

In Your Downtown:

A look at Indiana's Jewish-Owned Retail Businesses

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Title Photo: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Vincennes, Knox County, Indiana, Nov. 1887, From Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Sanborn Maps Collection.

Before there was Walmart, Target, or Amazon, local stores were pillars of the community. It was in these shops or department stores, lining downtowns, that members of Indiana's Jewish community often found their success in business. Across Indiana, Jewish immigrants and members of the community established well-known businesses, some growing into retail chains.

Many pervasive stereotypes surrounding Jews still circulate today, such as Jews exceling with money and businesses. This discrimination and stereotyping often forced them into particular professions. As early as the tenth century in Europe, Jews were unable to own land and farm, forcing them into towns and cities, working in businesses such as shopkeeping. Excluded from other areas of economic activity, many sought opportunities in new markets. Coming to the United States, often working as peddlers, they reached untapped markets and started in new forms of retailing, such as department stores. It was in retail that many found their success.

Indiana saw Jewish businessowners enter the retail business and boost the local economies. From Gimbel to Strauss, many may be familiar with the names without knowing the stories behind these businesses and the families that helped transform their communities.



Photo: Winski (*Courtesy of Indiana Album: Shirley and Mike Benham Collection*) (Photo of Mose Winski, a Jewish Russian immigrant, next to his fruit and vegetable wagon, Lafayette, Indiana, circa 1910)



KNOX COUNTY

Gimbel's Clothing Store

Vincennes, 1842 to 1887

Adam Gimbel, the founder of the Gimbel Brother Company, was born in 1817 in Bavaria to a Jewish family. Immigrating to the United States in May of 1835, he started in New Orleans as a dock worker. He became a peddler in July 1837 after seeing others find success traveling the river and peddling their goods.

He arrived in Vincennes in 1842. After selling out his inventory in one week, Gimbel decided to stay in Indiana and rent a room for his new store. Soon after, he purchased his own building for his "Palace of Trade." Located at 200 N. Main Street in Vincennes, the store, a two-story brick building in the Italianate style, became increasingly successful in the community. His personal motto was "Fairness and Equality to All Patrons." At a time when standardized prices were not common, this motto attracted people like local Native Americans who might have otherwise been charged higher prices. This store was the start of a major national retail chain run by the Gimbel family or relations for many years.

Gimbel's Clothing Store didn't remain in Vincennes forever. Gimbel sold the establishment in 1887 and moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where a large number of German immigrants resided. The flagship store opened in New York City in 1910 and one of the settings for the movie *The Miracle on 34th Street* takes place in a Gimbel's. When thinking of what the business would become, it is hard to imagine its humble beginnings as a small store started by an immigrant in Indiana.



Photo: Gimbel's (From SHAARD/County Survey) (Photos of the Adam Gimbel block from the Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory (IHSSI), compiled in 1995. The building burned down in 2011.)



DELAWARE COUNTY

Leon's Famous Clothing Store

Muncie, 1868 to 1899

Pillars of Muncie's Jewish community, Frank and Isabelle Leon owned and operated multiple clothing businesses, notably Leon's Famous Clothing Store. Married in 1858, the couple took an opportunity to find their own economic success in Muncie during the gas boom.

The Leons owned two of over a dozen Jewish-owned stores in Muncie's downtown retail district. Frank Leon owned the firm Leon and Metzger, which he bought in conjunction with Aaron Metzger. Started in the 1850s and purchased by Leon and Metzger in 1868, the clothing and dry goods store was an important part of the Muncie community.

Isabelle was much more involved in the family business in an official capacity than many married women at the time. Not only did she work for Leon and Metzger's, but she also served as one of the proprietors of Leon's Famous Clothing Store business prior to her retirement.

The Jewish congregation often held religious services in the Leon home before the creation of the Temple Beth El in Muncie. They were some of the town's first Jewish immigrants and were very involved in civic affairs. Frank Leon was instrumental in founding the Knights of Pythias and the Citizens' Enterprise Company, the forerunner of the Muncie Chamber of Commerce. They were prominent both socially and financially, with the newspapers commenting on the great loss of members of the community upon Frank's death in 1910 and Isabelle's death in 1904.

The buildings that housed Leon and Metzger as well as Leon's Famous Clothing no longer stand today.



Photo: Leon, Frank (Photograph of Frank Leon from "Men of Muncie," The Muncie Daily Herald, November 14, 1896)

MARSHALL COUNTY

Lauer's

Plymouth, est. 1861

One of the longest standing Jewish businesses in Indiana for much of the twentieth century was Lauer's Clothing Store.

The store was opened by brothers Meyer and Levi Lauer in 1861 as Lauer Brothers Clothing. The Lauer brothers were born in Volkerhausen, Saxony, Germany, and both immigrated originally to Cincinnati, which had a larger German and Jewish population. Meyer immigrated first, working as an apprentice in a cabinet factory, moving to Indiana two years later when Levi joined him in the United States. Like many, they started as peddlers, traveling and selling goods.

The brothers made it to Plymouth in 1858, peddling in the area, and working to open their own store, doing so in 1861. As they continued to work hard, they were able to purchase their own building by 1872, which they occupied until 1910. The Lauer family was one of twenty-five Jewish families living in Plymouth. The community never had a congregation, but they were involved and intertwined with the wider Plymouth community.

