

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Max Ehrmann



If Max Ehrmann could attend his 125th birthday party on Sept. 26, 1997, he surely would smile at his “immortality.” Since his death on Sept. 9, 1945, at age 72, his work has received meaningful attention.

Today, Ehrmann’s *Desiderata* — first published in 1927 — is among the world’s most popular poems and even won a Grammy Award in 1972. Like *A Prayer*, his famed 1906 verse, it has been translated into at least 32 languages.

To Ehrmann, life was a panoramic theater enacted across an infinite stage. He was a definitive and discerning witness, occupying a front row seat in Terre Haute, home of his birth, death, friends, profound thoughts and a few idols. Paul Dresser, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene V. Debs were among his favorite people. In addition, he maintained a close friendship with James Whitcomb Riley, who visited Ehrmann often.

“Here is the world in miniature,” Ehrmann declared in his poem *Terre Haute*.

The youngest of five children born to Bavarian immigrants Max and Barbara (Lutz) Ehrmann, Max resided at 638 N. Center and 514 S. Sixth during his youth with his parents, brothers Albert, Charles and Emil and sister Tillie. A skilled cabinetmaker, Max Ehrmann Sr. customized Pullman railroad car interiors at the Vandalia Yards.

At DePauw University, Ehrmann became student editor of the college newspaper. While there, he “contracted a disease I never have shaken off. The disease was idealism.” After earning a degree in 1894, he spent two years at Harvard studying law and philosophy while writing for national periodicals and *The Boston Herald*. In Cambridge, Mass., he met Debs; their rapport endured until the two men disagreed on the subject of U.S. entry into World War I.

Solicited to run for the Indiana legislature in 1897, Ehrmann instead chose to serve as a Vigo County deputy prosecutor. He was more content, however, meditating about life’s meaning and lecturing to the Terre Haute Literary Club. His brothers, all successful businessmen, sometimes helped him financially, giving him the freedom to pursue a literary career.

Publishing poems, essays and plays “placidly amid the noise and haste,” Ehrmann recorded his perceptive musings in a journal later published by the woman he married shortly before his death. Bertha Pratt King Ehrmann, co-founder of King Classical School, later resurrected her husband’s work, republishing much of it. She died at 524 S. Sixth St. on Jan. 16, 1961.

When 1952 Democratic presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson died in 1965, an anonymous copy of *Desiderata* was found at his bedside. A public search for the author’s identity soon brought Ehrmann worldwide notice. Now reproduced on posters, plaques and greeting cards, the message provided by *Desiderata* assures Ehrmann an eternal niche in American popular literature, a rank he long has warranted.

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