

LOUIS WILLIAM BONSIB

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MORE THAN AN ARTIST

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Mister Chairman, Fellow Questers and Honored Guests. I wish to thank the committee for this assignment. While doing the research on Mr. Louis Bonsib I had the opportunity to read many of his personal papers, meet many of the people who knew and remembered him. They related many fascinating stories about him. John Bonsib, his son and Mrs. Gretchen Bonsib, his son Richard's widow were most helpful.

Louis Bonsib was born in Vincennes, Indiana in March 1892. First let us meet his grandfather, also named Louis Bonsib. who was born in 1819 in Alsace-Lorraine. This was a turbulent and distressing time, as Napoleon Bonaparte had recently been defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, and the former French Provinces were occupied territory. German-Prussian influence was overbearing and the occupation made it difficult for Alsatians to find employment. A recession occurred and their land holdings were in jeopardy. Many migrated to the East, Russia; but some took a westerly route and came to the New World, America.

It is not readily apparent how Louis' family fared in the early years of the occupation but eventually he and four brothers or step brothers, whether as a family, or a group of five left Alsace-Lorraine for America. From where they sailed, or how, is not clear, but they did land in New Orleans in the mid 1800's. Whatever their surname was in Europe, it became Bonsib, courtesy of the United States Customs Service. Whether they stayed together or separated, again is not clear.

Some remained in the south, but as an adult in 1845 Louis was granted a plot of land in Freelandville, in Knox County, Indiana, near Vincennes.

Grandfather Louis often visited St Louis and there he saw Henriette Caspermor, a recent arrival from Prussia, debarking from a ship, he was smitten and shortly, proposed marriage. Being accepted, they were married and moved to Vincennes. He and Henriette had four children, Henry in 1850, Molly in 1852 and Mary in 1854. The last child, John F., was born in 1862, and would become our Louis' father.

Growing up, John showed a knack for selling, and developed his own business when he realized he could buy the parts, assemble a bicycle, and then sell it to someone over a period of time. By adding a small surcharge, he would more than recoup his costs. Later he opened a furniture store, again with payments over time. A most unusual approach as it was customary, at that time, to pay cash for goods. The fee charged for allowing time payments increased his profits. The store was known as "The Bonsib Installment House" and he would outfit a home for Five Dollars down, and One Dollar a week.

He was very successful and in 1890, in Vincennes, married a Scotch, Irish, English girl, Ida Brown. In March 1892 their only child, Louis W. Bonsib was born. Ida became ill and died in 1894 of "rapid consumption" when Louis was only two years old.

Louis' aunt Molly became his substitute mother and nurtured the boy. She had some artistic talents and encouraged him to draw and paint. This continued, even after his father remarried in 1899 to Etta Griffith of Vincennes. The later union was childless and Louis remained an only child with a stepmother and two maiden aunts doting on him.

His aunts, concerned for his health, used many common home preventives to protect Louis from the fate to which his mother succumbed. These included plying him with goose grease and “blowing sulphur down his throat” to prevent tonsillitis. On cold days he was wrapped with a crocheted scarf and cautioned not to breathe the “cold air.”

One early Easter he received a small bunny as a gift. He treasured it for less than a day as the cat attacked and shortly killed his new found friend. Thereafter, he was not fond of cats.

At age 14 or 15 he attended a lecture about radios, at the Methodist Church. A man demonstrated how to build a radio that could transmit Morse code. He learned a glass tube with rods, having a little space between, containing silver fillings, would make a radio. Using filings off silver dollars, and an antenna constructed from a long pole and a window screen he was soon communicating with a friend as well as ships at sea with “dots and dashes.”

Shortly, crystal radio sets were developed and he bought parts to construct one. When in high school he was licensed to operate the first “ham” radio station in Indiana. A magazine, “Modern Electrics” dedicated to “Ham” Radio Operators and published by the Gernsback Brothers, used his attic “station” in an article to demonstrate what a talented amateur could accomplish. Before complete radios were manufactured, he procured and sold the parts to firms and individuals to build their own sets; becoming one of the leading agencies in this new medium. Probably following a trait he inherited from his salesman father.