In 1910, they were able to erect a new building at 123 North Michigan Street. The Neoclassical building was two stories featuring tan brick and large storefront bays. The grand entrance was on the Garro Street side of the building and included Doric columns and limestone. In 1961 they modernized the space inside and out.

The building and business remained in the Lauer family until the business closed in the late 20th century. The space is now occupied by the Marshall County Historical Society and Museum, which moved there in 1993 and is dedicated to sharing the story of Marshall County.

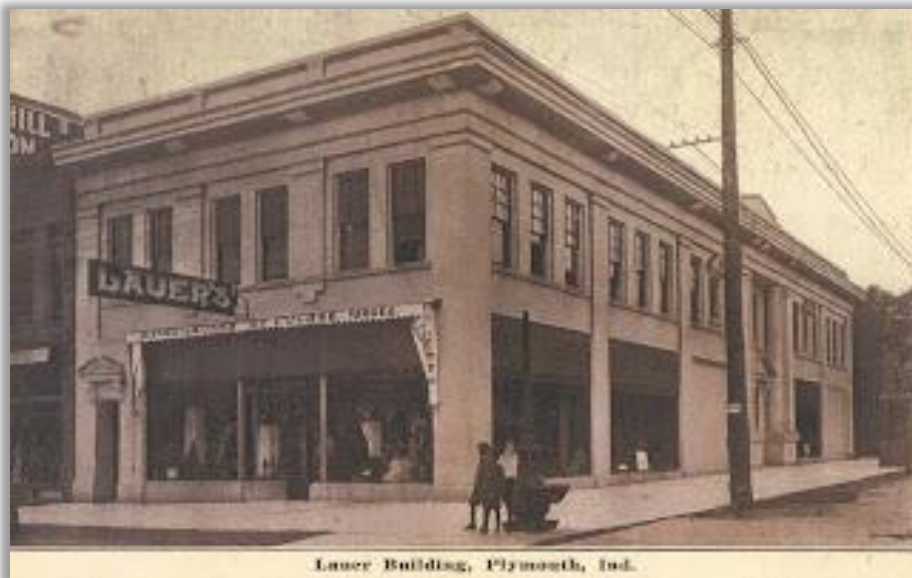


Photo: Lauer bldg (Photo courtesy of the Wythougan Valley Preservation Council))

MARION COUNTY

Strauss

Indianapolis, 1879 to 1993

Leopold Strauss, a German Jew, immigrated to the United States in 1865, choosing to make Indianapolis his home. He first worked as a clerk at the Eagle Clothing Store at 33 West Washington Street. Strauss bought the store out in 1879 to open his own clothing store.

The L. Strauss & Company store was considered one of the city's leading and most respected retailers and used fixed prices for their customers, a novelty at the time. During the store's existence, winners of the Indianapolis 500 were presented with the L. Strauss & Co. "trophy" in addition to the famed Borg-Warner trophy. This trophy was a piece of artwork sometimes commissioned specifically for that year's race or selected from existing artwork with themes centered around speed or racing.

In April 1946, the company moved to the Occidental Building at the corner of Illinois and Washington streets. The Occidental Building was built in 1914 in the Renaissance Revival style and features terra cotta cladding. The Renaissance Revival architectural style was popular during this time as many skyscrapers were constructed in downtown Indianapolis. The building was demolished in 1989 when contracts were awarded to tear down multiple commercial buildings to allow the building of the Circle Center Mall in downtown Indianapolis.



Photo: Postcard of L. Strauss & Co. (Courtesy of Indiana Album: Evan Finch Collection) (Photo of original building from 1800s)



Photos: Left - Occidental Bldg 1915 (Courtesy of Indiana Album: Evan Finch Collection) (Postcard of the Occidental Building, circa 1915); Right - Occidental Bldg 1989 (Courtesy of the Library of Congress: Historic American Buildings Survey)(Photo of building where it was housed from 1945 to 1980s)



WABASH COUNTY

Beitman & Wolf

Wabash, 1865 to 1980



Among the many Jewish businessmen in the ninetieth century in Wabash were David Beitman and Benjamin Wolf, proprietors of the Beitman and Wolf store. For generations, the store was a fixture in Wabash.

Located at 90 W. Canal Street in Wabash, the building was designed in the 19th century functional style and had later been altered in the 1970s for a modern façade and storefront.

Benjamin Wolf was born in Hochstattan, Germany, on March 14, 1842. He came to America in 1860, working as a peddler and a store clerk. He worked for a Jewish businessman, David Bach, for three years before purchasing the store from Bach in 1865. Going into partnership with Bach's nephew, David Beitman, the company sold a variety of groceries and household goods. It became exclusively a clothing store for both men and women in 1934.

The Beitman and Wolf families were active members of the community. They helped organize the Rodef Sholem Congregation in 1868 and established the accompanying cemetery. They, along with their sons, were also active in civic life in Wabash, serving as members on the board of directors for local banks and as members of the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs. Many Jewish immigrants to Wabash got their start working at the company, working as clerks in the store, just like Benjamin Wolf did.



Photo: Parade float (Courtesy of Indiana Album: Wabash County Real Photo Postcard Album Collection)

These stories are only a fraction of what members of the Jewish Community have contributed to Indiana history in retailing and beyond. As their stores lined our downtowns, from little shops to big department stores, they boosted local economies and greatly impacted those around them.

References for further reading:

"From Peddlers to Merchants" by Joseph Levine, a publication of the Indiana Jewish Historical Society.
<https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/p16797coll18/id/1635/>