

Georg Ahrens' German Consular Tenure in St. Louis

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Introduction

Large host countries like the United States often have many foreign countries' consular establishments spread across various cities and these function essentially as regional field offices of their respective embassies in the capital. Once upon a time, St. Louis had such offices representing several countries, reflecting its then-prominence as a midwest crossroads of commercial, industrial, and cultural importance. Among these was a consulate representing Germany and what follows is a brief recounting of the life and times of the head of that office from 1925 to 1932, Dr. Georg Ahrens. He is an interesting figure in both German-American history and the history of the City of St. Louis because he played a role in some of the most significant events associated with German-American friendship during the interwar years.

Ahrens' story begins in Berlin. Born in 1890 to Gustav and Johanna Ahrens, he finished secondary school in 1909 and completed his university education at Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University) in 1913, graduating with a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree, just as the storm clouds of World War I were gathering over Europe. He was called-up to service by the German Foreign Office in January 1914 and was already attached to the diplomatic outpost in Shanghai by the time fighting broke-out several months later. But, by March 1915 Ahrens found himself in the US, having just been re-assigned to the Imperial German Embassy in Washington as a diplomatic attaché to Ambassador Count Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff [1]. It was the start of a deep attachment he would develop with America, its people, and its culture.

Early Days in Washington

The United States was, of course, not yet involved in the war, but the atmosphere was tense. Irish Americans and German Americans, the latter group now comprising more than 10% of the total American populace, generally sympathized with other non-interventionist groups that wanted to stay clear of Europe's current round of bloodletting. Then, on May 7, 1915, the German submarine U-20 hit the British-flagged ocean liner *Lusitania* amidships with a single torpedo, sinking it off the coast of Ireland, with almost 1200 lives lost. Among them were over 100 Americans. Ironically, Bernstorff's office had just issued an advisory the month before strongly recommending that American citizens avoid passage on British vessels through the war zone because of the grave risk (Fig. 1). But the notice was irrelevant after the *Lusitania* went down, as was the fact that she had actually been carrying a significant cargo of British ammunition [2]; public opinion would now start to swing distinctly against Imperial Germany.

The Royal Navy was the queen of the high seas in those days and British strategy involved a naval blockade of German ports in the North Sea to starve it of materiel. Germany responded with submarine warfare and the tonnage of ships of both sides that would ultimately go to the bottom of Atlantic waters is staggering. But, Germany also pursued a special program using unarmed merchant submarines, so-called "blockade runners", to keep the lines of commerce open with the still-neutral United States. The most successful of those vessels was the *Deutschland*, launched March 28, 1916 by Flensburger Schiffbau and which made several crossings, ferrying gold, diamonds, mail, and other valuable bulk cargo back and forth. A July 26, 1916 article in the *Boston Globe* regaled readers with the intrigue of how the *Deutschland* had recently evaded allied ships, surfacing to safety within US territorial waters outside of Baltimore, how English, French, and Russian spies surveilled it in port, looking for any information that could be relayed to allied warships in the open sea, and how the submarine had alternately evacuated and flooded its buoyancy tanks, staying at a constant draft while loading and unloading in order to obfuscate any inference of its cargo. It was genuine cloak-and-dagger stuff.

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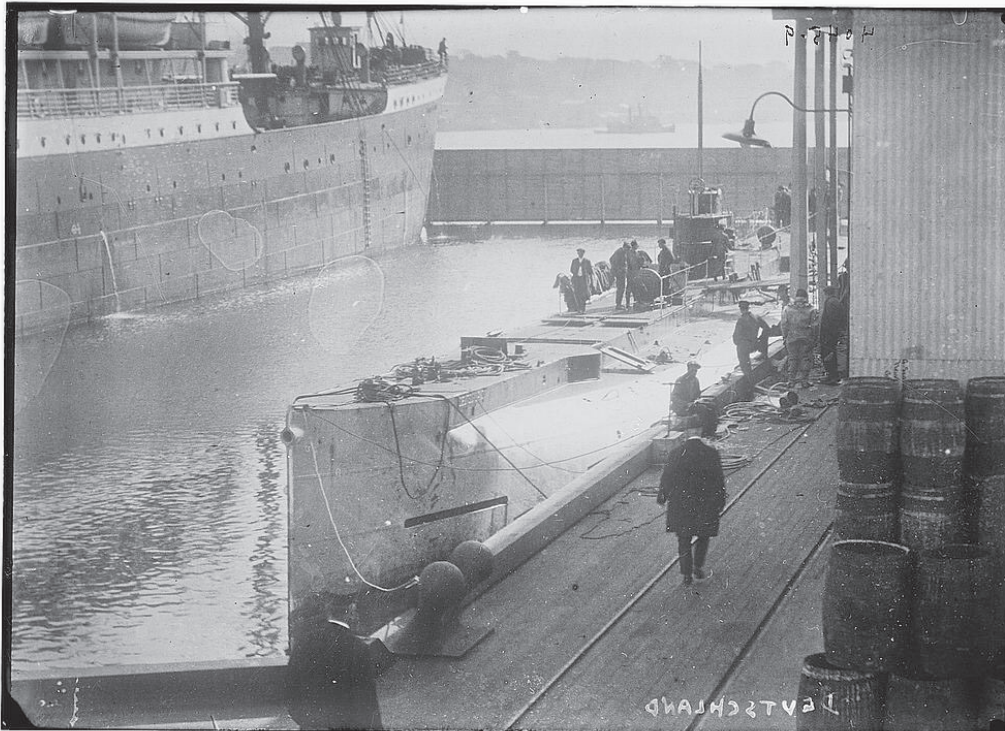
NOTICE!

TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

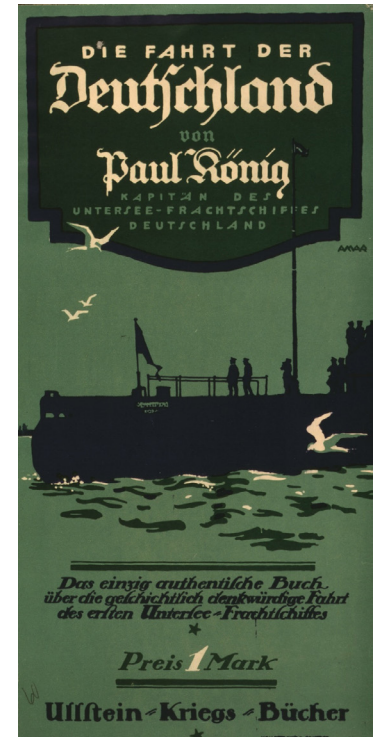
IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY
WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 22, 1915.

Figure 1: Ambassador von Bernstorff issued an advisory in April 1915 warning Americans of the danger of sailing on British-flagged vessels through the Atlantic war zone. This particular specimen appeared in the *New York Times* on May 1, 1915 just 6 days before the *Lusitania* went down (courtesy of the *New York Times*).

November 1916 saw Georg Ahrens dispatched from the embassy in Washington to New London, Connecticut, where the *Deutschland* had just arrived after another crossing on November 1 (Fig. 2a). Reporters clamored to interview its gregarious and charismatic skipper, Paul König (Fig. 2b), who was, by now, something of a celebrity. König revealed that he had outfoxed 7 British warships during this particular trip and allowed that he was carrying roughly 500 tons of cargo worth more than \$10 million [4]. (This cargo would be valued at roughly \$280 million in inflation-adjusted dollars today.) Speculation held that stocks, bonds, and jewels were among the haul. Ahrens, who was more reserved, preferred to get on with his duties. He spent the day aboard the *Deutschland* being debriefed, presumably exchanging information on diplomatic matters and perhaps even matters related to the War. To this day, the exact nature of diplomatic meetings on board the *Deutschland* whenever it was in a US port remain unknown, but all details would be duly reported back to Ahrens' boss, Ambassador von Bernstorff.



(a) The *Deutschland* in port at New London.



(b) König's book.

Figure 1: The *Deutschland* was docked at the port of New London in Connecticut for 2 weeks in early November 1916. Its skipper, Paul König, enjoyed a brief celebrity status prior to US entry into the War and he penned a book, *Voyage of the Deutschland* [3], about the blockade-running exploits of his ship. It proved to be a morale booster on the German home front during the War (respective images courtesy of the George Grantham Bain Collection of the US Library of Congress and Wikimedia Commons).

At that time, the US was very careful to maintain both neutrality itself and all appearances of neutrality. It did not want to be wrongly perceived as giving safe harbor to any combatant warships. So, Ahrens had to go about his duties that day in the midst of various inspections, including from US Navy officers, who concluded that the only weapon on board the *Deutschland* was Captain König's personal sidearm. The Navy once again cleared the sub as a merchant vessel and not a warship. By the end of his stay, Ahrens had come away with the information he needed for his report and would also fetch back a large cache of mail and dispatches from Germany for the embassy to process and forward.

