

INTRODUCTION



The historian can give you an orderly . . . account of major social practices and general events at particular times, but only a good diary can give you the fine detail and the wondrous confusions of daily life and the feelings and momentary reflections that reveal the living reality of the period.

—William Matthews¹

You hold in your hands the diary of a young man who lived first in Cincinnati, and then in St. Louis, during the heady days when the frontier of the United States began slightly west of the Mississippi River. His record gives us a bachelor's view of antebellum urban life, with all the power that a contemporaneous account can pack.

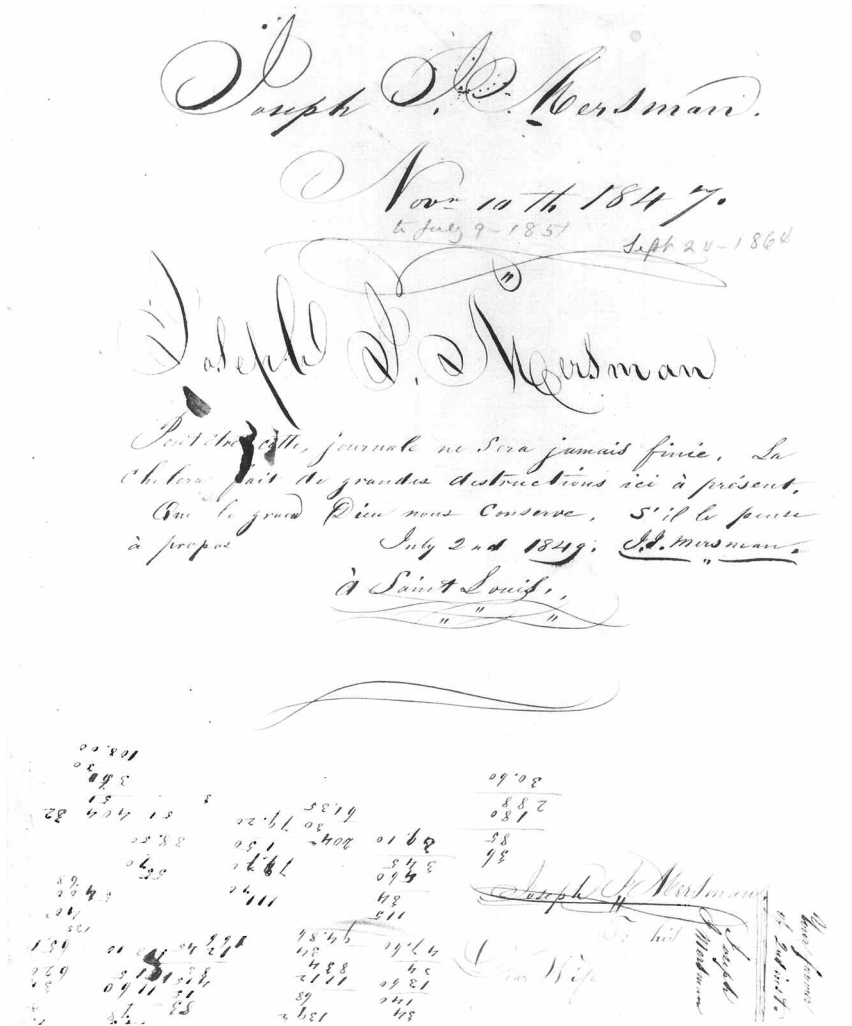
Joseph J. Mersman (1824–92), an immigrant from the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg (now part of the State of Lower Saxony in northwestern Germany), began writing in his notebook on 8 November 1847, at the age of twenty-three. Mersman reported his activities in a bound volume, small enough to fit into his coat pocket, which he called his “daily companion.”² From time to time, Mersman mentioned current events of national importance, but mostly he wrote about his own activities. Making entries as he sat in his boardinghouse at bedtime, and also when he traveled, Mersman wrote nearly every day for fifteen months while living in Cincinnati, Ohio, before relocating to St. Louis, Missouri, in February 1849. For about two years after that he added notes once a week, and from June 1851 until September 1864 he made episodic entries. Unfortunately, his record was silent during the years of the Civil War, except for two brief entries. Although he wrote most of the diary in English, Mersman recorded some (less than 10 percent) of the entries in French and German, presented here with translation.

