



Paper Trail

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APRIL 2004

ERNST NIEBERGALL, SANDUSKY, OHIO PHOTOGRAPHER



Ernst Niebergall
(from the Charles E. Frohman Collection).

In poor health, with little money, and no family, commercial photographer Ernst Niebergall passed away in Sandusky, Ohio, during the winter of 1954. The memory of the once prolific photographer soon slipped into obscurity. Ironically, this nearly forgotten individual was the creator of a visual record of lasting importance to the history of Lake Erie's western basin and its southern shoreline communities.

Niebergall emigrated alone from his native Germany in 1904 to live in Montreal. Four years later, at the age of 32, he entered the United States and settled in Sandusky, Ohio. It was a time of optimism, change, and dynamic growth. Old ways were giving way to the twentieth century's new technology. From freight trains and flights of early aviators to fisherman, farmers, and factory workers, Niebergall recorded the everyday lives of those living along Lake Erie's southern shoreline. In the process, he captured their spirit, energy, and ingenuity.

Technology and innovation were not Niebergall's only interests. He photographed winter storms, rock formations, seagulls, skaters on Sandusky Bay, and vacationers enjoying

Cedar Point's sandy beaches. His pictures were featured frequently in newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, and on post cards.

During World War I, the federal government began to view Niebergall with suspicion. His alien status and German citizenship marked him as a potential enemy. Agents of the U. S. Justice Dept. impounded his 14 cameras. After peace was declared, Niebergall resumed his work. Former clients commissioned Niebergall to photograph area homes, businesses, organizations, and institutions.

At the outbreak of World War II, federal officials appeared once again at Niebergall's door to take possession of his cameras. The government returned them to him at the end of the conflict, but times had changed. Color photography all but destroyed the market for his black and white prints. Poor health and declining business took their toll on the aging photographer. Although Niebergall remained devoted to his profession, he described his existence as one of "living from hand to mouth."

Sandusky industrialist and local historian Charles E. Frohman recognized the historic value of Niebergall's images. He acquired many of them and later included nearly 4,000 prints and negatives in his donation to the Hayes Presidential Center. Since then, Niebergall's work has been featured in dozens of books, magazines, newspapers, and videos. Today, they tell a different story. They provide a window on the past, helping us to better understand an earlier generation as they experimented with and adapted to new ideas and inventions that would soon become our modern world.

Many of Niebergall's photographs are featured in [*Lake Erie's Yesterdays*](#), the online image database made available through a partnership between the Hayes Presidential Center, the Sidney Frohman Foundation and the OhioLINK Digital Media Center.