One of his customers was the “young” Magnavox Company, then in California, later to move to Fort Wayne and become an advertising client.

Many years later, he was providing advertising for the Magnavox Company and a new marketing manager complained to him, that advertising people knew nothing about radios. At that moment, Mr. O'Connor, Magnavox's president called Louis into his office and showed him the earlier Modern Electric Magazine article, about the attic "Ham" radio station; inquiring if he knew the described person. When Louis claimed ownership things went forward quite well. The Bonsib agency represented Magnavox for many years.

Aunt Molly, who first taught him how to paint leaves, persuaded him to continue his artistic pursuits as well. He was determined to conquer this medium and studied extensively, never in any structured art school. He did, however, participate in Art Courses through the International Correspondence School in 1910. Later he studied with art teachers as far away as Arizona, although he was determined to not copy anyone's style.

While in primary and high school he helped in his father's furniture and bicycle store. He was a good student and worker. This was vital for the family when his father was bedridden for a long period of time after an accident. As a teenager he had to manage the furniture and bicycle store himself. It was a successful endeavor and when his father returned to good health, Louis went off to college.

Wanting to be an electrical engineer, he enrolled at the University of Cincinnati in 1910, then Vincennes University. This was not to be his career and he enrolled at Indiana University in 1912, but for some reason spent the year 1914 at University of Illinois. He was now studying Sociology, preparing to work with an uncle at a YMCA in Wisconsin.

At Indiana University he was a good student, graduating Summa cum laude and in the Honored Phi Beta Kappa Fraternity. He also excelled on the football and

wrestling varsity teams; starring as the center of the football team. He received his letter "T" and the Golden Football award at graduation.

Louis wished to demonstrate his artistic talents, and preferring to start at the top entered the election to be the senior editor of the university yearbook, "Arbutus." The contest was contentious, but with the slogan "Let the best man win" he triumphed and successfully lead the yearbook team his senior year. He did so well that on graduating, the Indianapolis Engraving Company known as IndECo (Involved with year book production) offered him a position as college service department manager, providing colleges with yearbook assistance. His salary, \$10.00 each week, increased to \$12.00 after his marriage in 1917. He also developed a separate commercial department and grew this section from none to ten employees producing more than \$65,000.00 of work annually in 1922. Obviously, he was on a career course separate from the Young Men's Christian Association.

His creativity and also some spare time allowed him to publish the nationally known monthly "Graphic Arts Bulletin," known as "GAB," containing his writings and that of others. Louis had found a way to express himself with poetry.

His tenure, all seven years, at the Indianapolis Engraving Company was rewarding. The suggestions he made to commercial customers, regards marketing their products were so imaginative and well received, they prompted him to start his own advertising firm. Mr. J. L. Brenn, a client from the Huntington Laboratories further encouraged him and Huntington Laboratories became his first client.

Leaving Indianapolis in 1923 he started an advertising agency in Peru, Indiana, but after an unsatisfactory year, with an unsuitable partner, he moved to Fort Wayne and the Bonsib Advertising Agency became a reality. His client relationship and

expertise was so effective that some of his first customers, the Huntington Laboratories and three others remained customers for thirty to forty years or until merged.

The agency grew rapidly and was very successful. Louis did not believe that one man alone could accomplish everything. His philosophy was to encourage teamwork, and allow his talented subordinates be creative although he remained the final authority.

At first, the clients in Fort Wayne were more inclined to say thank you rather than pay for the artistic displays he and other agencies produced. This was unsatisfactory and he demanded payment. Remarkably the clients acquiesced and relationships blossomed over the years. To ensure these relationships would endure, in 1926 he organized the Fort Wayne Advertising Club, which unfortunately perished during the depression. Following the Second World War the Advertising club was reorganized, and he at one time was its president. He also started a speaker's bureau and traveled the Midwest extolling the merits of advertising.

