

HIDDEN CLASSICAL:

An Indianapolis Landmark with Musical Roots

by Crystal Hammon



Every city has a forgotten history, a collection of places people walk or drive past regularly without much thought for their origins. In Indianapolis, one of those oft-ignored sites is a 147-year-old façade on the east side of Circle Centre on Meridian Street.

The façade once covered the Vajen Building, constructed at 120 North Pennsylvania in 1872 by John Vajen. It is historically significant because it is one of the best (and perhaps the only) local examples of 19th century, American cast-iron architecture, and also for its connection to the city's musical heritage. The façade's musical legacy was left by one of the building's former occupants, the Wilking Music Company, an Indianapolis icon for at least five decades.

Saved by the Indiana Landmark Foundation in 1980 when American Fletcher National Bank demolished the Vajen Building to construct the skyscraper that is now home to Salesforce, the façade was purchased for an estimated \$41,000. It was carefully dismantled from the building and stored at the abandoned Central State Hospital until the early 1990s when the city began construction of Circle Centre. Prior to construction, negotiations went back and forth as preservationists sought to keep historic buildings near Circle Centre.

Those efforts not only protected landmarks like St. Elmo's Steak House and the former Canterbury Hotel; they also preserved character in downtown Indianapolis, convincing developers, architects and city leaders to integrate a retrofitted version of the Wilking Music Company façade (and others) into the mall's exterior.

Preserving a historic facade was considered a win at the time, but it isn't a preferred strategy by today's preservation standards. That's because a façade can never quite touch what happens inside a building, according to Mark Dollase, vice president of preservation services

at Indiana Landmark Foundation. "The history of a building takes place in more than just the façade," he says. "It occurs through the good times and the wonderful interchange between people who live, worship and interact with each other throughout a place."

The birth of a musical paragon

The spaces where Wilking Music Company did business are textbook examples of Dollase's point. Frank Wilking founded the store in 1922 with his brother, Forrest, as a partner. Before that, Frank attended Shortridge High School, and at the age of 17, revealed his entrepreneurial spirit by opening a record shop.

He later studied at Valparaiso University, the University of Michigan and the Metropolitan School of Music, where he majored in piano. (The Metropolitan School of Music was purchased by Arthur Jordan in 1928 and merged with the Indiana College of Music and Fine Arts to form the Arthur Jordan Conservatory of Music, later affiliated with Butler University.)

Photo credit: Indiana Landmarks



After college, Frank Wilking taught piano and became a salesman at the Pearson Piano Company, later known as Pearson Music Company. Wilking left the company started Wilking Music Company with his brother in a small storefront at 211 Massachusetts Avenue — essentially one room. They quickly outgrew the space, and in 1924, moved to a bigger location ➤



Photo by Richard Landwehr

in the 100 block of East Ohio Street. Forrest Wilking left the company in 1930 and founded the Marion Music Company, which he ran until his retirement in 1967.

On his own, Frank must have prospered because in 1932, it appears that he and his wife, Julia, built a quaint, Old-English style home at 5724 Wildwood Avenue. An article in the Indianapolis Star gushes about the home and its unique wooded setting: “No matter from what angle the dwelling is viewed,” the Indianapolis Star reported, “beauty is found.”

The Ohio Street address was Wilking’s main business location until at least 1946, when the store secured a 10-year lease of the Vajen Building, which occupied 114 to 126 North Pennsylvania Avenue. It offered 52,000 square feet of floor space, making Wilking Music Company one of the largest music centers in the country at the time.

A January 1946 edition of *Music Trade Review* covered the store’s new Pennsylvania Street location and revealed Wilking’s plans to include his son Frank R. Wilking in the business upon his return to civilian life after World War II. The Wilking family also planned to make room for an art salon to display work from prominent Indiana artists.

Curiously, the new space was only a few steps from his former employer, Pearson Music Company at 128 North Pennsylvania. Pearson sold pianos and other musical instruments

side-by-side with household furniture until 1945 — a business decision related to the shortage of pianos beginning in the 1930s.

