

What Happened to the Panorama Painters?

During the summer of 1885 a group of artists from Milwaukee arrived in Atlanta to make sketches for a planned painting of the Battle of Atlanta. After these sketches were projected onto canvas by means of magic lantern the team of artists set to work creating an immense panoramic painting. The work, now known as the Atlanta Cyclorama, was first put on public display in Detroit in 1887. Since the turn of the century it has been installed in a permanent building in Atlanta. This article will seek to bring together what is known about the Milwaukee panorama painters and will in particular attempt to trace what became of them after the decline of interest in panoramas at the end of the 1880's. The article will conclude with concise biographical sketches of twenty-two artists who played a prominent role in the Milwaukee panorama industry.

A German-born Chicago businessman, William Wehner, brought the artists, who painted the Atlanta Cyclorama, to Milwaukee from Germany. His firm, variously known as the National Panorama Association or the American Panorama Company, was probably established in 1883. Wehner had taken note of the recent success in Germany of large panoramic paintings depicting battle scenes of the Franco-Prussian War.¹ The American public, he reasoned, would be happy to pay for the privilege of seeing similar battle scenes drawn from the American Civil War. Wehner knew that there were many skilled and experienced artists in Europe who would be able to carry out such a project. He accordingly secured financial backing from Chicago bankers and about turning his dream into reality.

Wehner's first step was to secure the immense sheets of Belgian canvas needed for the project. He then secured the services of August Lohr, an Austrian artist who had come to the U.S. in 1884 in order to supervise the installation of a German Panorama at the New Orleans Exhibition. Through Lohr, Wehner was able to recruit a group of European artists to work for his Milwaukee-based company. Among the earliest to arrive was Friedrich Wilhelm Heine, who reached the United States in 1885. Heine had already gained a reputation in Germany as a painter of battle scenes. Others who probably arrived in 1885 were Bernhard Schneider, Theodor Bredwiser, Hermann Michalowski, and Otto Dinger. Among those who appear to have arrived in 1886 were Richard Lorenz, William Schroeter, Franz Biberstein, Taddeus von Zukotynsky, Franz Rohrbeck, Georg Petera and Paul Wilhelmi.

Lohr and Heine, the first artists recruited from Europe by Wehner, were responsible for the overall planning of the Atlanta Cyclorama. For historical accuracy they were assisted by Theodor Davis, who had been a staff artist for Harper's Weekly during the war. Each member of Wehner's team had been hired because of a particular area of expertise. Schneider, Schnoter und Biberstein were experienced landscape painters who could be counted on to accurately recreate the background and topographic details. Other artists, such as Bredwiser, Micholowsky, Rohrbeck, Shultz and Wilhermi, specialized in human figures, while Peter and Lorenz had both been hired because of their skill in painting horses.

Wehner's base of operation in Milwaukee was a large octagonally shaped wooden studio at the corner of Wells and Fifth Streets. This building, the entrance to which was at 628 Wells Street, was built in the summer of 1885. The first panorama painted there was probably "The Storming of Missionary Ridge" which was followed by "The Battle of Atlanta." Both subjects were reportedly painted twice, though it is not clear whether, all the visions were done by Wehner's company.² The building was constructed in much the same way as is the building in which the Atlanta Cyclorama is presently

displayed; one entered from Wells Street through an underground passage way before emerging onto a central platform.

Wehner's company was not, however the first to produce panoramas in Milwaukee. Louis Kindt and Thomas Gardner, scenery painters at the German municipal theater, had produced a panoramic painting of the Battle of Lookout Mountain ("The Battle in the Clouds") which was exhibited at the Exposition Building with great success in 1884. Kindt and Gardner were also reported to have produced panoramas of the battles of Gettysburg and Shiloh.³

In November 1884 Kindt joined with Otto Osthoff and Paul Bechtner to incorporate the Northwestern Panorama Company⁴. Several of the executives of this company, such as Valentine Blatz and Henry Torchiani were persons connected with the brewing industry.⁵ Osthoff was the manager of the Schlitz Park, which he leased from the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company, while Bechtner was a local manufacturer, who dabbled in politics. In January 1885 the company rejected a permit to construct an exhibition building in which to display a planned panorama.⁶

The panorama, which the company decided to produce, was one, which ultimately bore the title "General Grants Assault on Vicksburg." To prepare for it, Louis Kindt spent two weeks in Vicksburg making sketches and making notes. Assisted by Gardner and several locally recruited Artists, Kindt set to work using the auditorium stage at Schlitz Park as a studio.⁷ The building in which the panorama was placed on exhibit in July 1885 was a sixteen sided frame structure at the southeast corner of Cedar and Sixth Streets. It was covered with sheet metal and topped by a skylight, was 125 feet in diameter and had an observation platform large enough to accommodate 150 viewers at a time. The Vicksburg panorama remained there on exhibition for more than two years and was not removed until the end of 1887.

