

Reitz or Wrong:

An Industrial, Environmental, and Cultural Analysis of Evansville's "Lumber Baron"

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For nearly two centuries, the history of Evansville, Indiana has existed without recognizing some of the key factors responsible for the city's famed past. The commonly accepted history of Evansville, the state's third-largest city, conveys valiant tales of industrialization, transportation, and successful entrepreneurs who overcame insurmountable odds and left everlasting impressions on the people of the region. While the once-prosperous city held national recognition and participated heavily in transatlantic and transcontinental trade, Evansville's historical significance has diminished over the course of the twentieth century. What were once bustling factories, streams clogged with shipments of imported timber, and railways packed with the products of Evansville's various industries, now stand as vacant remnants, empty lots, or repurposed structures now housing upscale restaurants or offices that draw little attention or recognition of historical significance from the modern passerby.

Although the physical remnants of the city's storied, commercial growth have nearly vanished, the legacies left by leading industrialists have continued to shape Evansville's historical memory. Influenced by various works of local history published from the middle of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, public memory of the region has celebrated these prominent figures, through the creation of festivals and scholarships, or the dedication of municipal spaces. These tributes, however, have played a significant role in the omission of crucial features in the story of Evansville and have perpetuated the existence of incomplete narratives, specifically that of the natural world. Reexamining the portrayal of such social elites and their influence in this transformative era of the city's past reveals that amidst economic prosperity and political victory, environmental degradation resulted from these actors.

No singular figure in Evansville can better represent this forgotten aspect of the region's history than John Augustus Reitz. One of the city's most influential community leaders, Reitz

earned wealth and local fame through his involvement in community boards, political positions, railroad construction, and most importantly, the lumber industry. Reitz's sawmill, John A. Reitz & Sons, would become the largest manufacturer of lumber in Evansville, during an era when the city was widely known as the national leader in hardwood lumber production. Due to Reitz's impact, along with others', the successful men of Evansville's past are celebrated and permanently remembered for bringing prosperity to the city and surrounding region, yet little to no attention has yet been brought to the natural destruction that this industrial growth contributed to. The Reitz family and Evansville historians have played significant roles in shaping how local history would be remembered. Through their works, local historians highlight the fame of prominent businessmen, emphasizing their success and philanthropic works, while overlooking the impact they had on the natural environment; for Reitz specifically, this correlates to the physical changes his lumber interests contributed to in surrounding forests. The consequences of these incomplete historical works have led to a disconnect of historical relationships that exist between the human actors of Evansville's past and the environment, as well as a failure to address any implications that exist as a direct result of the city's industrial practices.

This research relies upon existing histories of Evansville from the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century to map the accepted historical narrative and highlight consistencies or contradictions throughout the literature. These historical works serve to walk readers through a chronological tale of Evansville's past, emphasizing significant players and events as the authors deem necessary and important. Additionally, more contemporary research such as historical analyses written in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, scientific studies, and other works under newer factions of historical study serve to aid in the examination of historical portrayal. Since the backbone of the work revolves around the impact

of Reitz's lumber endeavors, the argument follows the tenets accepted by a broader community of environmental historians. However, beyond using these tenets to introduce an overlooked perspective into the narrative of Evansville's industrial history, this theoretical approach has opened the work to more expansive ideas of challenging accepted beliefs and legacies that exist in the public memory.

Due to Reitz's impact, along with that of other local elites, the wealthy men of Evansville's past are celebrated and permanently remembered for bringing prosperity to the city and surrounding region, yet little to no attention has been brought to the natural destruction that this famed industrial growth contributed to or these actors' relationships with and views of the working class people whom they needed to achieve such success. The Reitz children and early Evansville historians have played significant roles in the drama of framing legacy and historical memory. Through their publications, local historians highlight the fame of prominent businessmen, emphasizing their success and philanthropic works, while overlooking the impact they had on the natural environment (for Reitz specifically, this correlates to the physical changes his lumber interests contributed to in surrounding forests) and the public stances they held on prominent concerns facing the regional populace. The consequences of these incomplete historical works have led to a disconnect of relationships that exist between the human actors of Evansville's past and the environmental or social injustices, as well as a failure to address any contemporary implications that exist as a direct result of the city's industrial reliance.

To examine the human and environmental connections that exist in the history of Evansville, the language and content of various local histories must be compared. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, local histories began to culminate in the early founding and industrial

development of the region. Early Evansville historians, such as Frank Gilbert¹ and Joseph Elliott,² showed interest in retelling the story of the region's first settlers, recounting the hardships these people faced and the potential they saw in the land. A work published by Brant & Fuller of Madison, Wisconsin in 1889 focuses heavily on Evansville's success in mastering the natural environment surrounding it, by providing statistics and examples of its "boundless energies and limitless resources."³ The way in which these resources are discussed, however, changes over the course of continued publication of Evansville local histories. In the most recent local history consulted for this work, James Morlock introduces how the land and its natural resources played a significant role in attracting early settlers, and later prosperous industrial opportunists.⁴ Morlock's work signifies a shift from the previous histories which places a heavy focus on how the human players profited from their abundant resources to the initial steps of examining nature's influence on human activity in the region.

