and clubs, but they were split politically between the Democratic majority and a Republican minority. It appears that Timothy Smith (1978) and LaVern Rippley (1974) were correct in arguing that religion may have trumped nationality in determining identity.

Lang's home county of Posey was part of the island of Germans including Evansville, but it may have been more Protestant than Catholic. Lang's home church in Mount Vernon, originally an Evangelical Synod church, in 1934 became Evangelical and Reformed, and in 1957, it became United Church of Christ when the Evangelical and Reformed Germanic denomination merged with the New England Yankee Congregationalists. Up to World War I, the main language used in services at the church was German, but after the war, English predominated, despite the feeling of some that "God spoke in German."

By the 1950s, when the church became United Church of Christ, had it ceased being a distinctly German institution? English is the only language of services except when "Silent Night" is sung in German for the Christmas Eve service; there has not been a German American minister for 20 years; a significant minority of members are not German American; and there is no display of the church's German heritage in the church's lobby.¹⁰ Was there a "loss of community, identity, loss of language and loss of neighborhood," as suggested by Giles Hoyt?¹¹

Lang wrote her master's thesis and a number of articles on Dubois County, northeast of Evansville, a second island of German settlement.¹² She emphasized the development of the county under the leadership of Father Joseph Kundek, a Croat who had been germanicized because he had been born in the Austrian Empire (Lang 1995). Father Kundek planned the founding of Ferdinand and Celestine near the already established Catholic county seat of Jasper to create a German American Catholic triangle at the center of the county. The Catholics dominated the county, but there were German Protestants (Lutherans, Reformed, Evangelical Synod, and Methodist Episcopalians) and non-German Protestants within the northern and southern borders of the county.¹³ German was the language of instruction in the parochial schools, which served as public schools because of the overwhelming Catholic dominance, until the McCray Bill of 1919

made it illegal statewide to teach German in the schools of Indiana (Ramsey 2002). A strong German-language press in the county became weaker after the war (Ziegler 1994).

Others have continued researching the patterns that Lang identified. When Juliet Niehaus researched Dubois County in the 1970s, she found that class divide had diluted the sense of community among Catholics (Niehaus 1981). On one hand, Niehaus argued that a development of pan-German identity in the county was partly for tourism dollars but was also divided by class so as to compromise any Catholic-Protestant brotherhood. On the other hand, the existence of the Deutscher Verein social and philanthropic organization; the sister-city relationship with Pfaffenweiler, Germany; and the German festivals indicate some sense of German community.¹⁴ However, Father Peter Yock (2001) has argued that St. Meinrad Seminary in Spencer County intensified Catholic identity because the seminary trained and supplied priests to Dubois, Spencer, and Perry Counties, creating a “Kundek Belt”; this may have compromised mutuality of identity with German Protestants too.

Lang was one of the pioneers of the “new social history” of the 1960s and 1970s, a decade or two before its popularity (Tilly 1984; Veysey 1979). The new social history emphasized ethnicity, class, gender, quantitative analysis, oral history, local history, and emphasis on common people rather than great men. Lang emphasized ethnicity as a critical concept in studying American history and gave voice to the lower and middle classes. Quantitative methods in her research centered on the U.S. Census of 1850, the first U.S. Census to record the nativity of residents so one could guess the ethnicity of individuals in coordination with surname analysis.

Lang’s research on German Americans created material for later theorizing by historians on the broad patterns of the ethnic group. Probably the most important American scholar of German American history is Kathleen Neils Conzen.¹⁵ One important point she emphasized was the “invention” of ethnicity by Germans. Conzen insisted that the Germans were the first ethnic group in the nation and thus the authors of cultural pluralism for the country, and she showed that Germans dominated many islands of settlement, especially in the Midwest, creating an archipelago of German-speakers (Conzen 1996; see also Johnson 1951). Of course, Lang knew this from her experience growing up in one of the islands with another island nearby. Drawing on her personal experience, Lang’s scholarship focused on the geography of ethnicity and thus anticipated Conzen’s (1991) concept of the pluralisms of place.

Russell Kazal is another leading scholar of German American history who has written a number of articles and a book, *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity* (see especially Kazal 1995, 2004). In an elaborate reconstruction of the geography of German Americans in Philadelphia in the early 20th century, especially from 1900 to the 1930s, Kazal emphasized the split between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews with regard to assimilation. Protestants became “old stock” as they merged with WASPs; Catholics joined with other white Catholic working-class members, including Irish, Italians, and Poles, to become “white ethnics”; and Jews merged with non-German Jews. Kazal agreed with Will Herberg (1955) and Milton Gordon (1964) about structural assimilation. Thus, the great diversity of German Americans based on religion and class,

to say nothing of German region and dialect, was revealed again, something that Lang had emphasized earlier.

