

Christoph “Christ” Mandler (1858-1949)

Christoph Mandler was a master cigar maker at a time when cigar making was an important industry in Bloomington. He reported that during his career, he made over 4,576,000 cigars, each one rolled by hand. At the height of his career, he made over 1600 a week, which means he rolled well over 200 a day!

“Christ” Mandler was born in April 23, 1858 in Hessen, Germany. At the age of 21, he entered the German army to fulfill his compulsory service. A few years later, in 1882, he immigrated with a friend to the United States and to Bloomington, IL.

Bloomington during the last half of the nineteenth century had a large German immigrant community. They were largely welcomed here as they brought needed skills such as cabinet making and brewing, and a strong work ethic. Up until the time of WWI, there was a German newspaper, and a German bank. There were German clubs and festivals. The “German Days” festival usually held in October brought thousands of visitors to town enjoy German music, parades and food.

Three years after coming to Bloomington, Christ married Bertha W. Warmbir. She had immigrated from Germany just one year earlier. Perhaps they met at one of the several German clubs. They would have a family which included five sons and one daughter.

Soon after arriving in Bloomington, Christ began his career in the cigar business. He worked for the Tryner and Richardson Cigar Company, one of the more successful cigar factories in town. By 1886, he is listed in the city directory as a cigar maker by trade. Until the early 20th century, all cigars were made by hand. The average cost for a cigar at this time was five to ten cents, depending on the blend of tobacco. The better the quality of tobacco used, the more the cigar cost. At the height of cigar making in Bloomington, there were about 18 factories located in the city, most downtown.

After five years, Christ went into business for himself. He continued to handcraft his cigars for the next 50 years. His granddaughter told how he did this. Starting with a tobacco leaf, “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 the end and cut off this end and put it in the box.”

Beginning about the time of WWI, cigars declined in popularity. The quick smoke of a cigarette was preferred, especially by soldiers, to the long, leisurely smoke of a cigar. Of course, all this was before it was realized that smoking of any kind is dangerous to people’s health. Despite the loss of popularity and customers, Christ continued to roll cigars until 1942.

Beyond cigar making, Christ ran a good German household. As his granddaughter remembered, he was a stern and strict German father, though she claimed he mellowed when the grandkids arrived. The children were all taught German and were fluent in both German and English. Christ loved to sing; his favorite song was “O Tannenbaum” and he would sing, dance and perform both for gatherings at home and at the German clubs. He belonged to the Bloomington Turnverein, a German social club founded to promote physical health. It was a place for people of German heritage to socialize and enjoy their traditions. He also belonged to Krieger Verein, an organization for past members of the German army.

During the World Wars, public opinion turned against this public display of German pride, and these organizations like the German newspaper and bank, ceased to exist or changed their names.

For the most part, Christ Mandler lived a quiet life in Bloomington. Tragedy intervened in 1920 when his son, Christ Mandler Jr., died suddenly in Chicago of either pneumonia or heart

trouble. The young man had been working there as a time keeper for Western Electric company. In 1937, the Mandlers lost another son when the car he was driving skidded off an icy road and crashed in a ditch.

Having lived through the Great Depression and two World Wars in which his adopted country fought and defeated his native country, Christoph Mandler witnessed many changes in Bloomington, including machine made cigars and the closing of the cigar industry here in town. He died at St. Joseph Hospital at the age of 91 on December 6, 1949. He is buried next to his wife, Bertha who had died eight years earlier, in Evergreen Cemetery.

Discussion Question: Think of examples of lifestyle and change in Christoph Mandler's life. Specifically, what did he do that would not, or could not be done today. What would a person such as him do instead?

Bullets for Christoph Mandler:

- *Born in Germany 1858, died Bloomington, IL 1949.
- *Immigrated to U.S. after doing compulsory service in German army.
- *Joined large and active German community in Bloomington.
- *Became a cigar maker, hand-rolling between 4 and 5 million cigars in his career.
- *Married and raised six children, loved to sing and perform, active in German clubs.