In their works, these historians, along with other authors and journalists of their era, include detailed accounts of people who refer to as leaders in the community.⁵ Specifically, for John Augustus Reitz language such as "public-spirited," "fearless," and "enterprising" appear continuously throughout the biographical sections of these works.⁶ Showing his mastery of industrial ideologies and his philanthropic efforts, these historians have further cemented a legacy of Reitz that overlooks the more technical details of his most profitable business in

¹ Frank M. Gilbert. *History of the City of Evansville and Vanderburg County, Indiana*. Chicago, IL: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1910.

² Joseph P. Elliott. *A History of Evansville and Vanderburgh County, Indiana: A Complete and Concise Account from the Earliest Times to the Present, Embracing Reminiscences of the Pioneers and Biographical Sketches of the Men Who Have Been Leaders in Commercial and Other Enterprises*. Evansville, IN: Keller Print Co, 1897.

³ *History of Vanderburgh County, IN*. Madison, WI: Brant & Fuller, 1889. p. 94

⁴ James E. Morlock. *The Evansville Story: A Cultural Interpretation*. 1956.

⁵ The most extensive local histories include biographical accounts of the lives of Evansville's elite, wealthy industrialists and business owners from the mid to late nineteenth century.

⁶ Elliott, p. 368-369.

lumber and how his livelihood altered the natural environment. Revisiting the framework of these local histories and the stories they intend to tell is crucial for understanding how the existence, influence, and destruction of the natural world have been overlooked and further embedded within the Evansville's pride in its leading entrepreneurs and industrial growth.

According to local historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what allowed Evansville, a relatively small settlement on the banks of the Ohio River, to develop into a significant national, and international, port for hardwood lumber resided in the diligent work of Evansville's leading businessmen. However, these industrialists achieved success, especially John A. Reitz, at the expense of the natural resources present during Evansville's initial founding and industrial growth. Morlock has come the closest to understanding the natural environment's importance in Evansville's industrial success in his work published in 1956. Here, he dares to venture where earlier historians had failed to, stating that:

There are six important factors, all somewhat inter-related, which were responsible for this growth: 1. The topography and natural resources of the surrounding area; 2. The promise of the Wabash and Erie Canal; 3. The attraction of skilled workers; 4. The accumulation of capital resources; 5. The rapid increase in the use of tools and machines, and; 6. The sound leadership that was attracted to the growing town.⁷

While the list of factors includes some direct references to the natural environment of the region, which differs from local histories published in the previous century, it continues to show emphasis at the end of the list, as well as throughout the rest of the work, to the industrialists that brought wealth to the city.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the city of Evansville led the United States in hardwood lumber manufacturing. Within this prosperous time frame, several prominent families rose through the social ranks of the community because of their involvement in the local

⁷ Morlock, p. 52

lumber industry. John Augustus Reitz, once coined the “lumber baron of the Midwest,” owned and operated one of the most successful sawmills in the area, John A. Reitz & Sons. This mill, from the years 1883 to 1893, was the greatest manufacturer of hardwood lumber in Evansville, making Reitz the owner of the leading lumber manufacturer in the United States at the time.⁸ Evansville’s lumber industry saw extreme growth at the beginning of the 1840s. An increasing national focus on railroads and Evansville’s unique geographic position provided an ideal atmosphere for trade and rail commerce.⁹ Several important railroad projects arose with the help of influential, wealthy figures, including Reitz. John A. Reitz became the president of the Evansville, Carmi, and Paducah railroad company, and was heavily involved in another rail project running from Evansville to Nashville, Tennessee.¹⁰ These rails allowed Evansville to become a significant center for manufacturing. The city was considered “the southern terminal” for the Evansville and Crawfordsville Railroad specifically, which “played no small part” during the North-South trade prior to the Civil War.¹¹ This trade helped boost the demand for lumber which increased even decades after the war was over.

During the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, southern states struggled economically, and “to a large portion of the South, Evansville was the most convenient depot for supplies.”¹² Business grew tremendously, inspiring many men in the region to make their names in this line of work. The lumber industry employed “Dealers in Lumber, Sash and Blind Manufacturers, and Contractors and Builders, as well as Manufacturers of Furniture, Chairs, Wagons, etc.,” however, the sawmills not only brought more commercial attention to the region

⁸ Elliott, p. 370

⁹ Additionally, Evansville was referred to as “the gateway to the south, being farther south than any principal city in the northern states.” [*The Book of Evansville, Illustrated*. Evansville, IN: Unigraphic, Inc., 1978. p. 3. Willard Library Special Collections (Hereafter WLSC)]

¹⁰ Gilbert, p. 13

¹¹ Louis P. Benezet. *1850-1950 One Hundred Years*. p. 28. RHMC.