Lang was also involved in participating in the study of the remnants of German culture, by being a leader of the Indiana German Heritage Society and a contributor to the national German-American Studies organization until her death, including publishing articles for the organization in the 1980s and 1990s while in retirement.¹⁶ She was well acquainted with both German and American culture and history, in addition to being fluent in German and English. She embodied the ethnic culture by being bilingual and being devoted to “land, church and family” her entire life (Bigham 1980:7). Her family owns land in rural Posey County today, even though most live in urban Mount Vernon and intend to keep their home at 630 Mill Street (Figure 9) in the family, which is a trait of Midwest immigrants (unlike native Protestants) that has been emphasized by the historian Jon Gjerde (1997).

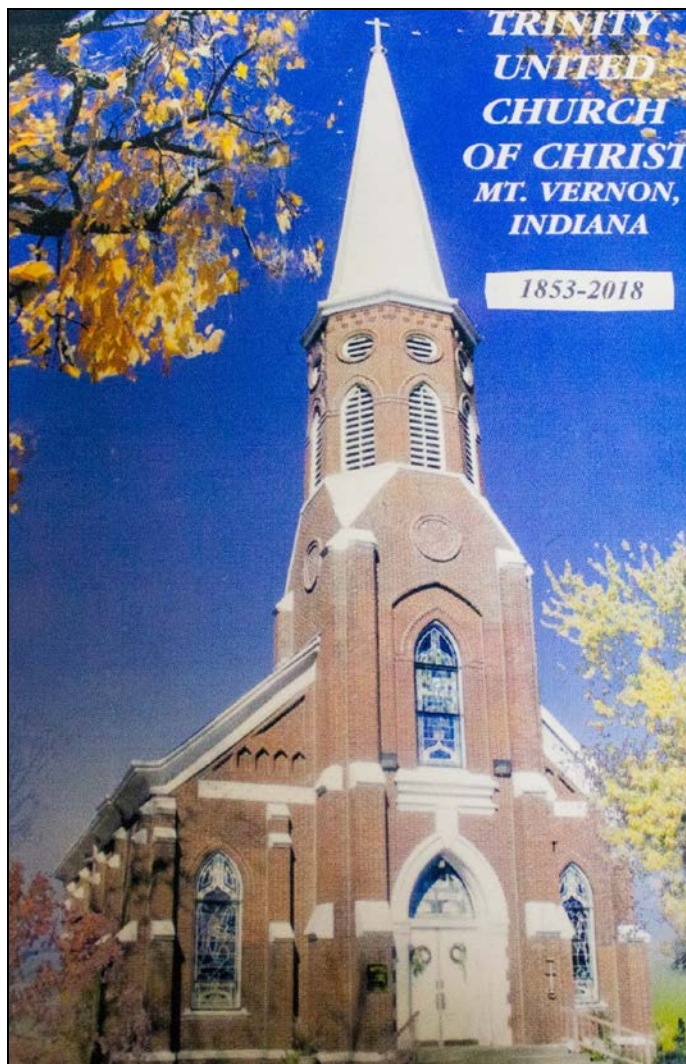
Figure 9. Lang family house and garage at 630 Mill St., Mount Vernon, Indiana, in 2020



Elfrieda Lang regularly visited her relatives and showered them with gifts. She maintained her Protestant faith as a participant of First Methodist United Church in Bloomington while also continuing her allegiance through membership to Trinity United Church of Christ in Mount Vernon (Figure 10). She loved opera, especially the work of Richard Wagner, and attended basketball and football games as a Hoosier fan, which was undergirded by her love of Kentucky jokes. She collected landscape paintings of the Hoosier Group¹⁷ (three of whom were trained in Munich, Germany), especially those

depicting Brown, Jennings, and Franklin Counties in Southern Indiana, and gave many to her relatives as gifts.

Figure 10. Trinity United Church of Christ, Mount Vernon, Indiana



Source: Donald Kleinschmidt.

Elfrieda Lang was a mixture of German and Hoosier culture and, according to two of her nephews, was also an Eisenhower Republican.¹⁸ By that, they probably mean that she was a moderate Republican, unlike many of the residents of Southern Indiana, including German Americans, who were conservative Democrats until the 21st century. Like President Eisenhower, she was a German Protestant. Eisenhower's paternal ancestors had been River Brethren (named after the Susquehanna River) of Pennsylvania

German heritage, a Bush-Meeting Deutsch group, his grandfather and father having moved from south-central Pennsylvania to Abilene, Kansas, as part of a colony in 1879, and his maternal ancestors were United Brethren in Christ.¹⁹

There is no wonder why the History Department of Indiana University to this day celebrates one outstanding undergraduate major with the Elfrieda Lang Award each year. That she pioneered so much when the history profession was a patriarchy is even more amazing.