Back in Washington, Georg Ahrens continued to diligently perform his various attaché duties, all amidst an increasingly deteriorating atmosphere that portended eventual US entry into the War. By early 1917, diplomatic relations were close to a complete collapse and Ambassador Bernstorff was ordered to close the embassy and return to Germany. The logistics were no trifling matter. It would involve not only safely moving a complement of around 60 embassy staffers, counselors, messengers, typists, maids, valets, etc. from Washington to New York, but also arranging similar travel for almost another 100 recalled German expatriates scattered around the country. Ahrens again went about his duties with characteristic efficiency, prioritizing what had to be taken in terms of files, equipment, etc. and what would have to be destroyed, as well as organizing the large-scale packing, crating, and movement of all this government bulk to the train station. The preparations for evacuation must have had an orderly chaos similar to that of a large circus breaking-down the big top and hurrying elephants onto the train to race to the next city.

The *New York Times* reported that the American government was sufficiently concerned about the safety of Bernstorff and his staff at this point that it assigned a detail of 20 discretely-armed US Secret Service agents to escort the group. Under cover of darkness, all parties rendezvoused at Washington's Union Station, boarding a special train that departed a few minutes after midnight on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1917, making its way up the coast 220 miles to New York, where the steamer *Frederik VIII* was docked at Hoboken, just across the Hudson River. The embassy staff was ushered aboard the neutrally-flagged liner by the Secret Service, which then sailed from America under guaranteed safe passage from the British and French governments. It was the close of another cloak-and-dagger operation that Georg Ahrens helped to spearhead, but which he did not especially relish. The US would enter World War I a few months later in April, 1917 and fighting would rage on for another year and a half until the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

Back to America: Promotion and Re-opening the St. Louis Consul

Georg Ahrens busied himself with various diplomatic duties during and after the War. As international relations increasingly returned to normal, he was eager to again receive a foreign assignment, but none was yet forthcoming. In the meantime, he had married Hildegard Schmidt zur Nedden and they would have their first child, Johann Georg, in December of 1922. Ironically, the St. Louis consular office had already been re-established after the War by 1921 under Dr. Hugo Mundt, but the Weimar government in Germany closed it again near the end of 1923 because of budgetary issues wrought by hyperinflation. But, in a 1925 reversal, it was yet again decided to re-open the office because of St. Louis' commercial, industrial, and cultural importance, including the fact that a large fraction of its population was German-American and that there were important business and industrial connections associated with this group. Ahrens was very pleased when he learned that he would be appointed as Consul General in St. Louis. It would be a welcome move and a welcome promotion.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* announced Ahrens' arrival in St. Louis on October 20, 1925 (Fig. 3). He took up temporary residence at the Jefferson Hotel, which had opened in 1904 as part of the gigantic supporting infrastructure for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, more popularly known as the St. Louis World's Fair. His immediate concern would be the workaday tasks associated with re-establishing the office itself, which had now been defunct for 2 years. Once things were up and running, he would then have some breathing room to send for his wife and son.

One of the first substantive matters requiring his attention involved Americans who held German government loan securities. Hyperinflation in Germany peaked around 1923, but the replacement of the old Papiermark with the new Reichsmark in 1924 had already started to bring some financial stability. Now, the Weimar government was exchanging old securities denominated in Papiermarks for new ones in Reichsmarks at an exchange rate of 40 to 1. Ahrens announced the exchange program in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on February 10, 1926, noting that a special department on the 3-rd floor of the gigantic First National Bank, 510 Locust Street at Broadway, had been established to handle transactions for people in Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. Security holders would have until May 15 to surrender their notes.

Exchanges went relatively smoothly, but there was an important and very problematic by-product. The large and shifting world of pre-war, wartime, and post-war German securities, which included emergency loan bonds, was very confusing to an inexperienced public and had opened huge opportunities for shady financial offerings. By April, Ahrens was again speaking directly to the public through the *Post-Dispatch* and other St. Louis dailies to warn about unscrupulous brokering of German financial instruments, hoping to educate the general public against being swindled through purchases of nearly-worthless paper. Aside from his altruistic purposes, he also wanted to be sure that this issue could not be used to make post-war anti-German sentiments any worse than what they already were.

Pastoral Duties and Cultural Gemütlichkeit

By 1927, Ahrens' consular office had been firmly established in the Planter's Building, 408 Pine Street, in downtown St. Louis (Fig. 4). He had fully settled-in and was diligently supervising the office and seeing to all of its official duties; they were numerous. He tended to expatriate Germans living in St. Louis, to American travelers to Germany for visas and such, to American and German firms wanting to do business with each other, and to the many miscellaneous financial, diplomatic, and government matters that seemed to arise on a regular basis. These activities comprised his "pastoral portfolio".