¹² Brant & Fuller, p. 134

but also supplied these other sectors with necessary materials.¹³ John Reitz & Sons was not the first nor last of Evansville's lumber mills to appear in this time period. The region surrounding the city, "within 100 miles" in every direction, offered immensely dense forests which "had just about all varieties of woods."¹⁴ Evansville's geographic location provided "accessibility to the immense lumber region of Indiana, Kentucky and the tributary sections."¹⁵ Reitz and other leading lumbermen saw these forests as natural assets for an industry that seemed to promise success. According to Morlock, the capital resources obtained by the industrialists of this era could only be made possible by the natural resources present.¹⁶

The products of Evansville's lumber industry traveled to far-reaching places, contributing to the city's national and international recognition. John Reitz & Sons typically sold its lumber to "Indianapolis, Chicago, and other cities in the North."¹⁷ For other lumber manufacturers, however, the majority of the industry's output was shipped to Southern states, and occasionally to European nations.¹⁸ These products took various forms as well. Some external companies purchased the sawed lumber for rail car manufacturing, which was especially beneficial for Evansville's growing railroads, while other boards were sent to furniture factories across the United States, and other craftsmen in Germany and England.¹⁹

¹³ Charles E. Robert. *Evansville, Her Commerce and Manufactures: A Descriptive Work of the Business Metropolis of Indiana*. Evansville, IN: Courier Company, 1874. p. 345

¹⁴ Ed Small. "The Evolution of the Furniture Industry in Evansville, Indiana: Globe-Bosse-World." Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, 2009. Indiana Room Collection, Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Archive (Hereafter EVPLA-IRC)

¹⁵ Robert, p. 344

¹⁶ Morlock, p. 53

¹⁷ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891: 8. Evansville Historical Newspapers, Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Archive (Hereafter EVPLA-EHN)

¹⁸ *The Book of Evansville, Illustrated*, p. 3

¹⁹ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891.

Drawing on the works of Brant & Fuller and Morlock primarily, it can be gathered that the gross product of Evansville's lumber industry in 1859 was \$296,000.²⁰ However, this value rapidly increased to \$2,545,000 in 1880, when the estimated yearly output of lumber products reached 107,500,000 feet.²¹ Following this rise, the industry continued to expand, reaching a value of \$3,228,000 in 1889, which can be considered the peak of Evansville's lumber production. The lumber industry contributed to over one-third of the city's industrial economy. In addition to the wealth in production this industry brought to the city, lumber mills and other manufacturing centers employed great numbers of the local workforce, which included many immigrants who shared regional ties to John Reitz.

Three years later, in 1891, an article published in the *Evansville Courier and Press* provided a more detailed account of the six most successful mills in the city. John Reitz & Sons led this pack of elite sawmills in both size and production, for this fell in the time frame of Reitz's reign as the nation's leading hardwood lumber manufacturer. The reporter for this story estimated the value of the over 100 million feet of lumber produced by these six mills to be around \$1,500,000. The output of John A. Reitz and Sons in this year was assessed at just over \$250,000.²² The value of the Reitz mill in 1891 nearly reached the gross profit of Evansville's entire lumber production in 1859, only thirty-two years earlier. As with other aspects of the nineteenth-century, American economy, the availability of and access to natural resources led to rapid growth in the industrial sector.

John Reitz's involvement and dominance in local lumber manufacturing is evident throughout the recorded history of Evansville. This success sets up the narrative for Reitz's story

²⁰ Morlock, p. 106

²¹ Brant & Fuller, p. 143

²² *Evansville Courier and Press* (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891.

of prosperity, heroism, and high esteem that exists in prominent local histories. Born in Dorlar, Prussia on December 17, 1815, John Augustus Reitz was raised in a Catholic, landowning family. Reitz's paternal grandfather owned a salt distillery and several large estates, which were later passed to his son Franz Josef, who operated a liquor distillery, an inn, and a flour mill.²³ With the profits from these various ventures, his family afforded to send John A. Reitz to Esloh, "one of the important educational centers of Prussia," at the age of twelve.²⁴ Several historians recall that upon finishing his education, Reitz displayed immense courage by deciding to become the first of his native village to migrate to the United States in 1836. He was 21 years old.