He firmly believed that this medium could be used to better inform people, and educate them, as to the value of products, and how they could be used to improve daily life.

During this early period he acquired many clients both local and national. One in particular was the Wayne Pump Company in Fort Wayne, producing gasoline station pumps. For the twenty or more years he provided their advertising the company's share of the market rose from a small fraction to 67%. They developed a pump that calculated the total cost of the gasoline, including the taxes. This was a departure from the calculation of total gallons only. The Gasoline companies were

reluctant to acquire the new pumps, having concerns about their cost and maintenance. However with slogans like “Fill er up” and “I’ll take my change in gasoline”, as well as much hard sell by him and the marketers the major companies were convinced and purchased the new pumps. This was called the “computer pump.”

He pursued a campaign to make service stations clean and more attractive to customers. Rest room attention and the sale of various merchandise were part of his crusade. Louis not only created media for his clients, he went out and sold the product.

Another early and long standing account was the H. A. Thrush Company, makers of oil burners and hot water heat. Promoting clean oil fired heat; he coined the strong, contrary phrases “Coalitosis,” and “Banish Coal Dust from Your Home Forever.” This campaign ensured the Thrush Company would remain clients for a long period.

In the early years he singlehandedly grew the agency, personally servicing twenty accounts in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan. Most of the accounts were in radio manufacture, and the auto industry. One account was Magnavox, still located in California. In a personal summary written in 1941 he lists more than one hundred companies that had been, or were still clients of the Bonsib Agency.

Truly a remarkable performance.

In Bert Griswold’s book “Builders of Greater Fort Wayne,” published in 1926, he was recognized for his efforts in civic affairs as well as the “Fort Wayne Industrial Foundation.” This was an organization similar to the present Economic Development Alliance in Fort Wayne. The foundation had some success in bringing companies like International Harvester and Magnavox Corporation to the Summit City.

Another account (the Rastetter Corporation) made chairs and tables. Louis convinced them to combine them in sets of four chairs and one table as a “bridge set.” There was some concern about the sturdiness of the furniture. Louis, aware that a picture is worth a thousand words; climbed up on the table and chairs to prove their strength. They held his weight, ‘three hundred pounds’. Further, he convinced the newly opened, in 1929, New York’s Roxy Theatre to use the set on stage. He also convinced stores in the New York City shopping district to display the sets in their show windows.

This became a very successful promotion.

During the Second World War there was a move to conserve paper. He discovered the Government was printing war bonds on large, heavy sheets of paper, and furthermore mailing them in similar heavy envelopes. Since he had vigorously campaigned for the sale of the bonds, he felt somewhat responsible for the apparent waste of paper. He called this “Bushel Basket Inflation” and wrote critical articles in Printer’s Ink Magazine, the voice of Advertising. The government paid heed and reduced the size and weight of the paper they used.

In 1942 Louis was also recognized by the Federal Government for his achievements in support of the “War Effort”, as he encouraged an awareness among the people at home. His campaign was “Educating the Public to Accept Rationing.” Some of his slogans were “Rationing Gasoline? O.K.! If that ‘s What It Takes;” and “It’s Patriotic to be thrifty.”

He preferred the Republican Party and was a delegate to the state convention in 1940 and 1941. Later he served on the Allen County council for three terms, retiring at age 70 in 1972, because of ill health. He was also very active in the Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce, at one time serving as publicity chairman.

Loyal to his alma mater and a 50 year Presbyterian he chaired the Westminster Foundation at Indiana University in 1960, and raised the funds to build the Westminster Chapel on the campus. One of our Questers recalls Louis having taught him in Sunday School at the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne.

Another Quester, employed by a local insurance company, recalls Louis often complained about the “risk rating” he received because of his significant weight.

He never could convince Louis that he was in a group, that posed an insurance risk, but they remained friends.

Meanwhile Louis had married Marietta Jacobs in April 1917 after she finished high school. Marietta could trace her family roots in the United States to the “Colonial Dames of 1792.” This union was blessed with four children.

