HISTORIC • ILLINOIS

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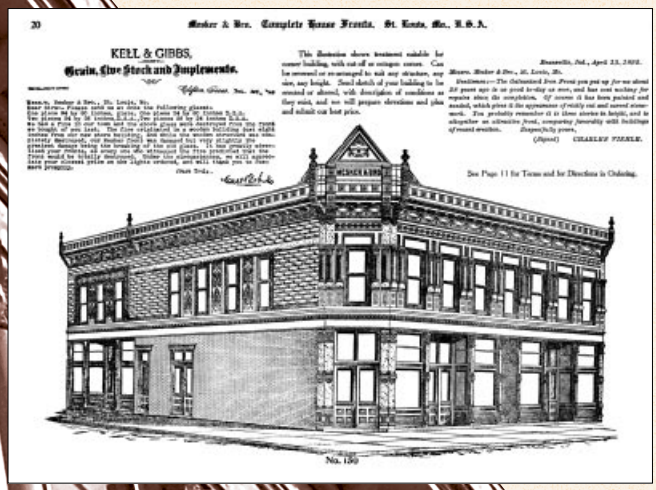
Three Brothers, Two Businesses Add up to Architecture Galore

—story on page 3

Two competing family firms manufactured a prodigious amount of stamped-metal facades and exterior architectural features that graced buildings in Illinois and around the nation. Bernard and Frank Mesker operated Mesker Brothers Iron Works in St. Louis, while their brother, George, competed with them from his Eansville, Indiana, location of George L. Mesker & Co. Both companies, established in the 1880s, continued to manufacture products well into the mid-twentieth century. Pictured here is the Hotel Mann in Virginia, Illinois, with its elaborate facade produced by the St. Louis brothers. Inset: The cover of the 1904 Mesker Brothers catalog features a versatile range of products, from milled storefronts, plate-steel columns, and ornamental sheet-metal panels, to rock-face-sheet-metal siding, elaborate cornices, and pediments.



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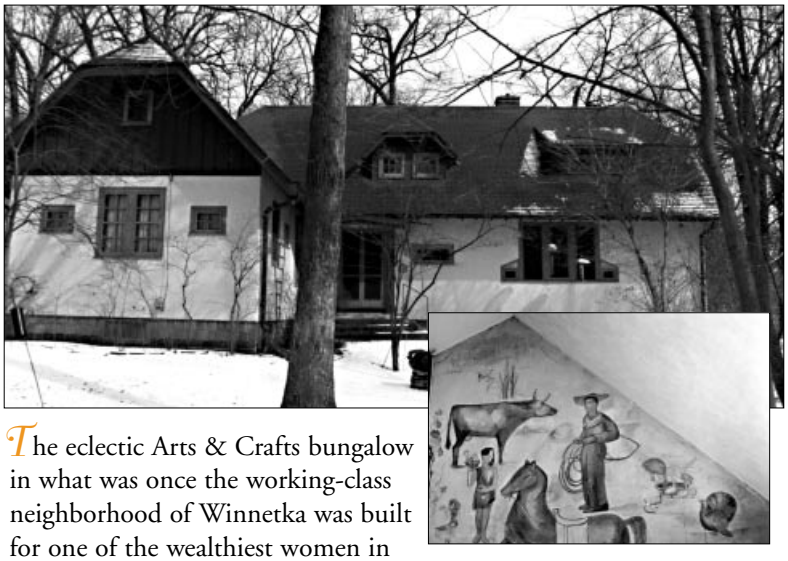


The eclectic Arts & Crafts bungalow in what was once the working-class neighborhood of Winnetka was built for one of the wealthiest women in the largely wealthy north-shore Chicago suburb. Lola Maverick Lloyd could have afforded—and at one time did live—in a much bigger house in Winnetka. Her other Winnetka home was *Wayside*, which her husband, William, inherited from his prominent parents, Henry Demarest and Jessie Bross Lloyd. Even the *Wayside* estate, though, was not a home where the wealthy family sat idle. Characterized as "an annex to Hull House," the home often provided shelter to Hull House residents.

Wayside was named a National Historic Landmark in 1966 for its association with Henry Demarest Lloyd, prominent social reform advocate. In February 2006 the modest house that Lola built on the other side of the tracks was listed in the National Register of Historic Places for its association with Lola, a tireless social activist who devoted much of her life to pursuing global peace.