Reitz first arrived in Baltimore, Maryland in December of 1836, later traveling to Louisville, Kentucky where he settled for about one year. The young immigrant envisioned starting a pottery business in Evansville, a nearby town that was slowly gaining more commercial significance because of the prospects of the Wabash and Erie Canal. Following the popular theme, Joseph Elliott tells that Reitz "had at the time but one gold piece of money in his pocket" in his initial days in America, setting the stage for his eventual rise to local fame.²⁵

After settling in Evansville in 1838, however, Reitz's pottery business did not produce the necessary profit, forcing him to find work elsewhere. Reitz began working at an Evansville sawmill owned by Silas Stephens, where he learned the basics of the industry, giving him the experience and capital necessary to ultimately start his own mill in 1845.²⁶ This mill, located at the mouth of Pigeon Creek in downtown Evansville, eventually became "one of the largest

²³ Following the death of Reitz's grandfather, his grandmother took over the family businesses at the age of 81, which she continued to operate for thirty years. She died at the age of 116. [Personal Family Records, Reitz Home Museum Collection (Hereafter RHMC).]

²⁴ Gilbert, p. 12

²⁵ Elliott, p. 369

²⁶ The first use of steam power in the city of Evansville was in the Silas Stephens sawmill, established in 1837. (Morlock, p. 57)

hardwood lumber mills in the country.”²⁷ Reitz continued to run the mill until his death in May of 1891, suffering through at least three significant fires and expanding the mill in 1873 to incorporate his sons, when it earned its official name of John A. Reitz & Sons.²⁸

The mill was in operation for a staggering seventy-three years, from its initial founding in 1845 until 1918. Public discourse surrounding the mill suggests that it ran twenty-two out of twenty-four hours per day, six out of seven days every week. As an ode to Reitz’s generosity as an employer, one work mentions that an organized strike never occurred or interrupted the operations of the mill because Mr. Reitz ran an efficient mill and was kind to workers.²⁹ At the end of the mill’s reign, John A. Reitz’s son, Francis Joseph, was the sole owner. John A. Reitz & Sons was “the oldest business in the United States west of the Allegheny mountains” when it was first announced that the leading lumberman’s son would be closing the family business.³⁰ This announcement introduced an abrupt end for a mill of such significance, nonetheless, Francis Joseph no longer wished to “be bothered by too many business ventures” and proclaimed to the public and employed workers that the mill would discontinue operations after the last logs of the most recent purchases had been sawed.³¹ Less than one year after this publication, the largest hardwood lumber mill in Evansville’s history closed its doors.

John A Reitz & Sons, along with other businesses that Reitz formed with close associates following the founding of his mill, shifted the tide for this ambitious immigrant and his family, launching them into a selective class of social elites. Although Reitz undoubtedly had wealth and

²⁷ Brant & Fuller, p. 163

²⁸ Marilyn Harshbarger. “A Study of the Philanthropic Contributions of John Augustus Reitz and Family.” May 6, 1991. RHMC.

²⁹ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Vanderburgh County Indiana*. Evansville, IN: Press of the Keller Printing Co., 1897. p. 90

³⁰ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, IN) September 23, 1917. Reitz Collection, Willard Library Archive (Hereafter WLA).

³¹ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, IN) September 23, 1917. Reitz Collection, WLA.

connections when he arrived in Evansville, his economic status would rise dramatically over the course of a few decades. In the 1850 United States Census, only five years after opening his lumber mill, Reitz first appeared as an official resident of Evansville. Listed as a saw miller, his young mill began to define his identity, yet with a total real estate value of \$5,000, the profits from the venture had not yet set him apart from other small business owners.³² While his listed occupation would change slightly with each census following 1850, the most noticeable difference resides in the growth of personal and real estate value. Twenty years after his initial appearance, John Reitz, now listed as a foundryman, reported values of his personal estate at \$125,000 and real estate at \$400,000 in the 1870 Census.³³ The rapid growth in property value experienced by Reitz secured his position among the wealthiest members of Evansville society, and more importantly one of the wealthiest, foreign-born elites.

The success of the Reitz lumber mill is only part of the story portrayed in local histories, however. Throughout the years of his business, John Reitz became a public figure in Evansville. Among his positions at the head of railroad projects, Reitz held various leadership roles in the city. Serving as president of the board of trustees for the town of Lamasco, Reitz aided in its consolidation with the city of Evansville.³⁴ In the economic sector, Reitz served as vice president and eventually president of the Crescent City bank, “one of the solid banking organizations of the state.”³⁵ Historians have additionally exemplified his role in founding the German National Bank. Eventually rising to the title of president in this enterprise, Reitz would remain in that role for the rest of his life. Working with other prominent men of the region, he created partnerships

³² In the 1850 U.S. Census, John Reitz was listed as John “Ritz,” an error which would not occur in any following censuses mentioning Reitz or his family [Harshbarger, RHMC].