Wehner's American Panorama Company went out of business in 1887, but the Wells Street studio was taken over by a successor firm, the partnership of Lohr and Heine. Several of the American Panorama Company's original team of artists, including Georg Peter, Hermann Michalowski and Paul Wilhelmi, now worked as panorama painters for this firm. Their major achievement was "Jerusalem on the Day of the Crucifixion," which attracted much attention when it was placed on exhibition in the spring of 1887. This work was later put on permanent display at Sainte Anne de Beaupre in Quebec Province, Canada, but its present location is uncertain. Wehner appears to have maintained some connection with Lohr and Heine, as the 1888 Chicago City directory lists him as the vice president of a firm called the Palestine Exhibition Company.

The firm of Lohr and Heine was in turn succeeded by the Milwaukee Panorama Company, which filed articles of association on November 27, 1888.⁸ The incorporators of this company were August Lohr, Imre. Boos and Paul Zabel. Boos, a local journalist who wrote for both the English and German language newspapers, was the husband of the artist Amy Tesch Boos. Zabel was a singer and impresario who organized operatic performances at Schlitz Park. The Milwaukee Panorama Company exhibited a Panorama of "Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" which began exhibition on June 1. 1889 and was ultimately destroyed in a fire. Like the Crucifixion panorama, it was painted at the Wells Street studio.

The company ultimately acquired the Northwestern Panorama Company's Cedar Street exhibition building and the Vicksburg panorama installed there. When they later exhibited a "Battle at Gettysburg" panorama in this building, the Northwestern Panorama Company sued them for breach of contract, claiming that they had agreed to exhibit only the Vicksburg panorama there.⁹ This Gettysburg painting was probably a local production, perhaps the one attributed to Kindt and Gardner. It was probably not the Gettysburg panorama by Paul Dominique Philipoteaux which is now a permanent display at the Gettysburg Military Park.

Not all the panorama artists were employed by Wehner. Karl Frosch, who may have arrived in Milwaukee as late as 1887, was brought over by Lohr and Heine to work on their Crucifixion panorama. Theodor von Luerzer, an Austrian born artist who also reached Milwaukee in 1877, was not recruited in Europe, but was locally hired, as was probably also the case with the German born artists Gustave Wendling and Albert Richter. Two local residents who were also recruited to become panorama artists were Robert Schade and Amy Tesch Boos.

But what happened to the panorama painters after the panorama boom ended around 1890? Some, including Dinger, Wendling, Richter and Schroeter, returned to Germany. The others, however, sought to continue their artistic careers in the United States. Some continued to paint panoramas, but most of the artists found it convenient to use their skills in other ways. Some had serious careers as artists and teachers, while others opened portrait studios, painted theater scenery, did decorative fresco work, or became commercial artists. One, George Peter, eventually became a staff artist for the Milwaukee Public Museum. Of the artists who remained in Milwaukee, several became charter members of the Society of Milwaukee Artists when it was organized in 1900. Among these were Biberstein, Heine, Lorenz, and Schade.

Although all of these artists were eventually forced to give up panorama painting, some did so reluctantly. One of these was Gustave Wendling, who returned to Germany and helped to paint a panorama exhibited at Duesseldorf in 1902. A decade later the demise of the American Panorama Company, Wehner attempted a comeback and engaged Heine, Peter and Rohrbeck to paint "The Battle of Manila" a scene from the Spanish American War. The work was painted in San Francisco, where it was exhibited without success in 1900.

Unfortunately, much of what has been published about the Milwaukee panorama painters provides information which is at best incomplete and at worse misleading.¹⁰ For one thing, the information available in European sources has been largely overlooked while no one seems to have made a serious effort to trace the subsequent careers of the artists who left Milwaukee after the panorama boom of the 1880s. In order to correct the record and fill in the gaps, it now seems timely to present an updated picture of who the panorama painters were and what sort of lives they led. What follows will be presented in the form of a series of biographical sketches, each summarizing the career of one of the panorama painters. For convenience the biographical sketches are presented in alphabetical order.

ⁱ For the development of panorama painting in Germany see Stephen Oettermann. *Das Panorama: die Geschichte eines Massenmediums* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat Autoren und Verlagsgesellschaft.1980).

German Immigrant Culture in America, 1994, Peter C. Merrill