Lola Maverick Lloyd left *Wayside* after a bitter (and scandalous, because it happened in 1916) divorce, settling across town in the much smaller stucco and board-and-batten-sided house built by family friend Charles Haag. A Swedish immigrant, Haag was a sculptor whose favorite medium was wood. Lola's diaries reveal that the house design was a team effort. Many of Haag's carved-wood details and custom woodwork are modeled after furnishings and fixtures commonly found in Swedish houses. Other details in the house reflect Lola's Texas roots, including a mural of her parents' *Maverick Ranch* and the installation of amber glass in the living room window that would allow the sun to stream through and simulate the "glowing light of Texas."

The home is filled with charming details at every turn, and Lloyd wanted to make it comfortable for her children, who had been accustomed to much larger quarters. But Lloyd also wanted her home to reflect her philosophy: "Too much culture, sophistication, complexity of life will drive the race insane. What to live without—that's the art."

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows chapter in St. Francisville (Lawrence County) purchased a facade that appeared in the 1909 catalog of George L. Mesker & Co. Both Mesker companies routinely included renderings and testimonials in their catalogs to showcase the popularity of their products.

Sibling Rivalry Good for Illinois Architecture

The Meskers' Sheet-Metal Businesses

A look up at the facades of old commercial buildings on Illinois main streets reveals much more than just an abundance of intricate ornamentation. The decorative features of these buildings offer insight into architectural history, providing examples of styles commonly employed in the late nineteenth century, including Renaissance, Romanesque, and Gothic revivals. The adornments also inform us of the role of changing technology in the construction industry. Although the casual observer may think that these pilasters, scrolls, pediments, brackets, dentils, and other ornaments are rendered in carved stone, carved wood, or cast metal (bronze or iron), a closer look reveals that most of them are made of galvanized sheet metal, stamped into a variety of architectural motifs. Least obvious, but perhaps more interesting, is where the facades came from.

The story of sheet-metal facades in Illinois is largely one of two competing companies. While numerous sheet-metal companies existed nationwide, two in particular dominated the Illinois landscape: Mesker Brothers Iron Works of St. Louis, Missouri, and George L. Mesker & Co. of Evansville, Indiana. Thousands of buildings from Galena to Cairo, from Nauvoo to Paris, featured products offered by the Mesker brothers' companies, which were among the largest and most famous architectural sheet-metal manufacturers. Although the two companies were owned by brothers—Bernard (1851-1936) and Frank (1861-1952) owned the St. Louis company, while brother George (1857-1936) owned the Evansville factory—they were operated independently and were in fierce competition. Collectively, the two companies produced thousands of sheet-metal building fronts, and through their catalogs they sold and distributed them all over the country. In addition to having contracts in every state, the Mesker Brothers filled contracts in Hawaii, Mexico, Canada, Cuba, and India, while George L. Mesker & Co. sold building fronts in Bermuda. Mesker Brothers company records show that during the course of twenty-three years more than 5,200 fronts were sold and shipped, while George's Evansville company had also sold thousands of "house fronts."

The T.J. Abbott Building in Golconda features facade components made by George L. Mesker & Co. The cornice, window hoods, lintel cornice, and cast-iron columns were a popular choice for many owners of "brick fronts." In the company's 1896 catalog, a nearly identical facade is listed for about $120.

The facade of the Union Block Building in Taylorville, which dates to 1887, was manufactured by Mesker Brothers Iron Works.