³³ U.S. Census Bureau. Inhabitants in 6th Ward Evansville, in the County of Vanderburgh, State of Indiana, 1870. www.myheritage.com/.

³⁴ Gilbert, p. 13

³⁵ *Biographical Encyclopedia*, p. 88

in realty, foundry, and machinery ventures.³⁶ Seemingly at the culmination of his public service, the citizenry of Vanderburgh and neighboring Posey counties elected John A. Reitz to the Indiana House of Representatives in 1862. Though he served as a Democrat during the early stages of the Civil War, local historians reconcile this by stating that “it was no small political victory and no little evidence of popularity to be elected to the senate as a democrat.”³⁷ Others chime in, emphasizing that “he was a stalwart democrat yet did not place partisanship before the general good nor personal aggrandizement before the welfare of the commonwealth.”³⁸ Evidently, local historians used Reitz’s public positions and business ventures to highlight the influence he had over the people and the positive benefits he brought to the region.

However, what cemented Reitz’s legacy further into the public memory of Evansville, resides in the philanthropic donations he and his children contributed to the city. In a local newspaper, an article printed the day after his death focuses on his “charitable and public spirited” nature.³⁹ This charity appears throughout other texts and manifests itself physically in several architectural structures in Evansville. Reitz and his family were devoted Catholics and members of Holy Trinity Catholic Church, but John Augustus was additionally responsible for the building of this church. However, his contributions did not stop with his own parish. Reitz “donated not only the ground, 75 x 150 feet, but also the church building, 32 x 85 feet” for Sacred Heart Church, of which he supervised and led the construction in 1889.⁴⁰ The “Home of the Aged” run by the Little Sisters of the Poor that once stood in Evansville can trace its lineage

³⁶ Elliott, p. 370

³⁷ Ibid, p. 371

³⁸ Gilbert, p. 15

³⁹ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, IN), May 14, 1891. John Augustus Reitz folder, RHMC.

⁴⁰ Brant & Fuller, p. 298

back to Reitz as well. As a result of these donations, one local historian from the nineteenth century was inclined to state the following about John A. Reitz:

While firm in his own convictions of right and wrong, he was most charitably disposed toward others who differed from him. In truth he was liberal and thoroughly American in his attitude toward all other organizations and churches, and extended to them the same toleration he expected in return. He contributed to every church in the city regardless of faith, and was well-known for his liberality.⁴¹

Such statements, especially in a work published only six years after Reitz's death, would have a significant impact on the shaping of his reputation in the public memory.

The Reitz family is estimated to have donated 3 million dollars to different groups within the Evansville community, most memorably through the dedication of buildings like orphanages and churches. However, the donations did not halt with the death of the family patriarch.

Following his death, John Reitz's children used their father's wealth to further imprint his legacy on the city, ensuring his extended presence in the public eye. Possibly the most well-known of his children, Francis Joseph Reitz, used his inheritance and social capital to rise through the ranks of several political, economic, and community institutions. In 1914, F. J., as he was more commonly referred to, was considered "a bachelor, worth in excess of, oh, say, five millions."⁴² F. J. would become the president of several banks in the city, as well as the owner of the family lumber mill, and in these positions of influence, he made significant strides in solidifying his father's permanent place in the city's history. In the early twentieth century, F. J. Reitz set aside \$700,000 for the construction of an orphanage, organized the building of a public high school (which would become Reitz High School), and in 1925 donated \$900,000 to build Reitz

⁴¹ Elliott, p. 371

⁴² Elbert Hubbard. *A Little Journey to the City National Bank*. Evansville, IN: 1914. Indiana Room Collection, Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Archive.

Memorial Catholic High School, in honor of his parents.⁴³ Additionally, the family home that John Augustus Reitz built-in 1871 still stands as a museum today, and remains one of Evansville's top historic attractions, being placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

To begin analyzing how the industrial history of Evansville's lumber manufacturing and the memory of John A. Reitz work into the suppression of the presence of the natural world in this narrative, a deeper understanding of environmental history must be introduced. This subfield in the discipline of history addresses the conceptualization and understanding of nature's role in the human story. Arising from the momentum of the social justice movements in the 1960s, environmental history began in the 1970s, predominantly led by U.S. historians searching for deeper understandings of humans' impact on nature in the past and vice versa.⁴⁴ As the field has grown and expanded, American historians' dominance has diminished as more branches have sprouted out of the original ideas including material, political, and cultural environmental histories. The story of Evansville lies in the realm of material environmental history, where authors place "human history in a fuller context...concern[ing] the past 200 years, when industrialization, among other forces, greatly enhanced the human power to alter environments."⁴⁵ In a new age of environmental history, those working in this field strive to connect human history with the environment through a multitude of factors.⁴⁶

William Cronon, one of the leading historians in this realm, wrote *Nature's Metropolis* which would become a groundbreaking analysis of the relationship between the urban and

⁴³ Tess Grimm. "History of the Home Museum." RHMC

⁴⁴ J. R. McNeill. "The State of the Field of Environmental History." *Annual Reviews*. August 16, 2010. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-environ-040609-105431>. p. 347.

