

The Whiskey Merchant's Diary: An Urban Life in
the Emerging Midwest by Joseph J. Mersman.

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 ***The Whiskey Merchant's Diary: An Urban Life in the Emerging Midwest* by Joseph J. Mersman (review)**

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Book Reviews Joseph J. Mersman. *The Whiskey Merchant's Diary: An Urban Life in the Emerging Midwest*. Edited by Linda A. Fisher. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. 418 pp. ISBN 0821417452 (cloth), 49.95. In the diary of Joseph J. Mersman, editor Linda A. Fisher found entrance into the world of an ambitious young man who lived 40 in antebellum Cincinnati and St. Louis. 1834 Mersman kept his diary consistently from 1847 to 1851, again for a time in 1853, and then added only an occasional entry thereafter until 1864. Many of the themes we associate with bustling midwestern river cities during the time period are visible here. In an era of rapid urban growth and commercial expansion, German immigrant families like Mersman's sought new opportunities in the antebellum West. Americans were thrilled to travel by canal and steamboat, feared the threats posed by cholera and raging city fires, and young men aspiring to business and social success took their cues from a culture that celebrated self-improvement, individual striving, and the self-made man." Born

in 1824 to a German farming family in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, Joseph J. Mersman came with his father and siblings to the United States in 1833, settling first in Stalltown (Minster), Ohio, and then Cincinnati (xvii). There, Mersman began an apprenticeship in 1839 with a "rectifier," a whiskey wholesaler who purchased and processed raw distilled spirits to make a product that could be sold to retailers (23). Mersman's diary begins in November 1847, when he was twentythree and nearing the end of his apprenticeship. He approached a turning point in his life when he would establish his own business and think more seriously about marriage. Mersman chose to go into partnership with John Clemens Nulsen, a tobacconist. Nulsen and Mersman set up their business in 1849 in the booming city of St. Louis (151, 181). While the two men labored to get their business started, Mersman faced an additional challenge when he discovered he had contracted syphilis, a condition that cast his plans for marriage into doubt. He followed two physicians' regimens, which included therapeutic decoctions and sulfur baths (230, 245). In 1851, believing he was cured, he married Claudine Creuzbauer, Nulsen's sister-in-law (258). The marriage had its tensions, and Mersman was not entirely happy, yet the couple raised a number of children and the family steadily improved its condition (265, 280-81). Fisher followed the family's story beyond the diary. By the early 1880s, the retired Mersman was blind, likely from syphilitic complications. He lived in a well-to-do neighborhood near the Nulsen's, as well as Nulsen's son-in-law, Charles E. Orthwein (with whom Mersman had been a business partner), and William Orthwein, now WINTER 2007 73 BOOK REVIEWS in partnership with brother Charles. As Fisher points out, "four households, united by business interests, blood ties, and marriage vows, remained neighbors for many years" (290-92). The distinctly appealing aspect of Mersman's diary is the glimpse it offers into the lives, the camaraderie, and the strategies for success of ambitious single young men in the antebellum era. Diary entries include details of his daily routine. He sometimes discussed work affairs, but mostly he recounted stories that suggested the comfortable, almost carefree pace of life he enjoyed with his friends: socializing with them and with family, attending the theater and concerts, drinking ale in saloons, smoking cigars, flirting with women, and improving himself with his studies of French, the flute, and the guitar. We also see his anxiety as he made plans to move to St. Louis to begin his own business, his worry as cholera struck in 1849 and periodically thereafter, his unhappy frustration and struggle with syphilis, and his hopes for marriage. Sensitive to characteristic traits of antebellum American culture, Fisher places this material in a useful framework. We learn something of the family's history preceding and following Mersman's diary, including the curious detail that his sister Agnes worked with circus companies and eventually married William "Wild Bill" Hickok (5). As a biographer might, she divides the diary into chapters that reflect the most characteristic activities and notable events of each...

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