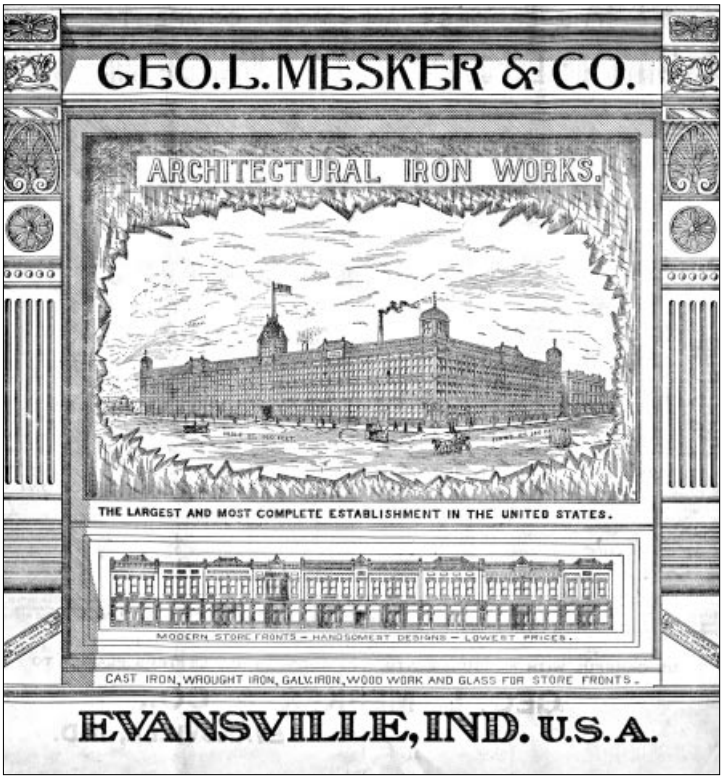
The Meskers were an enterprising family, and they understood the potential profits that could be made using the new sheet-metal technology. The use of sheet metal for architectural ornament began in the 1870s, and in the following decades it supplanted iron as the metal of choice for most architectural work. Because one of steel's advantages was that it was stronger than iron and it could be rolled and stamped into large ornamental sheets, by the end of the nineteenth century it had replaced iron for cornices, building fronts, and other architectural design features.

Galvanized sheet metal provided an economical means of architectural ornamentation. This was particularly appealing to smaller communities where professional architectural services were scarce or nonexistent. Because sheet metal was so lightweight, it was suitable for new or existing buildings of frame or masonry construction.

Sheet-metal facades were also easy to get and easy to install. The prefabricated pieces were made according to the dimensions sent in by the building owner. In addition, the sheet-metal facades and components could be ordered through catalogs and shipped to a community by rail directly from the manufacturer, eliminating the cost of a wholesaler. A local builder or even the owner, could construct the building and attach the façade assembly to it by following the manufacturer's detailed step-by-step instructions. A complete sheet-metal "front," as it was called, could be erected in as few as two days, vastly quicker than a masonry or cast-iron facade and—even more importantly—at roughly one fifth the cost.

The Mesker brothers embraced this industry-changing technology, a logical step from their father's experience in the metals. The Mesker brothers were the sons of German immigrant John Bernard Mesker (1823-1899). Settling in Cincinnati, John trained as a "tinner," a craftsman who worked with tinplate—small sheets of iron dipped in molten tin. He worked primarily for stove and tinware businesses until he struck out on his own in 1844, when he began making trips up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, providing services from a flatboat of his own construction. Three years later he co-founded Mesker and Busse, a stove manufacturer, and in 1850 he opened a store in Evansville, where he produced stoves, copper, tin, sheet-iron ware, and eventually began galvanizing iron for buildings. In 1874 John's business changed its name to J. B. Mesker & Son. The company, which flourished into the 1890s, provided a fertile training ground for John's sons, all of whom attended private and business schools to prepare for work in the family trade.

Like their father, the Mesker boys wanted to establish their own



The cover of this George L. Mesker & Co. 1896 catalog showcases examples of the company's facade work below a drawing of their factory, which the company called "the largest and most complete establishment in the United States." (Photo courtesy David Mesker)

The Three Meskers

The story of the Mesker brothers is as fascinating as that of their companies. It is clear that Bernard, being the oldest, was the leader of the group and exerted the most influence on his brothers. A man of old-fashioned values, he was the first in line for the morning paper and began each day by reading it front to back. He preferred personal contact for business meetings and refused ever to use the telephone, professing "If they want to talk to me, they know where I am." It is no wonder that Bernard (or Ben as he was called for short), through his precise bookkeeping and meticulous organization, steered the Mesker Brothers company through several business panics into financial success. It was also Ben, who upon his visit to England, foresaw the changing of architectural tastes at the turn of the twentieth century, and launched the company into steel window fabrication—a very successful move that ensured the company's stability for decades to come.