⁴⁵ McNeill, p. 347

⁴⁶ Paul S Sutter. "World with Us: The State of American Environmental History." *Oxford Academic: The Journal of American History*. June 01, 2013. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/100/1/94/747851>.

natural worlds.⁴⁷ In 2017, during an interview celebrating the 25th anniversary of his work, Cronon touched on the current state of environmental history and what precautions people working in this field must take when writing. At the basis of historical work, Cronon believes, there lies narrative, and in that telling of a story resides a moral lesson. However, with that lesson, environmental history must avoid environmental determinism.⁴⁸ In other words, authors must not predispose any moral or cultural biases upon the subjects of their work, creating judgments based on ideologies or knowledge that would not have existed in certain times or societies of the past. Cronon argues that environmental historians must “be fair to the people whose lives we narrate...to see the world through their eyes.”⁴⁹ Environmental history should invite people to dig deeper into their local histories and begin making connections between wealth, power, industrialization, and the appeal and relative abundance of natural resources. These relationships will further reveal themselves after dialogue has been created, and they are no longer embedded within political, economic, and industrial aspects of local history.

When considering Evansville’s extensive and prominent industrial past, little has been recorded of the natural world’s place in this story. Local landscapes undoubtedly changed significantly throughout this transformative era, especially the forests within and surrounding the region. In the story of Reitz, the environmental damage that his industrial practice inflicted has been continually left out of narratives of local history. Prior to American settlement, “deep forest covered [the Evansville] area almost completely...an equilibrium had existed for hundreds of years between animals and plants...between climate and vegetation.”⁵⁰ However, while

⁴⁷ William Cronon. *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

⁴⁸ McNeill, p. 359-360

⁴⁹ "Nature's Metropolis Turns 25: A Conversation with William Cronon." Interview. *Edge Effects* (audio blog), April 4, 2017. Accessed March 25, 2019. <http://edgeeffects.net/natures-metropolis/>.

⁵⁰ Morlock, p. 1-2

Morlock's work from the middle of the twentieth century begins to show some recognition for the natural world, it cannot serve as a representation for earlier or other histories of the region. According to other historians, "the age of civilization [was] at hand," which meant that the forests could no longer remain in their full abundance if human progress were to ensue.⁵¹ Any mention of the forests of the region in Evansville's early history refers to them as "dense and wolf-infested," a threat to public safety.⁵² These seemingly dangerous and endless forests had commercial significance, however, and "made [Evansville] prime territory for settlers," especially those searching for industrial and economic success.⁵³

Few records exist that describe the quantity of lumber that was being imported from the surrounding forests by John A. Reitz & Sons and other mills in the city. However, on occasion a historical work or newspaper article from this era of mass production in Evansville will reference which of these natural depositories could provide the best quality product for the industrialists. Possibly the most detailed account of which local forests had been targeted by Evansville's lumber industry appears in Charles Robert's work on Evansville's commercial and industrial practices. Robert states that:

The best Poplar known in this section is obtained in the upper Ohio and Green River Valleys... Yellow Pine, for flooring purposes, and Poplar, of the finest quality, are cut in unlimited quantities in the regions bordering on the Tennessee River... large quantities of Oak and Cypress... Walnut, Ash, Gum and Hickory... are well supplied in unlimited quantities from native forests.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Robert, p. 346

⁵² Brant & Fuller, p. 70

⁵³ Betty Lawson Walters. *Furniture Makers of Indiana 1793-1850*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society Publications, 1972. p. 11. EVPLA-IRC

⁵⁴ Robert, p. 345

The species of tree that could be found in Evansville's lumber mills and other manufactures were not limited to Robert's list, and included various others that lived in abundance in nearby counties and states.⁵⁵

The same sources that praise Reitz and other leading men involved in the lumber industry, while leaving out the environmentally catastrophic details of mass deforestation in the surrounding forests, provide sparse trails of information and statistics that allow new analyses of these practices to be linked with more current observations. Evansville newspapers were especially quick to print lumber statistics in the nineteenth century to express the pride that arose from the city's economic success. An article published on August 9, 1891, in the Evansville Courier and Press tells of the six most successful lumber mills, John A Reitz & Sons included, and the over 200,000 logs that these mills ordered annually.⁵⁶ The logs at this time were primarily coming from the Green River valley that Robert and other historians mention briefly.