But, he also reveled in the cultural aspects that were closer to the *Gemütlichkeit* end of his job-description's spectrum. These were



Figure 3: Dr. Georg Ahrens, German Consul, at around the time he arrived in St. Louis in 1925 (photo *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*).

crucial to promoting German–American friendship and relations, especially after the War. His first really big event was hosting his new boss, Ambassador Baron Adolf von Maltzan, for a 4 day visit in March, 1927. It was the first time a German Ambassador had visited St. Louis since before the War and the Baron was eager to speak on increasing trade and the ties of business between the two countries. He gave a number of speeches around town, always extolling, as the *St. Louis Post–Dispatch* reported, the principle that “sound trade relations are the strongest ties with which nations can be linked together”. Ahrens and his boss were very much alike in mind.

As 1927 rolled into 1928, it seemed like Ahrens’ activities in the realm of cultural–diplomatic *Gemütlichkeit* and German–American *Freundschaft* grew more frequent, everything from hosting Dr. Otto Vollbehr’s famous collection pre–1500 books with Frederick Lehmann at the Chase Hotel*, to speaking at large civic events, like the German, Swiss, and Austro–Hungarian program of the Women’s National Exposition at the St. Louis Coliseum, to hosting German industrialists interested in touring St. Louis’ manufacturing infrastructure. Though constantly maintaining a packed schedule, it was work he enthusiastically embraced and which suited him much more than the cloak–and–dagger episodes that dotted his earlier assignment in Washington. But this general environment of *Gemütlichkeit* was also not without some externally–imposed friction. As noted above, St. Louis was, in those days, an important intersectional meeting place of notable German out–of–towners and wealthy, German–American captains of industry, the latter who were eager to greet and mingle with their visiting *Landsmänner*. In fact, competitions of sorts would break out on certain occasions among would–be hosts and none of these industrialists was more insistent than the head of the Anheuser–Busch Brewing Association, August A. Busch Sr. (Fig. 5), especially if the German parties in question were of sufficient interest or importance. So, the role of peace–keeping impresario among St. Louis’ heavyweight German–American industrialists would gradually become an additional, though unofficial part of Georg Ahrens’ job portfolio.

The first high–pressure test of his brokering skills came in May 1928 when Hermann Köhl, Günther von Hünefeld, and James Fitzmaurice, by then known as *Die Drei Luftmusketiere*, visited St. Louis shortly after completing the first east–to–west trans–Atlantic airplane crossing [6]. Their feat, which experts doubted was even feasible at the time, came after numerous aviators had perished in prior attempts.



Figure 5: August A. Busch Sr. (right) with his mother Lillian (Mrs. Adolphus Busch; center) and his nephew Adalbert Von Gontard (left) circa 1923 (photo courtesy of the George Grantham Bain Collection, US Library of Congress).



Figure 4: Georg Ahrens’ consular office operated out of the Planter’s Building, which had originally opened in 1894 as the Planter’s Hotel. This particular photo was taken circa 1972, when it was by then known as the Cotton Belt building, subsequent to the St. Louis Southwestern Railroad, popularly known as the Cotton Belt, moving its corporate offices there (courtesy Historic American Buildings Survey collection, US Library of Congress).

It was a remarkable moment of aeronautical achievement about which Georg Ahrens, always keen to promote German–American friendship, would comment in a May 15, 1928 article in the *Post–Dispatch*:

I am glad it was the German people who were first to reciprocate the visit of Colonel Lindbergh... It should go far toward bringing about a stronger friendship between Germany and the United States.

But, the event also created a pressing matter of how to handle their brief stopover in terms of a social schedule. August Busch was adamant; he was not coming into the city just to be part of a gaggle of anonymous admirers at an event someone else arranged; the rough–and–tumble brewer did not play second fiddle [7]. Instead, the *Luftmusketiere* and a proper delegation from the St. Louis establishment were being summoned, as it were, to his country estate out in Affton Missouri [8] to be hosted, entertained, and feted as only August Busch could do. After some wrangling, the requisite arrangements were

*Vollbehr’s collection would later be acquired through an Act of the US Congress by the Library of Congress [5].

negotiated and a caravan of cars carrying Georg Ahrens and more than 20 VIPs, including St. Louis Chamber of Commerce head Harold Bixby, publisher Joseph Pulitzer, and City of St. Louis Mayor Victor Miller, duly trundled 10 miles out rough Gravois road to Busch's estate. The group spent the afternoon around his gigantic dining room table chatting and pontificating with the *Luftmusketiere* on all manner of topics. Busch was impressed with the intrepid flyers and they with him. As for Ahrens, he had deftly averted a potentially serious social crisis, but it would not be the last time he would be called-in to handle matters involving Mr. Busch.

