

Evansville firm becomes iron giant

Tom Wyman, Editor, State Headquarters

Stylish. Easy to order by catalogue. And best of all, rock-bottom cheap.

For a profit-minded businessman building a commercial storefront in the late nineteenth century, what's not to love about a metal façade from George L. Mesker & Co.? From the 1880s until the second decade of the twentieth century, the Evansville company produced and sold an estimated 5,000 facades mounted on building fronts across the country.

Mesker's biggest market by far was the company's home state of Indiana. By 1909, the company claimed a total of 1,516 sheetmetal storefronts had been sold to Hoosier businesses. That figure eventually reached 2,000. Mesker also sold individual decorative touches made of cast iron: pilasters, cornices, window caps, ornamental cresting.

"It was a real easy way to get a very decorative front on your store building," says Dennis Au, preservation officer for the city of Evansville. Mesker's pressed metal storefronts could present the appearance of brick, stone, or concrete block, with sills and cornices bearing intricate, stylized floral motifs. The morning glory pattern was Mesker's signature design.



Laura Kennick

Pressed into service a century ago, the Mesker metal facades that line the North Vernon business district were protected by the conservative nature of the building owners. "They're not going to go ripping up something when what they've got will work," says John Warner of The Westerly Group, a consulting firm.

And did we say cheap? The 1909 catalogue offered storefront No. 8052, "a stylish combination of ornamental work and galvanized steel rock for upper front, and stamped galvanized iron columns." The price for the 18-foot-wide, two-story front: \$187.20. And, Mesker advised, "Catalogue prices subject to a liberal discount."

Prices like that were far cheaper than erecting a high-style edifice. A Mesker storefront could be quickly installed—"...any ordinary mechanic can put it up," the 1898 catalogue claimed. And while some metal façade buildings were architect-designed, many builders who ordered the facades simply dispensed with the architect, W. Knight Sturges wrote in his introduction to *The Origins of Cast Iron Architecture in America*. And so they saved still more.

A Mesker façade could do more than present a gunmetal-gray face to the street. A bit of sand added to stone-

colored paint, for instance, gave the metal surface the look of more expensive stone at a fraction of the cost. The savings and variety of choice, along with the ease of order and shipping, made Mesker facades particularly popular in small towns, where dollars often had to stretch farther.

And it's in smaller cities and towns of Indiana where many of the best examples of Mesker facades survive. Mesker storefronts may be found in Corydon, Huntington and especially North Vernon. At least 65 buildings in North Vernon's downtown are clad in metal storefronts or adorned with cast-iron ornamentation produced by Mesker, says John Warner of The Westerly Group, who's drafting the nomina-

Mesker offered the latest in architectural ornament at affordable prices. Design No. 4008 from the company's 1905 catalog (left) was advertised at \$275, including sills, columns, lintels, cornice, window caps and pediments.

tion of the North Vernon Downtown Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places. “It’s the best Mesker collection I’ve seen,” he says.

Camille Fife, president of The West-erly Group, says, “The examples in North Vernon really give a wonderful idea of the variety of pressed metal decorative work. The elements contained in some of these panels vary from the simple rosetta to more high-style design. It’s the wealth and variety that is remarkable in a small town like North Vernon.”

The railroads linking North Vernon and Evansville eased shipping of the facades. Indeed, railroads made possible the business that grew from the firm launched by John B. Mesker, a Cincinnati tinsmith who moved to Evansville after the Civil War. In 1879, his three sons—George, Frank, and Bernard—launched George L. Mesker & Co. Frank and Bernard left for St. Louis to form a competing firm, Mesker Brothers Iron Works. “These two firms set the standard and became the leading producers of cast and galvanized iron storefronts in the U.S. during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” Warner writes in the nomination.

Credit for the creation of multi-story, self-supporting metal façades goes to a New York inventor born in 1800, according to Margot Gayle and Carol Gayle in their book, *Cast-Iron Architecture in America: The Significance of*

Factory-made metal facades, including Mesker examples in Huntingburg (right and below), were forerunners of modern building practices such as prefabrication and modular construction.

James Bogardus. By the mid-nineteenth century, with demand growing for fire-resistant building materials, Bogardus had applied his skills to erecting a factory with cast-iron facades in New York City. The metal fronts soon came into vogue across a fast-growing nation hungry for cheap, ornamental, and fireproof structures.

After a long run of popularity, the facades fell victim to changing tastes as the Victorian era ebbed, and to changing costs. Newer building styles in the early twentieth century favored classical design, the Gayles—mother and daughter—wrote, “which made most cast-iron architecture seem overdecorated and overstuffed.”

George L. Mesker & Co. changed with the times, shifting to the production of large window frames for storefront plate glass windows. The company later produced structural steel and during World



War II made parts for landing ship-tanks—LSTs—vessels that ferried armor in beach invasions. The company shut its doors for good in the early 1980s.

The market for metal store facades faded nearly a century ago, but the Mesker legacy lives on in the unique style of the decorative storefronts that enliven and embellish Indiana streetscapes in the twenty-first century. With care, they’ll last well into the future. As the Gayles remind everyone, “Cast-iron architecture should be seen as one of the gifts of the nineteenth century to our own times.”