ENDNOTES

1. Biographical information about Lang comes from a folder in the Indiana University Archives and from three nephews and a niece of Lang whom I interviewed in Mount Vernon on March 9, 2020: Donald Kleinschmidt, Bill Lang, Phillip Sutton, and Judy Heberer.
2. The Evangelical Synod traces its roots to 1840 and the large wave of German immigrants who came to the American Midwest between 1820 and 1860. In 1817, the Prussian state had forced the merger of most Lutheran and German Reformed churches within its realm. Those of Reformed background, in particular, chafed at this union. Upon immigrating to the United States, these German Protestants were largely uninterested in joining Lutheran churches, but they were not fully at home in existing German Reformed congregations that dated to the colonial era. Instead, they formed the Evangelical Synod, which represented, in many ways, a moderate German Protestantism. The name Evangelical Synod was adopted at a conference session in Indianapolis in 1866 (Schneider 1935).
3. This information, including a photographic album of Elfrieda's Elmhurst years, was provided by her relatives. There was no living informant from Elmhurst who could be interviewed, although the college archivist Elaine Fetyko Page was very helpful.
4. John Barnhart (1895–1967) was born in Decatur in central Illinois, and received his doctorate from Harvard University as a student of Frederick Jackson Turner. His most prominent publication was *The Valley of Democracy* (Indiana University Press, 1953). Albert Kohlmeier (1883–1964) was born in Mackey, Gibson County, in Southern Indiana. He also received his doctorate from Harvard University. His most prominent publication was *The Old Northwest as the Keystone of the Arch of American Federal Union* (The Principia Press, 1938). John Andressohn (1884–1966) was born in Philadelphia and received his doctorate in history from the University of Wisconsin. It is interesting that all three were German Americans. (This information comes from Indiana University Archives, including a history of the History Department by James Madison.)
5. Data from the American Historical Association in Washington, DC. Another Southern Indiana woman who was successful academically despite patriarchy in her field (physics), Melba Phillips (1907–2004), was a contemporary of Lang and was from Hazelton, Pike County. Phillips graduated from Oakland City College in 1926, majoring in math, history, and English. In 1928, she received a master's degree in physics from Battle Creek College, Michigan, and in 1933, she received a doctorate

in physics from the University of California at Berkeley. She then became a research assistant to the famous Robert Oppenheimer, her doctoral committee chair (see Mills 2018).

6. Data from Dina Kellums of the staff of the Indiana University Archives.
7. The term *Hoosier* for Indiana natives probably refers to their origin in the Upland South.
8. For Germans in Indianapolis, see Probst (1989).
9. *The Pocket* is a term for southwesternmost Indiana. A Pocket Athletic Conference of area high schools was founded in 1938. The Pocket covered both German American islands discussed above, including all the counties west, north, and east of Vanderburgh County (Evansville), excepting Evansville itself. The counties that had high schools in the conference include Daviess, Dubois, Gibson, Perry, Pike, Posey, Spencer, and Warrick.
10. Information from Donald Kleinschmidt, a member of the church. The same pattern of assimilation probably occurred with former Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) churches who merged with the predominantly English Methodist Episcopal Church to create the United Methodist Church in 1968.
11. See also Steenbergen (2016). More recently, and in another part of the country, Russell Kazal (2004) has explored the transformation (and decline) of German American identity in 20th-century Philadelphia, noting the differences between Catholics and Protestants, the role of community institutions and politics.
12. See Lang (1944; 1946a, b, c; 1945a, b). Also see Krapf (1996).
13. This information is from interviews with James Madison and Bill Bartelt, retired Harrison High School (Evansville) history teacher and Lincoln scholar, on October 6, 2020.
14. This information comes from Giles Hoyt.
15. See Conzen (1980, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1990, 1991) and Conzen et al. (1992).
16. This information comes from interviews with Ruth Reichmann on June 14, 2020, and Giles Hoyt on June 15, 2020.
17. The five painters of the Hoosier Group were born before the Civil War, in the 1840s and 1850s, and died in the first three decades of the 20th century. Three were natives of Indiana: Otto Stark (1859–1926) from Indianapolis, Theodore Steele (1847–1926) from Gosport in Southern Indiana), and Ottis Adams (1851–1927) from Amity in Johnson County, just south of Indianapolis. William Forsyth (1854–1935) and Richard Gruelle (1851–1914) were natives of greater Cincinnati who moved to Indianapolis. Ethnically, only Stark was German American (Newton 1985).
18. This kind of cultural mixing and moderation was common by the mid-20th century also among the Philadelphia German Americans who were on their way to becoming either “white ethnics” or “old stock” as described in Kazal in *Becoming Old Stock* (2004).
19. Dwight Eisenhower celebrated his River Brethren and United Brethren in Christ heritage. This may be the reason why he and Mamie Eisenhower retired to a farm near Gettysburg. In contrast, he did not celebrate his mother’s membership in the Jehovah’s Witnesses; in fact, he was silent about it (Bergman 1998; Eisenhower 1967). Kenneth Davis, in his 1945 biography of Eisenhower, does not mention the

presence of worship in the Jehovah's Witnesses by Eisenhower's parents in Abilene, probably because the group was considered to be a strange sect and not respectable by the measure of the middle and upper classes.

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