Sporting Affairs

Ahrens and his wife Hildegard would eventually set up housekeeping in a spacious apartment at the Gatesworth Hotel, 245 Union Boulevard, on the north edge of Forest Park. Hildegard had arrived in St. Louis with their older son Johann, now 7, in tow, but the couple had since had another son Rudolf, now 2. Ahrens' consular salary from the German government was even enough for the family to afford live-in help in the person of one Felicity Pitschas, a practical nurse and *Kinderpflegerin* from Berlin, who assisted Hildegard in tending to the children and running the household.

Miss Pitschas' efforts helped to give the Ahrens family some latitude for personal pursuits and one of Georg's was in physical fitness and sports as a component of healthy living. August 12, 1928 was the 150-th anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Jahn, the godfather of the physical fitness movement, and Ahrens was honored to be asked to place a wreath at the Jahn memorial in Forest Park during a large ceremony organized by several of the Turner's clubs in St. Louis. In fact, he often participated in the annual commemoration of Jahn's birthday sponsored by the German Sports Club, which fielded a respectable soccer team in the old St. Louis Municipal League [9]. Ahrens' well-being seemed to reside at the perfect intersection of his personal, social, and professional activities.

One event he was particularly looking forward to was an upcoming wrestling card on October 1, 1929 at the St. Louis Coliseum (Fig. 6) featuring his countryman Richard Schickat**. At 32 years of age and 216 pounds, the German professional wrestler had been recognized as the reigning champion by both the New York and Pennsylvania state athletic commissions after his recent defeat of Jimmy Londos in Philadelphia***. Schickat would be facing the contender, 212 pound Frank Brunowicz of Boston, in the main bout.



Figure 6: The St. Louis Coliseum at Washington and Jefferson Avenues occupied an entire city block, replacing the old St. Louis Exposition and Music Hall (torn down in 1907) as the city's main convention and event center (postcard courtesy of the James R. Powell Route 66 Collection, Curt Teich Postcard Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago IL).

On the evening of the Schickat-Brunowicz match, Ahrens was riding in a car driven by his friend, architect Charles Nagel Jr. While heading east toward the Coliseum, calamity struck at 4475 Washington Blvd. Two cars driven respectively by Albert Stribling, an out-of-town salesman from Mount Vernon, Illinois, and Violet Spooner, a schoolteacher who lived nearby on Forest Park Blvd, collided practically right in front of Nagel and Ahrens. Nagel could not brake fast enough, quickly adding a third car to the steaming wreck. Road travel did not involve the speeds it does today, but the force and lack of modern automotive safety features were still enough to bang-up Ahrens, including a complimentary broken nose, for which he was taken to nearby Barnes Hospital. Ironically, the 3 drivers each walked away without a scratch.

Ahrens missed the bout, which Schickat would incidentally win in the 22-nd minute. The accident came at a particularly bad time because there was yet another important German visitor on the docket that August Busch Sr. was eager to receive in 2 weeks at his castle in Affton, the Lord Mayor of Berlin, Gustav Böss. Arrangements were again negotiated and Busch entertained in his usual

**Richard Schickat had a fairly long career over which he wrestled under 3 successively simplified variations of his last name: Schickat, Schikat, and Shikat. In an October 2, 1929 story in the Post-Dispatch, his manager, Joe "Toots" Mondt, said the simplifications made the name easier to spell for newspaper men, apparently poking fun at the less-than-diligent manner with which some reporters went about their work.

***The nature of wrestling as a sport at that time was most similar to what we would now recognize as Greco-Roman wrestling in the Olympic Games. It is entirely different from the sports-themed entertainment that is generically referred to today as professional wrestling.

splendid fashion with a large luncheon on October 19, 1929. Ahrens was not yet recovered and the prospect of enduring 10 miles of bumpy road to Affton with a broken nose made him glad to be able to sit this particular visit out.