Mersman's diary, the record of a man transforming himself from an impoverished, unschooled newcomer into a successful, skilled merchant, provides a view of the path many took in the mid-nineteenth century. From 1833 to 1843, nearly 200,000 Germans entered the United States, primarily through the ports of Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.³ Thousands traveled to Cincinnati, where the northeast quadrant of the city became an ethnic enclave. Because one reached that neighborhood by crossing the Miami and Erie Canal,⁴



Joseph J. Mersman (1824–93), c. 1850 (detail). Mersman was living in St. Louis by the time this photo was taken, and was preparing for his marriage. This is the picture of a young, successful businessman of the time. (Personal collection of Linda A. Fisher.)

which locals referred to as the “Rhine,” the entire district became known as the “Over-the-Rhine” neighborhood. Encompassing nearly one hundred city blocks, the neighborhood included churches, schools, markets, beer gardens, and theaters as well as residences.⁵ Gothic lettering on signage gave the streetscape a European look, and four German-language newspapers united the community. By the 1850 federal census, one-quarter of Cincinnati’s population had been born in German states.⁶



Frontispiece of Mersman’s diary. Mersman began his diary entries on November 8, 1847, although the frontispiece note begins it on November 10th. (Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.)

Mersman’s account—filled with work and play, eating and drinking, flirting and dancing—is an action-oriented journal with little introspection. However, several overarching themes unify the record:

Bachelor culture. Contemporaries referred to unmarried men in the nineteenth century as “rogue elephants,” because they moved about in society unfettered by responsibility.⁷ Mersman attended theater performances, patronized saloons, and danced until dawn. He documented boardinghouse experiences,



“The Soaplocks, or Bowery Boys.” Newspaper and periodical articles of the times were sarcastic about urban bachelors, referring to them as “rogue elephants” and disparaging their lifestyle. (Nicolino Calyo, c. 1840, accession number 1980.33, Collection of the New York Historical Society.)

alcohol consumption, tobacco use, and membership in fraternal organizations. He described flirtation, courtship, and eventually marriage, providing insight into gender relations during his era.⁸ The maps in this edition show the spatial relationships of residences, places of employment, and nightspots Mersman frequented.

Social networks. One-third of the residents of Mersman’s hometown, some eighteen hundred individuals, immigrated to America during the 1830s, and many settled in Cincinnati.⁹ German church services, philanthropies, singing societies (such as the *Liedertafel*), and other ethnic customs remained important to them, as the diarist notes. Mersman mentions dozens of individuals who were European transplants;¹⁰ the Annotated List of Persons, Places, and Businesses identifies most of them and cites the sources of information.

Family relationships. The interactions of three families—the Mersmans, the Nulsens, and the Creuzbauers (the kinfolk of the diarist, his business partner, and his wife)—form the centerpiece of the diary. The relatives assumed multiple roles with respect to each other—friends, business partners, and in-laws—in a manner common in immigrant communities. Mersman’s sister, Agnes Mersman Lake (1826–1907), wife of circus clown William Lake Thatcher (c. 1816–69) and later of James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok (1837–76),¹¹ is just one of the many colorful relatives who appear on the pages. This diary documents Agnes Lake’s early circus

career, filling the gaps in the historical record, where Agnes herself provided misinformation. It also reveals how other family members aided Mersman's efforts to launch his wholesale tobacco and liquor business.

Business practices. Mersman was a whiskey rectifier.¹² He describes scrambling for capital, marketing his wares, and arranging transportation for his goods. To accomplish his business objectives, he uses steamboats, omnibuses, trains, and the telegraph. His story illustrates improvements in transportation and communication, puts a face on the growth of the American middle class, and reveals how merchants confronted the challenges that faced business development.

Language skills. Mersman's knowledge of English, French, and German appears throughout the diary and influences his choice of words. His idiosyncratic capitalization, spelling, and punctuation, reproduced in this volume, capture the diarist's language skills for further study by scholars.

Disease outbreaks. Mersman describes a community-wide cholera outbreak in 1849 and again in 1853. Unlike other residents who fled to the relative safety of the countryside, he remained in St. Louis and witnessed the epidemics' impact. Mersman also recorded the treatment for syphilis that he endured. His writing exemplifies the psychological stages that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described in the twentieth century.¹³ Mersman documents his denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance—profound emotions that resonate with the feelings patients experience today.