Contemporary understandings of deciduous forests can provide a better examination of these statistics and accounts of the impact of Evansville's lumber activities. According to a study of the forests in Indiana, published in 2013, the average forest in the state contains over 400 trees per acre, and "seventy-eight percent of forest land consists of sawtimber."⁵⁷ With John A. Reitz & Sons purchasing around 50,000 logs annually, the mill was consuming around 125 acres of local forests every year.⁵⁸ The Reitz mill contributed to the destruction of local forests for seventy-three years of continuous operation, yet no records exist to detail this destruction and no measures were taken to preserve the remaining natural resources after these had been removed.

⁵⁵ Evansville's lumber suppliers offered products from an array of tree species, including poplar, yellow pine, oak (red, white, and burr), cypress, walnut (black and white), ash, gum, hickory, elm, birch, cherry, sassafras, hackberry, box elder, locust, cottonwood, willow, sycamore, pecan, and others. (Small, p. 2. EVPLA-IRC).

⁵⁶ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891.

⁵⁷ Dale D. Gormanson. *Indiana Forests 2013*. United States Department of Agriculture, December 2018. p. i

⁵⁸ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891. EVPL-EHN

A similar story can be told of other lumber manufacturers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Evansville.

Although the history of Evansville's lumber industry lacks an adequate examination of environmental consequences, this can be better understood by following the trail of newspapers and works by local historians. These sources, as mentioned previously, occasionally mention where much of the lumber was being purchased from, which can then provide a pathway to analyze the historical deforestation that occurred in these regions. The Upper Ohio River Valley, targeted for its quality poplar trees, served as a significant source for many lumber mills in the city because of Evansville's location on the banks of the Ohio River. Historically, since the first European settlers arrived in the regions around the Upper Ohio, the area has faced "several types of resource extraction – including logging."⁵⁹ This river valley, similar to the other regions that provided large quantities of logs for Evansville's sawmills, relied on the forests to support wildlife diversity, both on land and in rivers, as well as the overall health of the land. The timber of the region was cut extensively in the early twentieth century to supply lumber interests of cities downstream, resulting in "the region's forest cover [being] reduced from an estimated 90 percent to less than 30 percent."⁶⁰ Such a drastic change in the local topography had irreversible impacts on the soil, river, and wildlife in the Upper Ohio.

Similarly, forests surrounding the Tennessee River supplied Evansville's lumbermen with products for their mills. The forests in Tennessee remained relatively in-tact prior to the introduction of railroads. However, as rail commerce became a popular form of transporting people and materials in an industrial age, the expansive forests began to diminish. John A. Reitz

⁵⁹ Michele DePhilip & Tara Moberg. *Ecosystem Flow Recommendations for the Upper Ohio River Basin in Western Pennsylvania*. Harrisburg, PA: The Nature Conservancy, 2013. p. 11

⁶⁰ DePhilip & Moberg, p. 11

can be directly tied to the introduction of rails in this region due to his direction “of the Nashville division of [a rail] system from Evansville to Nashville, Tennessee.”⁶¹ Resulting from rail interests, “beginning in the 1870s, Nashville and Memphis promoters welcomed Northeast lumbermen into the state” to extract timber from the local forests.⁶² With several factors at play, the start of northern lumber influences in the region introduced a destructive era for Tennessee’s forests. In the years between 1880 and 1920, in which John A. Reitz & Sons had reached its peak of lumber production, “the greatest timber extraction in the state’s history occurred” leading to “rapid deforestation” and “long-term environmental changes.”⁶³

Despite the natural destruction that occurred partially because of the lumber industry in Evansville and other regions of the country, state and national organizations have worked to preserve the remaining forests. The Green River Valley provided much of the lumber for John A. Reitz & Sons in the mill’s later years.⁶⁴ The state of Kentucky deemed this region a State Forest, which works to protect the wildlife and natural resources of the area. Another nearby site, Mammoth Cave National Park, serves to educate visitors about historic deforestation and inform them of steps that have been taken to preserve the Green River Valley. In the middle of the twentieth century, “the establishment of National Forests” helped to diminish the “dramatic loss of wildlife” due to deforestation.⁶⁵ Although the responses in the affected regions have experienced success in efforts to improve the treatment of forests, the narrative of Evansville’s lumber industry continues to forget the significant damage enacted upon the natural

⁶¹ Gilbert, p. 12

⁶² Margaret Lynn Brown. “Timber Industry.” *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Tennessee Historical Society, October 8, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2019. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/timber-industry/>

⁶³ Brown, “Timber Industry”

⁶⁴ Evansville Courier and Press (Evansville, IN) September 23, 1917. Reitz Collection, WLA.