Dr. Ahrens continued this pace over the next few years, balancing official consul duties, family obligations, and his role as a cultural and social nucleus of German–American activities in St. Louis (Fig. 7). All indicators suggest he went about these activities happily and eagerly. However, the days in St. Louis would shortly come to a close for him and his family. The Foreign Service is similar to the priesthood and the military in the sense that one must go where one is sent and Ahrens was notified in 1932 of a pending transfer. After taking his family back home to Germany for a visit, he returned briefly to hand the office over to the new Consul, Reinhold Freitag, at the end of November. The Ahrens family then departed St. Louis the following week for Georg’s next assignment in Mexico.



Figure 7: Dr. Georg Ahrens (center right) presenting the German “Wanderpreis” Cup to German Sport Club President Bernhard Deutschmann (center left) and the first-string players of its soccer team on March 21, 1931 (Image cropped from a photographic portrait by Hans Kaut, 1864–1934, of Kaut Studio, 2048 Victor Street, St. Louis, MO; from author’s collection).

dry campaigns surrounding the First World War and the disastrous experiment of Prohibition that followed, but would likewise not live out the 1930s. With already–severe health problems worsening, he committed suicide at his castle in Affton on February 10, 1934 and the subsequent and gigantic gathering there for his visitation would be the last time Busch would host, so to speak, a group of VIPs at his beloved estate. It is today owned by several of August’s grandchildren and remains open to the public as Grant’s Farm.

Regarding the *Deutschland* (Fig. 2), it immediately became obsolete as a merchant vessel once the US entered the First World War, so it was converted to an armed U–boat (U–155), subsequently sinking more than 40 allied warships over the course of 3 tours of duty. It was surrendered after the Armistice in 1918 and by 1922 had been scrapped. The grand Planter’s Hotel on Pine Street in downtown St. Louis, out of which Georg Ahrens operated the consular office, was razed in 1976, only a few years after the photo in Fig. 4 was taken. The St. Louis Coliseum (Fig. 6) was likewise eventually demolished, having been eclipsed by 2 newer venues, namely the St. Louis Arena and Kiel Auditorium, which opened in 1929 and 1934, respectively.

St. Louis no longer has a German Consul General, but is instead part of the Chicago consular district headed by incumbent Wolfgang Mössinger. Local matters are facilitated by an official network of volunteer assistants, termed Honorary Consuls, of which Paul Oberneufemann is the current assignee for the St. Louis region. Although almost a century has passed since Georg Ahrens’ arrival in St. Louis, the mission of the diplomatic and consular corps remains the same, namely to care for and promote close friendship between the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Acknowledgement

The life and times of Georg Ahrens in America were covered by various news dailies, including the *St. Louis Post–Dispatch*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *New York Times*. Their archives were extraordinarily valuable in researching this story, as were papers from the 1930 United States Census. The author would also like to acknowledge an anonymous gift of photographic portraits originally made by Hans Kaut, which included the image in Fig. 7, and conversation with Craig Thomas, Curator of Animals, at Grant’s Farm.

Epilogue

The Ahrens family had made numerous close and lasting friendships during their time in St. Louis and returned for several visits, as Georg’s duties in Mexico would permit. Sadly, a family tragedy struck in 1938 when their older son, Johann, then 18, died as a result of a bicycle accident while he was in college back in Germany. Ironically, Georg and Hildegard received the news while in America during a visit with their old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Nagel Jr. Ahrens would subsequently hold a series of government, advisory, and foreign office posts during and after the Second World War, ultimately requesting retirement in 1955 and thereafter busying himself with translating Henry Kissinger’s influential book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* into German [10]. Georg Ahrens died in 1967 in the city of Karlsruhe in southwest Germany, with his passing going largely unnoticed by St. Louis newspapers.

Ahrens’ old boss, Ambassador von Bernstorff, left the diplomatic service during the Weimar era and became a member of the German Parliament, serving until 1928. With the growing political turmoil of the 1930s, he left Germany for Switzerland, dying there in 1939. August Busch Sr. (Fig. 5) successfully guided Anheuser–Busch Brewing Association through the anti–German

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DKV Membership Dinner

The DKV Membership Dinner was a lovely chance to come together and show appreciation for all members. We enjoyed music by the Deutschmeister Brass Band and an impromptu dance performance by Die Heimatgruppe with a special appearance by some members of the Volkstanzgruppe. Die Heimatgruppe and Volkstanzgruppe danced to a holiday version of “Rock Mi” to spread the holiday cheer. Dinner and dessert was complimentary for all members to show thanks for all of the hard work and dedication throughout the year. Special thanks to those who volunteered to cook and serve. Thank you to everyone who made this day special.

Olivia Schaffer