Although three of the Mesker brothers competed with each other for business, they remained on good terms as family members. Pictured here is the family gathered for Frank Mesker's wedding in St. Louis in 1903. In the photo are: (seated, left to right) George L. Mesker, Anna Schmidt, Frank Mesker, Pauline Gehner Mesker, Ben Mesker, Oscar Schmidt, and (standing, left to right) John Mesker, Albert Gehner, August Gehner, and Willamina Gehner. The boy seated on the floor is unidentified. (Photo courtesy David Mesker)

Ben's partner and younger brother Frank was quite on par with Ben in terms of business savvy. Frank appears to have handled most of the technical issues, including the company's patented inventions. An extensive traveler, his great hobby was fly-fishing, and he practiced the sport in the best known places worldwide. In 1903 he married Pauline Gehner, daughter of prominent investor Augustus Gehner. Frank's marriage later caused friction between Ben and Frank, when Frank began to withdraw more money from the company's funds to support his family. It is unclear how serious the feud was or how it was eventually resolved, but the company continued to operate successfully with the two brothers in charge. Despite causing a skirmish with his brother, Frank's marriage proved to be fruitful—he was the only of the three brothers to have children. It was his son Francis, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who operated the business after Frank's death in 1952.

Despite being competitive with his brothers, George maintained a close relationship with them, evidenced by their frequent correspondence. His own marriage years later proved to be somewhat of a scandal. In 1913, at the age of fifty-six, George married Elizabeth Diana MacEachen, the eighteen-year-old daughter of mining engineer Neil MacEachen. Three years later, he and his wife left Evansville and moved to New York. Although a millionaire and a known philanthropist, George appears to have lived modestly while in Evansville. In fact, the entire Mesker family, along with father John Bernard Mesker, lived in the same household, as did Ben and Frank in St. Louis until Frank's marriage. After he married, however, George began spending more freely, mostly to support the lavish tastes of his young wife. He even commissioned architect Addison Mizner to design a house in Palm Beach, Florida. La Fontana, named for the marble patio fountain with life-sized sculptures, was designed around Mrs. Mesker's collection of Italian paintings and furnishings.

The three brothers were the most successful of a large Mesker family, which included four additional brothers and two sisters. Imprinting themselves into architectural history, however, was never their goal. They simply wanted to earn a living.

Darius Bryjka

businesses. In 1876 John Mesker and his oldest son, Bernard, formed a partnership with J. B. Buehner, a chair manufacturer, under the name Buehner, Mesker & Company, with Bernard in charge of the Mesker interests in the venture. In 1879, however, a restless Bernard left Evansville, lured by the prospect of striking silver in Colorado. He sold his interest in the chair manufacturing company and headed west, stopping in St. Louis to visit his brother Frank. Discussions with Frank led Bernard to a change of heart, and he decided that the sheet-metal industry would provide a more stable and more lucrative business venture than silver prospecting. Together, Bernard and Frank established the firm of Mesker and Brother (also known as Mesker Brothers Iron Works). One of the firm's earliest commissions was a sheet-metal project for the Crow Memorial Building (1879-1881), designed by the prominent Boston architectural firm of Peabody & Stearns. Still Mesker and Brother was virtually unknown until 1883, when the company was awarded a contract for metal work on the St. Louis Exposition and Music Hall building. The heyday of the company's facade work spanned from the mid-1880s to about 1910, after which the firm concentrated on metal windows and related building elements. During World War I, the company also produced large quantities of ranges and bread ovens for the U.S. and Allied governments. Frank became president of the company after Bernard's death in 1936, and during World War II, Mesker Brothers produced airplane landing mats, fragmentation bombs, ammunition lockers, and oil and water tanks for submarine chasers. When Frank died in 1952, his sons and grandsons took over the company and held it until the mid-1960s. Though it passed out of Mesker hands, it continued to operate under the Mesker name in St. Louis until the 1980s, when it moved to Huntsville, Alabama, where, as Mesker Door, Inc., it manufactures steel doors and frames.

Mesker company nameplates were either molded into the bases of columns or bolted on as a plate.

While Bernard and Frank were building their St. Louis business, their brother George continued to work for their father in Evansville as a bookkeeper and ironworker at J. B. Mesker & Son. In 1880 he was named partner and he headed his father's firm with another brother, John Henry Mesker (1855-1898). It was during this phase of George's increased involvement that the company received several important commissions. Among these was a contract for the iron, zinc, and tin work for the Cloud State Bank in McLeansboro, Illinois. Designed by the architecture firm of Reid & Reid of Evansville, the building was completed in 1881. It features an exuberant array of architectural motifs, including several cornices and a square mansard roof covered with tin. The building's crowning element is a "bull's eye" tower covered with zinc shingles and topped with wrought-iron work. Adjacent to the bank, the Cloud family constructed another Reid & Reid design—the McCoy Memorial Library—which also features sheet-

Ornamentation provided by the Mesker Brothers Iron Works lends character to this otherwise simple structure in Belleville's business district.

metal cornices and decorative ironwork, likely made by J. B. Mesker & Son.

