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STATE OF INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES INDIANA HISTORIC SITES AND STRUCTURES INVENTORY

Additional Architectural Information

A. NAME Wit	tmer Building
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C. NUMBER

82-196-00013

B. ADDRESS 609 Main Street

D. UTM References 1,6 45,00,50 4,20,27,50

E. The arrival of Fred J. Wittmer to Evansville in the mid-1860's was typical of the first wave of German immigration which began with Germany's unrest of the 1840's and continued through America's immediate post-Civil War period. Wittmer first settled in Mount Vernon, Indiana, a river town southwest of Evansville near the confluence of the Ohio and Wabash Rivers. Mount Vernon, as well as most other 19th century river cities, attracted German immigrants through a nearly continuous program of publications and boosterism. Free-thinking Germans fleeing the unpleasantness of mid-century Germany were much sought after by expansion-minded cities for their industriousness.

Wittmer fit the profile characteristic of the first-wave Germans. He was a skilled artisan (boot and shoe making), Lutheran, and entrepreneurial. Wittmer and his cohort of mid-century immigrants tended to become small businessmen, at least, or captains of local industries. The later major wave of German immigration tended to be characterized in Evansville by blue-collar, laboring class Catholics.

Wittmer's ethnic enterprise found expression immediately. At the age of 20, Wittmer established himself as a shoemaker. Just five years later, in 1873, Wittmer and a partner (Philipp Wittmer; relation unknown) purchased the property at 609 Main Street. Wittmer operated out of the former saloon building as a manufacturing shoemaker until about 1884, when he branched out into retail sales. This evolution from manufacturing to retailing was evidence of the increasing stratification of the local commercial scene at the end of the 19th century. By 1892, the year that Wittmer took out a building permit (and mortgage with the Central Trust and Savings Bank), he was well on his way to becoming one of the city's most fashionable shoe retailers ("dealer in ladies and gents boots and shoes"). Wittmer continued to operate out of his newly renovated quarters (he and his family of five lived upstairs) until his death at the age of 52 in 1900.

The building which Wittmer renovated in 1892--and which is so well preserved today--is a rare remaining example of Downtown Evansville's metal-front commercial architecture. The city had several foundries producing architectural metal work as early as mid-century. One of the greatest local names associated with architectural metalwork was the George L. Mesker Company, a manufacturer and distributor whose galvanized store fronts found their way throughout North America in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Regrettably, the Wittmer storefront (along with the front at 325-27 Southeast Eighth Street, #59, 82-196-0296) is a rare extant example of this Evansville phenomenon--most others, particularly on the riverfront, were demolished for surface parking or urban renewal projects.

G. PREPARED BY

Douglas L Stern

H. DATE 07 December 1982(Amended)