Louis William Jr. was born in 1918 and after school joined his father in 1939 and 1940, but the Second World War intervened. When he returned it was to work in advertising in New York and Denver. Photos he took in the 1940’s were published in Life magazine.

Joan, born in 1921 married Carl Lipp, a Fort Wayne Accountant.

In 1923 John came, who after his completing his education and serving in the Armed Forces in the 1940’s joined his father in the family agency in 1947.

Lastly, Richard “Dick” was born in 1931. Completing his education and serving in the Armed Forces in Korea, he joined his father and brother in 1953 to become an advertising man.

All the children went to Indiana University, following in their dad’s footsteps; although some had part of their education at other universities.

Louis and Marietta were pleased with their children and instilled in them the conservative values they had cultivated. Having all one’s sons follow in the same profession as the father is most unusual. Louis must have set a fine example or made a most attractive offer to “Bill”, John and Dick for them, to have entered the field in which he labored. I feel certain he welcomed their decisions.

The agency became exceedingly successful but did not change from a “one man shop” until son John returned from the Armed Services in 1947, and joined him;

twenty-four years after he started the agency. He was ready for help. The “one man shop” however now had 14 people employed and functioned as a smooth team, although during the Second World War there had been a skeleton crew, as many of the young artists and writers left to serve their country.

After his sons, John and Dick joined the agency it continued to grow and prosper. Their talents and labors were recognized by their peers as well as their father. Although many men find it difficult to transfer authority and therefore allow the business they brought to life, wither. Louis felt otherwise. Enjoying the company of his sons in the business and wishing to continue working with them, he became chairman of the board, allowing the daily operation to be their responsibility. Of course he was always available for consultations. Now he could pursue his hobbies of painting, traveling and gardening; as well as have more time to enjoy his eleven grandchildren.

As he was an entrepreneur, so were his sons. “Bill,” had left earlier for the larger cities and John, in the 1970’s, lured by the potential of Cable Television left to devote his creative talents to promote and disseminate that medium. Before John left the firm he had assisted his father and brother Dick for almost twenty-five years. When John left, Dick and his wife Gretchen continued to expand the business until 1997 when Dick sold the agency, seventy-three years after its inception. The Bonsibs were no longer in advertising.

Louis was now past 65, and although he and Marietta had traveled extensively in the United State and somewhat abroad, he yearned to see more scenic wonderlands. Louis, despite his energetic involvement in the Bonsib agency’s growth and success was a creator at heart. He had never lost the spark that Aunt

Molly had ignited in him as a boy. He always found time for paint and canvas; usually on weekends and vacations.

It was to Marietta's delight when shortly after their marriage they bought a house, and during the discussion about wall coverings, her husband put her at ease, promising to cover the walls with his paintings. I am not sure what resulted but their marriage lasted until his demise more than sixty years later.

Louis had continued to paint, using both oil and watercolors to capture the scenes they saw on their many journeys; usually by car. Brown County, Indiana was his favorite and probably most frequent subject at any season. If there was no time to paint while visiting, he would take photographs and at his leisure, in his studio, transfer the image with his palette to canvas or paper.

The coasts of Maine, Quebec and California and the glens and valleys of Appalachia were frequent painting locations. There was also travel to Hawaii, Japan, Alaska and Europe; memorialized in oil and watercolors.

He spent much time in Brown County; to continue his painting, and visit his alma mater, Indiana, and Vincennes his early home and university. He was devoted to Indiana University sports; becoming a personal friend of Herman Wells and the Bonsib agency was generous to many athletes. Earlier his Chairmanship of the Westminster Foundation, building the Chapel on the IU Campus was described.

In the early 1920's the "Daughters of Indiana" established the Hoosier Salon to cultivate and support Indiana artists. A gallery was established in New Harmony, Indiana and exhibitions were held in Chicago to expose the nation to the Hoosier talent. The Salon was very successful and later Louis was often exhibited there as well as in the Salon's Broad Ripple, Indianapolis gallery. His paintings garnered many awards at these exhibitions, and remain in the permanent collections.