Despite the success of his father's business, George had ambitions of his own. While the exact date of his departure from J. B. Mesker & Son is unclear, in 1885 George established his own company, George L. Mesker & Company, eventually building it into the country's largest architectural ironworks. It appears that in order to avoid competition among the Evansville family businesses, each company chose a specialized niche within the sheet-metal and iron market. J. B. Mesker and his son Edward (1860-1898) focused on stove and range manufacture, while John Henry Mesker, who established his own business in 1883, dealt in iron fences, railings, and similar building components. The architectural sheet-metal and iron work became George's specialty. Starting with local commissions, George soon began receiving orders from other nearby towns such as Henderson, Kentucky. Taking a page from his brothers in St. Louis, he eventually began sending out catalogs and similarly garnered a nationwide clientele. Unlike its St. Louis competitor, the Evansville foundry continued to sell large numbers of building fronts into the 1910s, capitalizing on both the economic resurgence that followed the Panic of 1907 and the decreased competition from the St. Louis Mesker firm. From 1908 to 1913 George L. Mesker & Co. sold almost as many fronts as during the previous twenty-three years of operation. In the 1920s the company sold storefronts as well as structural steel components, including roof trusses. Mesker often worked with other manufacturers to offer a complete line of metal building products. Despite remaining the company's titular head until his death in 1936, George Mesker departed Evansville in 1916 never to return, leaving the running of the company to business manager Henry Koch. During World War II, George L. Mesker & Co. secured numerous government contracts. After several years of financial decline, the company was sold in 1974 to the Fabsteel Company, a structural steel fabricator for the petrochemical industry. The Evansville foundry closed in 1981 after ninety-six years of operation.

The business of both firms was based on mail-order sales, but the St. Louis Mesker Brothers in particular realized the full potential of the catalog as a sales tool. Spurred by the Panic of 1884 and strong local competition, the brothers traveled to the East Coast with the idea of relocating. In Washington, D.C., they discovered a mail-order architectural metalworks company that was going out of business. The brothers reused that company's trade catalogs, which featured virtually the same products that Mesker Brothers produced. Frank and Bernard simply replaced the covers of the already printed catalogs and mailed about 1,500. Surprised by the amount of orders received, they increased the catalog mailing number to 5,000, then to 50,000, and afterwards to half a mil-

The cast-iron columns and upper-story ornamental panels, as well as milled wooden storefront, were provided by George L. Mesker & Co. and adorn this otherwise basic two-story structure in Crossville (White County).

The elaborate cornice on the Tunnell Building in Edwardsville is a product of Mesker Brothers Iron Works in St. Louis.

lion per year. Both firms' handsomely designed catalogs sought to impress would-be customers with the quality of their products. Mesker building fronts also alleviated the need for an architect, designer, or skilled craftsman, since the only aesthetic decision a building owner needed to make involved selecting an engraving from the catalog. The two Mesker companies also provided renderings based on rough sketches with dimensions sent in by potential customers. Their extensive product lines ranged from sheets of galvanized steel to entire storefront assemblies. They sold cornices, window hoods, and columns, as well as stairs, elevators, skylights, steel roofing, and stamped steel ceilings. They also offered wooden millwork and glass for storefronts. Their customers could put together any combination of stock elements that they wished or take advantage of preselected packages. Custom work was also available, but naturally it was more expensive than stock designs. Combined with efficient production, this marketing strategy allowed the companies to become the leaders of the industry.

Despite the popularity of their cast-iron offerings, the companies' primary architectural products were upper story facades of sheet-metal, which were affordable, elegant, fireproof, and easily installed. Though available elsewhere as early as 1872, it wasn't until the 1880s that these "fronts" seriously competed with the more established but more expensive cast-iron facades. Cast-iron storefronts, on the other hand, always were popular, so the Meskers offered both materials in combination. A cast-iron storefront would often accompany galvanized sheet metal components on the upper story. The wear and tear of street activity demanded the sturdiness of cast iron on the ground floor, but at the upper levels, sheet-metal was lighter, easier to use, and cheaper.