Wilking documented the shortage in a story published in a 1937, full-page advertisement in the Indianapolis Star — a regular feature in local newspapers for decades. The headline read, “Great Boom Felt In Piano Industry.” Manufacturers were running at full capacity to keep up with the demand for pianos. The article attributed increased demand to the influence of radio, which gave Americans a greater appreciation for music and created what Wilking called, “a musical renaissance.”

Manufacturers also began making compact pianos and organs that easily fit in small homes. “That people are buying pianos isn’t news,” he wrote. “And hasn’t been for the past two years, when the industry started to breathe again following the depression.”

Raconteurs of the Indianapolis music scene

Regular newspaper content made Wilking Music Store a juggernaut within the city’s music community. In fact, the pages were dedicated, “to the Music-Loving Public.” For anyone interested in music or music education, the Wilking page was a comprehensive guide. It published a calendar of local recitals and concerts, many of which happened in the store’s auditorium. Wilking also brought nationally-known musicians to teach master classes

for musicians and hosted train-the-trainer workshops for area piano and organ teachers.

The store was a lively place where celebrities and nationally-known musicians performed and taught. In November of 1946, Hoagy Carmichael was there, greeting fans and autographing copies of his recordings and his first book *The Stardust Road*.

A maverick in the music industry

Wilking wrote several manuals that taught his innovative method of piano instruction as well as sales manuals that were distributed nationally to train piano sales staff. He is also credited with directing one of the first performances of its kind — the mass piano concert.

In fact, he conducted the world's largest such concert at the 1939 New York World's Fair, employing 150 pianos and over 1500 performers. He came to prominence in 1935 after founding and directing similar events in Detroit and Indianapolis. Locally, those festivals were presented at Butler University and the Indiana State Fairground Coliseum.

Life, *Fortune* and *Time* magazines reported on the World's Fair event, but details are sketchy. One can only imagine that the performances were an extraordinary spectacle with hundreds of musicians playing simultaneously as an orchestra of grand pianos. The Indianapolis News reported that eight weeks ahead of the third annual event at Butler University's fieldhouse in May of 1938, Wilking had been rehearsing pianists (in groups of 100) drawn from 40 cities.

Wilking was also an accomplished composer, writing music for several movies as well as the operetta, *Gypsyana*, which was performed at the English Hotel and Opera House on Monument Circle. The Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and other American orchestras also performed Wilking compositions.

The Steinway connection

The Wilking Music Company became a Steinway dealer in 1936 — most likely Steinway's exclusive dealer in the area — and the Wilkings maintained a friendly relationship with the Steinway family. In 1954 Wilking and his wife hosted Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Steinway for a reception at the Columbia Club, where Wilking was a member and leader. At the time, Mr. Steinway was president of Steinway & Sons.

The Steinways were in town for the Steinway Centennial Concerts played by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra at the Murat. The ISO's conductor, Fabien Sevitzyk, presented Mr. Steinway with the manuscripts of four original symphonic works, composed as a tribute to Steinway's 100th anniversary.

The Steinways purchased Wilking Music Company in 1960, and Wilking remained president until his retirement in 1965, when Charles Steinway took the helm.

After the downtown location was demolished in 1980, the company was sold to Kimball International, which ran it until 1995.

Frank Wilking's enduring legacy

As a musician and businessman, Frank Wilking led a remarkably productive life — one that had a lasting influence in Indianapolis and beyond.

In the music industry, he held leadership roles with the American Music Conference, the National Association of Music Merchants, and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra as well as Florida's Fort Lauderdale Symphony Orchestra Society. In addition to authoring sales and instructional manuals, Wilking had also written a novel, *Military Park*, and was working on another at the time of his death in 1970 at the age of 76. ■

NOTE gratefully acknowledges HistoricIndianapolis.com for publishing a post that inspired this story.



Frank O. Wilking, 1929. The Berzman Collection, Indiana Historical Society.