⁶⁵ Brown, “Timber Industry”

environment. The historians that wrote of the heavily timbered hills in Evansville's early years would hardly recognize the barren fields that lie in their place.

Engaging this environmental analysis in conversation with local histories helps to explain why the story of the natural environment has been overlooked in the public memory. To begin, John Augustus Reitz and his economic and philanthropic influence appear in nearly all works of Evansville's history, published from 1860 to 1956. Further, when he is mentioned, the portrayals of his life set the framework for an almost heroic remembrance. Other works use similar tactics to highlight how Reitz helped Evansville prosper, portraying him as a community icon, who was especially good-spirited and extremely generous with his wealth. The name and legacy of John A. Reitz and the Reitz family are deeply tied to various industries, buildings, and institutions within Evansville; however, a lack of adequate information has caused this legacy to continue without addressing the destructive consequences his success had on the natural environment. Without the inclusion of observations and statistics regarding the deforestation of surrounding regions, the public memory in Evansville is hindered, allowing for the sharing of an incomplete narrative.

When using a lens of environmental history to evaluate local histories and the ways in which they portray Reitz and his impact on Evansville, it is crucial to avoid imposing current morals or understandings of the environment and recently established standards of its protection. The study of environmental history strays from environmental determinism and therefore ensures that cultural bias and societal developments do not construe or affect historical analyses. However, John A. Reitz and his actions maintain a direct connection to the destruction that local forests endured during his industrial business ventures. Whether intentional or not, Reitz and his family left the environmental toll out of business records, leading to its omission from

newspapers as well as publications by local historians. Turning to more recent understandings of regional deforestation provides support to the argument that these forests were severely depleted. State and national organizations eventually became aware that the implications were irreversible and would remain that way for generations unless protections existed. Since the Reitz family had such an important role in shaping the social community of Evansville, their legacy has overshadowed any negative consequences of the lumber industry which provided them this influence. Additionally, since access to many of the forests was solely made possible because of extensive rail or river transportation, many of Evansville's citizens would have never faced the damage occurring at the time. Both past and current historians have failed to shed light on the environmental destruction of the region's history, allowing for an incomplete narrative to be celebrated and passed down through public memory.

The argument of this research is not to say that the memorialization of John Reitz and his family are unfounded or products of malicious idolatry. Reitz's focus on religion and culture pervaded and shaped his family relations and the interactions he had with the community. While alive, Reitz contributed to the expansion of Evansville as an industrial hub and supported the creation of physical spaces for people in religious groups or with specific ailments to gather and live. Furthermore, his actions inspired his children to provide similar services to educational institutions, orphanages, and the Catholic Church to which they belonged.

However, the purpose of this study is to revisit the reasons behind celebratory public memories of individuals such as Reitz and spark a conversation around what this says about the socially accepted values that uphold these views. Reevaluating why historical figures are important to local memory reveals some of the values that were prevalent in their societal context. In the case of John Reitz, the widespread approval of his industrial practices, religious

beliefs, and political ideologies during his life shows that he symbolized a public leader and representative of accepted values of nineteenth-century Evansville and other growing cities of that era. Widespread economic growth, expanding communication, and endless use of natural resources for industrial gains all influenced both the ability for Reitz to succeed and the positive reception of his actions by the public. When cultural values reflect economic growth and industrial expansion, society idolizes those who are successful in those sectors, which then influences the views of how society should look and what the priorities of its members should be. For communities of German immigrants, Roman Catholics, and industrial laborers, Reitz symbolized a realization of social mobility and success, even though the reality of the circumstances from which he came were far from that of his less-privileged counterparts. Regardless, the views that his constituents, fellow community members, employees, and others who experienced his presence shaped and continue to influence the way that Reitz and his family are remembered in Evansville.

The history of Evansville, Indiana, as told by prominent local historians, recounts a story of progress and growth in the industrial sector due to the diligent efforts of ambitious entrepreneurs. However, this popular framework has continually omitted or failed to acknowledge the role of, and impact on, the natural environment in the city's past. As an internationally recognized manufacturer of hardwood lumber, Evansville's local forests and the natural topography of the region played significant roles in the city's success, and the success of its leading entrepreneurs, such as John Augustus Reitz. Without the inclusion of the environment in this narrative, historians have effectively passed on a version of this story which forgets the price at which the city's success was achieved: the destruction of several natural resources and oases for local flora and fauna. Overlooking such an instrumental aspect of this story did not

occur instantly, yet as deeper understandings and observations of these impacts arise, it becomes increasingly urgent and necessary to include this tale of natural destruction while the opportunity for preservation remains. Local histories of industrial growth, in Evansville particularly, often extend pride and gratitude for the course of past events, however, audiences must challenge these works and begin to search for the relationships between people and the environment, acknowledging the reciprocal effects on the natural world.

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