The galvanized steel sheets were stamped into a variety of architectural motifs that were a fusion of late-nineteenth-century popular architectural styles, the Classical Revival style as the dominating influence. As evidenced by the catalogs, the stock designs of both companies did not change very much over the quarter century of production. Through the years, the companies tended to employ several design motifs that were repeated throughout the various facade components. George L. Mesker fronts often featured a stylized "morning glory" motif, while the Mesker Brothers fronts utilized the "fleur-de-lis," a nod to the early French heritage of St. Louis.

Both Mesker companies routinely included embossed nameplates on their storefronts, a method practiced by foundries nationwide. Over the years, the nameplates appeared in several designs, which were either molded into the bases of columns or bolted on as a plate. Unfortunately, they do not always survive, making identification more challenging.

The designs and elements offered by Mesker Brothers are believed to have been designed by Bernard Mesker, who concentrated on the design side of business. Bernard loved to travel and was likely exposed to various styles of architecture worldwide. In addition, he owned dozens of books on Classical architecture, which served as a basis for many of his designs. His brother, Frank, on

the other hand, traveled mostly for business and supervised the company's sales. He was not ignorant of design principals, though, having previously worked as a draftsman in the office of St. Louis architect J. B. Legg. A graduate of Kliner's Commercial College in 1876, Frank also gained valuable experience as a bookkeeper and estimator for Huzzell and Cozzens, a sheet-metal firm in St. Louis, prior to going into business with his brother. It is unknown at this point who designed the ornaments for George L. Mesker & Company.

Always ahead of the competition, Mesker Brothers Iron Works invented and patented various improvements to architectural sheet-metal work. Of the company's 62 patents, 44 were issued between 1887 and 1892, demonstrating the St. Louis company's commitment to becoming the leader in the sheet-metal-front business. Perhaps the company's most important patents are for metal building fronts that focus on providing speedy and economic construction of elements of various dimensions. Other significant patents relate to several versions of a steel column, which since its introduction in 1888 began replacing its cast-iron counterparts. Weighing considerably less than cast-iron, steel also cost less to ship, was easier to handle, and provided a smooth and even surface and a greater carrying capacity. Mesker Brothers clearly favored the steel column, and by 1894 the company no longer offered cast-iron columns.

In contrast, George L. Mesker & Company held no patents for sheet-metal production. The company sold only cast-iron columns, claiming that they were superior to those made of steel or sheet iron. But the real reason for not using steel columns may have been that the patents were held by the family competitors in St. Louis.

While both companies distributed their products nationally, their records and catalogs indicate that Illinois was one of the largest beneficiaries of Mesker products. Perhaps Illinois has so many of both companies' products because it lies directly between the two foundries, making it a fertile ground for competition, offers, and counteroffers. The abundance of surviving Mesker facades is a testament to the companies' impact on the architectural fabric of Illinois communities, more so than any other sheet-metal or ironworks establishment. The endurance of the Mesker facades also demonstrates both companies' commitment to quality, and with proper maintenance, there is no reason why these galvanized sheet-metal fronts and cornices should not last for generations longer.

Darius Bryjka
Project Designer, Preservation Services Division

Got Mesker?

While not the first to manufacture sheet-metal fronts or utilize mail-order sales, the Mesker companies did both on an unprecedented scale. Through their products, they infused architectural ornament into towns where it was scarce or did not previously exist. In many cases a building with a Mesker front was and remains among the most ornamental and identifiable structures in a community. Nearly three hundred such buildings have already been identified in 135 towns across the state. However, there are hundreds still to be documented. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency is maintaining a database of the structures, with hopes of statewide and perhaps national recognition of their significance. Do you think you have Mesker fronts in your town? For more information, including an illustrated identification guide, current database, and 1904 companies' catalogs, please visit www.gotmesker.com.

Darius Bryjka

ERRATA

page 3, right column, line 9
Change **1861** to **1859**
There are conflicting accounts of Frank Mesker's birth date. His gravestone at the Gehner Mausoleum, Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis, as well as the Mesker family gravestone at the St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery in Evansville, Indiana, both give 1859 as the year of his birth. In contrast, his biography in the National Encyclopedia of American Biography claims that he was born in 1861. The year 1859 is believed to be the correct one.

page 5, photo caption, line 5
Change **Oscar** to **F. Joseph**

page 5, photo caption, line 7
Change **unidentified** to **Oscar Schmidt (son of Anna & F. Joseph Schmidt)**