Fort Wayne continues to achieve distinction at the Hoosier Salon, for Doctor Fred Doloresco's Painting "Many Hands" is the 2009 Best of Show.

Another favorite was the Brown County Art Gallery in Nashville, Indiana. Here it was that Louis exhibited many of his paintings, particularly the Brown County landscapes to the delight of its patrons. When the gallery was destroyed by fire in 1968, Louis was instrumental in seeing it restored.

Marietta must have been very proud of his paintings and valued them highly. A contemporary relates the experience of wishing to buy a particular painting at an exhibition, but felt the price LW posted was too steep. Later he and his wife visited with Marietta who cordially showed them around the studio. When they offered to buy the same painting, she suggested an amount much higher than Louis' earlier price. One wonders if Louis ever considered making her his business manager.

This same individual remembers them as caring, warm friendly people with the desire to help Fort Wayne prosper and be a good home for their children and grandchildren.

In their early home on Indiana Avenue in Fort Wayne he had a studio over the garage, reached by an outside stairway. Often, the neighbor's children would timidly ascend the steps to watch him paint. He relished inviting them in and would teach them a little of his craft. Of course they gradually became patrons and collectors.

One such individual, each birthday, was allowed by his parents, to select a painting by Louis. Needless to say, he became a major collector.

The early 1960's were a busy time for this semiretired advertising man, but very active landscape artist.

As noted earlier, he had stepped aside and became chairman of the Bonsib Agency in 1960 and was no longer involved in the daily operation. He retired for good in 1972, almost fifty years since he started the advertising agency.

In 1961 he founded the L. W. Bonsib Foundation, for art and education, to assist students at the American Academy of Art in Chicago, and to support other art groups. The first recipient was John Oglesbee, a graduate of Southside High School in 1962. Other early recipients were the Patrons of the Hoosier Salon and the Brown County Art Gallery Association. The sale of his paintings was to support this charitable endeavor. The foundation did not survive after his death and no longer exists, however it had supported more than twenty students with major scholarships.

Following his avocation since childhood and working in a creative medium, he acquired a vast library of books and pamphlets describing all modes of painting. An avid reader, he would often sit for hours, pipe and tobacco in hand, reading his beloved books or applying his brush. His studio was crammed with paintings, palettes and easels to which he often retired.

His roots were in southern Indiana, in Vincennes, and attending the University there. He elected to donate the major portion of this art library, estimated at two hundred books and pamphlets, to that school. Many hundreds of his paintings were included. Also in Vincennes, a room was dedicated in his honor for the Northwest Territory Art Guild in the Old State Bank Building. Earlier he donated a mathematics library, and contributed towards a reading laboratory at Vincennes University.

Not forgetting his Alma Mater he supported the development of an advertising laboratory for Indiana University, and later contributed toward the facilities for art shows at Indiana Purdue Fort Wayne.

In 1971 the University of Vincennes awarded Louis the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humanities; recognizing his philanthropy to the arts as well as his artistic vision and achievements.

Louis' accomplishments were not only local. He was often listed in "Who's Who in Art in America," and other such reviews; and the Bonsib agency was known nationwide. There were many awards. The finest was in 1962 when both Printer's Ink Magazine and the Fort Wayne Advertising Club recognized his achievements.

It was one of the proudest moments for him and his family as the Fort Wayne Advertising Club, nominated him for the first Silver Medal Award, presented by Printers Ink Magazine and the Advertising Federation of America. This Medal is given for a lifetime of achievement and service spent in the highest tradition of the advertising business, since: (I quote)

"The recipient must have attained a solid and continuous record, of achievement for his company, worked outside his own organization, for the overall good of advertising, gained a reputation as a man of integrity, and helpful to young people starting in advertising, as well as those already in the business. Furthermore, the honoree should be an original and imaginative thinker, in some phase of advertising, and be active in a social or religious agency, dedicated to some phase of human welfare."