Personal finances. Partly an expense ledger and partly a social calendar, Mersman's diary details how he used his most precious resources—time and money. Repeatedly, he berates himself for wasting either. Paid an annual salary of seven hundred dollars (the equivalent of approximately \$14,000 in 2005¹⁴) for his work as a store clerk, Mersman saved nearly 40 percent of his 1848 income so that he would have capital to start his own business the next year. By tallying Mersman's outlays for room, board, clothing, laundry, amusements, books, and other personal expenses, we see how much he valued various items. Despite his limited resources, he spent money on educational endeavors, such as flute lessons and French instruction.

Cultural assimilation. Throughout his account, Mersman reflects the national spirit of his day. Intensely patriotic, he celebrates the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans, the end of the Mexican War, and the presidential election campaign of 1848. He notes the passing of John Quincy Adams and the visit of President-elect Zachary Taylor. Eventually, he becomes the founder and president of the Fourth National Bank of St. Louis. The enthusiasm of this German American immigrant for his new homeland demonstrates how one new arrival responded to American culture and politics.

Although Mersman had a keen sense of the dramatic, he never imagined that the secrets he entrusted to paper would someday appear in published form. Since he believed that he alone would read the entries during his lifetime, he recorded potentially embarrassing information such as drunkenness, prostitution, sexually transmitted disease, and marital discord. He envisioned an audience—a very small one—that might materialize only after he had gone to his grave.

On four occasions¹⁵ Mersman wrote a last will and testament in his book, indicating that he thought his life was in peril and that he expected his relatives would read the journal after his death. However, Mersman's fears were unfounded: he died 26 March 1892, nearly twenty-seven years after making his final diary entry. By that time, he was sixty-seven years old, had been infirm for decades, and had been predeceased by his wife, Claudine; his brothers, Henry and Frank; and his older sister, Elizabeth. Of his siblings, only his younger sister, Agnes Lake, survived him.

Perhaps Mersman's heirs—his eight children—read the book, but eventually it came into the possession of John Henry Gundlach (1861–1926), a member of the Missouri Historical Society (MHS) who collected historical documents. In 1926, after Gundlach's death, his estate donated Mersman's diary to the MHS archives.¹⁶ The book lay for nearly eighty years, carefully preserved in archival storage, but seldom opened. Now, more than a century after Mersman's demise, this edition makes his diary available to individuals outside of his family and outside of St. Louis. A case study of one man's experience in America's frontier cities, Mersman's record shows modern readers how American life has evolved in one hundred fifty years. Major gaps in the diary appear after 1851, but in this edition biographical information from other sources bridges the years when the author did not add to the record. By the conclusion of this record, Joseph J. Mersman, a self-made man, had established a thriving business, a growing family, and a responsible position in the community, offering his children opportunities found only in America.

NOTES

1. Arksey, ix.
2. JJM diary, 25 September 1864.
3. Wilcox, 1:404–11; Luebke, 100, 162.
4. Constructed in 1826, the canal remained in use until 1919. Now paved over, the route is known as Central Parkway (Wimberg, 4, 70).
5. Wimberg, 84.
6. Cist (2), 45, 47.
7. Chudacoff, 21.

8. Mersman wed Claudine Creuzbauer in January 1851. Only thirty-nine diary entries out of a total of 533 (about 7 percent) were made after that date.
9. Ostendorf, 164–95.
10. Schmaul has written that they were “transplanted but not uprooted”; whole villages emigrated and reassembled on American soil.
11. Laramie County Marriage Book B: 364–65, County Clerk’s Office, Cheyenne, Wyoming.
12. Rectifying whiskey, the process of redistilling or reprocessing spirits to remove contaminants or increase the alcohol content, was a common practice in the pre-Civil War era (Carson, 66, 235–37; Monzert, 51–52, 64–68; Regan, 40–41).
13. Kübler-Ross, 38–137.
14. McCusker, 101–6.
15. JJM diary, 18 February 1849, 19 June 1849, 9 July 1851, and 28 July 1853.
16. “Accessions for July 1926,” Minutes of the Missouri Historical Society, 18 November 1925–14 December 1927 (MHS Archives).