It was a blue ribbon night. The dinner was planned for a local country club, but the response was overwhelming, as more than four hundred people responded. Many from Fort Wayne, but others came from New York City and elsewhere. A larger

venue was needed and the dinner was moved to ‘Cutter’s Chalet’ on Covington Road. Mayor Paul Mike Burns, and officers of the American Federation of Advertising, were among the attendees who praised LW for his accomplishments.

Louis and Marietta continued to travel but when home he cultivated his large garden. Flowers were his passion and as one can see in his paintings he enjoyed their colors. He continued to paint, having more time in his “retirement” and continued to make gifts of his work to various institutions. He favored the southern Indiana Galleries and Vincennes and Indiana University, but many Fort Wayne institutions are fortunate to have his oils and watercolors on display. Irene Byron Hospital, The YWCA and YMCA, The Fort Wayne Art School, and Indiana Tech were some of the earlier recipients.

There are many collections of his work in Fort Wayne and elsewhere; not only among the family but with other art patrons. Some have hundreds of paintings and sketches. An over whelming number of institutions and museums in the United States and Europe possess his work.

Paintings occasionally appear on auction lists and usually sell well.

Unable to evaluate his work myself, I questioned the Hoosier Salon director as to the relative merit of Louis’ work. Her response was one of admiration, describing the many prizes he had been awarded there and at the Indianapolis Museum. She added his work was well received and praised, particularly the landscapes.

Another individual, an art appraiser who has evaluated over a thousand of his works, felt he was a great painter, particularly when portraying in oil, the Smokie Mountains and their unique character.

Further, the director of a large museum, familiar with his work and having exhibited part of Louis' collection had this to say: (I quote)

“Louis Bonsib was a tremendously talented painter whose gifts are insufficiently appreciated. In addition to forming and developing one of the more progressive advertising firms in the Mid-west, Louis spent considerable time developing his own artistic talent. He was truly driven and poured countless hours into honing his technique and skills. Few regional artists have shared Louis Bonsib's Type-A drive to continually improve their work. I have personally seen hundreds of Bonsib's sketches, drawings and finished paintings, and can attest to the steady progress of this artist's skill. Louis was not only a contemporary master; he was a self-taught, self-motivated devotee of the visual arts.”

But who was Louis Bonsib? Boy ham operator, furniture salesman, athlete, loving husband and father, Christian, successful advertising executive and entrepreneur, philanthropist, traditional artist or art critic.

Unequivocally, we can state that he was his own person, unique and probably “one of a kind.” I can imagine it was difficult for anyone to oppose him; not because of his immense presence, but because he was convinced, he was probably the only one in the room with the correct answer. I am sure he took advice and honored others opinions, but it seems clear that the final decision was always one with which he agreed, and would personally stand behind and defend. The latter I am sure of, for his honesty and integrity would not allow anything else.

Much of this is clear from his personal papers, speeches and poems. Yes, he was quite a colloquial poet, waxing, most often in a critical manner on many things. One topic he lent much ink to, was the modern approach to the visual arts and how

much he disagreed with it. A small snippet of the many and much lengthier rhymes he composed would be the one in 1962 when describing how a traditional landscape is a landscape and the new art could not be so discerned:

“They have the darn thing upside down,...
It doesn’t really matter,
The critic makes it rich and strong
With glib and fancy patter.”

by: L.W.Bonsib

So that is Louis William Bonsib, who, with Marietta, on Monday, October 29, 1979, having been in ill health, for some time, shopped for pipe tobacco at Riegel’s tobacco store, returned home, sat in his favorite chair and quietly passed away.

He had spent his eighty-seven years in a dynamic, changing world, but was probably the happiest when looking upon his beloved landscapes and permanently memorizing them on canvas, paper and wood.

Possibly, he is best described in a eulogy by Greg, his twenty year old grandson:

“There clearly was a love of nature in Louis Bonsib. You can see it in his oils and watercolors; the hazy purple of a distant mountain, the light freckled blue of a twisting brook, the shadowed green of a grassy hillside and the reddish gold of the changing leaves.”

THE END

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