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[JOIN+SUPPORT](#)
[TEACHERS+STUDENTS](#)
[OUR SERVICES](#)
[TRAIN](#)
[HOME](#) > [OUR COLLECTIONS](#) > [REFERENCE](#) > [NOTABLE HOOSIERS](#) > [KURT VONNEGUT](#)

Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History

Traces

On May 29, 1945, 21 days after the Germans had surrendered to the victorious Allied armies, a father in Indianapolis received a letter from his son who had been listed as "missing in action" following the Battle of the Bulge. The youngster, an advance scout with the 106th Infantry Division, had been captured by the Germans after wandering behind enemy lines for several days. "Bayonets," as he wrote his father, "aren't much good against tanks." Eventually, the Indianapolis native found himself shipped to a work camp in the open city of Dresden, where he helped produce vitamin supplements for pregnant women. Sheltered in an underground meat storage locker, the Hoosier soldier managed to survive a combined American/British firebombing raid that devastated the city and killed an estimated 135,000 people – more than the number of deaths in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. After the bombing, the soldier wrote his father, "we were put to work carrying corpses from Air-Raid shelters; women, children, old men; dead from concussion, fire or suffocation. Civilians cursed us and threw rocks as we carried bodies to huge funeral pyres in the city."

Freed from his captivity by the Red Army's final onslaught against Nazi Germany and returned to America, the soldier – Kurt Vonnegut Jr. – tried for many years to put into words what he had experienced during that horrific event. At first, it seemed to be a simple task. "I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen," Vonnegut noted. It took him more than 20 years, however, to produce

The book was worth the wait. Released to an American society struggling to come to grips with its involvement in another war – in a small Asian country called Vietnam – Vonnegut's magnum opus struck a nerve, especially with young people on college campuses across the country. Although its author termed the work a "failure," readers did not agree, as it became a bestseller and pushed Vonnegut into the national spotlight for the first time.

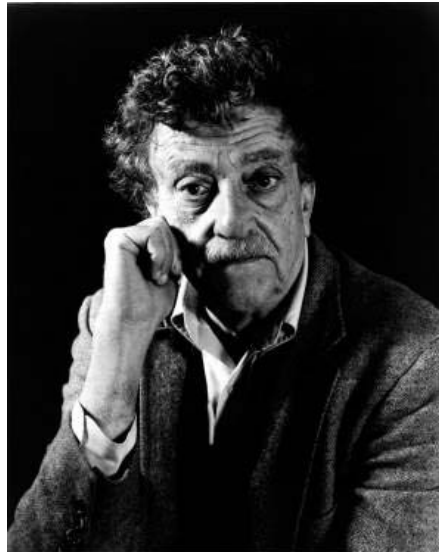
His experiences, it seems, have always helped shape what Vonnegut writes. Especially important was his life growing up as a boy in Indianapolis. Revisiting his birthplace in 1986 to deliver the annual McFadden Memorial Lecture, Vonnegut told a North Central High School audience: "All my jokes are Indianapolis. All my attitudes are Indianapolis. My adenoids are Indianapolis. If I ever severed myself from Indianapolis, I would be out of business. What people like about me is Indianapolis." This connection has not escaped notice by readers. Fellow Hoosier writer Dan Wakefield once observed that in most of Vonnegut's books there is at least one character from Indianapolis and compared it to Alfred Hitchcock's habit of appearing in each of his movies.

The connection between the Vonneguts and Indianapolis stretch back to the 1850s when Clemens Vonnegut Sr., formerly of Westphalia, Germany, settled in the city and became business partners with a fellow German named Vollmer. When Vollmer disappeared on a trip out West, Vonnegut took over a business that grew into the profitable Vonnegut Hardware Company – a company Kurt Vonnegut Jr. worked for during the summers while attending high school at Shortridge.

Kurt's grandfather, Bernard Vonnegut, unlike his grandson, disliked working in the hardware store. Possessing an artistic nature, he studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and also received training in Hannover, Germany. After a short stint working in New York, Bernard returned to Indianapolis in 1883 and joined with Arthur Bohn to form the architectural firm of Vonnegut & Bohn. The firm designed such impressive structures as the Das Deutsche Haus (The Athenaeum), the first Chamber of Commerce building, the John Herron Art Museum, Methodist Hospital, the original L.S. Ayres store and the Fletcher Trust Building.

Kurt Vonnegut's father, Kurt Vonnegut Sr., followed in his father's footsteps and became an Indianapolis architect, taking over his father's firm in 1910. On Nov. 22, 1913, Kurt Senior married Edith Lieber, the daughter of millionaire Indianapolis brewer Albert Lieber. The couple had three children, Bernard, born in 1914; Alice, in 1917; and, Kurt Jr., who came into the world on Nov. 11, 1922.

Fourth-generation Germans, the Vonnegut children were raised with little, if any, knowledge about their German heritage –



KurtVonnegut©RosemaryCarroll

a legacy, Kurt believed, of the anti-German feelings vented during World War I. With America's entry into the Great War on the side of the Allies, anything associated with Germany became suspect. In Indianapolis, the city orchestra disbanded because its soprano soloist was German; city restaurants renamed kartoffel salade as Liberty cabbage; the Deutche Haus became the Athenaeum; and the board of education stopped the teaching of German in schools. The anti-German feeling so shamed Kurt's parents, he noted, that they resolved to raise him "without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the music or the oral family histories which my ancestors had loved. They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism." His parents did pass on to their youngest child their love of joke-telling, but, with the world his parents loved shattered by World War I, Vonnegut also learned, as he put it, "a bone-deep sadness from them."

As the offspring of a wealthy family, the two eldest Vonnegut children had been educated at private schools – Bernard at Park School and Alice at Tudor Hall School for Girls. The Great Depression, however, reduced the elder Vonnegut's commissions to a mere trickle. Hit hard in the pocketbook, the Vonneguts pulled young Kurt from the private Orchard school after the third grade and enrolled him at Public School No. 43, the James Whitcomb Riley School, located just a few blocks from the family's Illinois Street home.

Kurt Jr.'s mother Edith, a refined lady used to comfort and privilege, attempted to reassure her son that when the Depression ended he would resume his proper place in society – swim with the children of Indianapolis's leading families at the Athletic Club, play tennis and golf with them at the Woodstock Golf and Country Club. But Kurt thrived in his new surroundings. "She could not understand," he later said, "that to give up my friends at Public School No. 43 ... would be for me to give up everything." Even today, Vonnegut said, he feels "uneasy about prosperity and associating with members of my parents' class on that account."

Part of that unease may have come from the idealism he learned while a public school student – an idealism that is often reflected in his writings. To Vonnegut, America in the 1930s was an idealistic, pacifistic nation. While in the sixth grade, he said he was taught "to be proud that we had a standing army of just over a hundred thousand men and that the generals had nothing to say about what was done in Washington. I was taught to be proud of that and to pity Europe for having more than a million men under arms and spending all their money on airplanes and tanks. I simply never unlearned junior civics. I still believe in it."

Along with instilling Vonnegut with a strong sense of ideals and pacifism, his time in Indianapolis's schools started him on the path to a writing career. Attending Shortridge High School from 1936 to 1940, Vonnegut during his junior and senior years edited the Tuesday edition of the school's daily newspaper. His duties with the newspaper, then one of the few daily high school newspapers in the country, offered Vonnegut a unique opportunity to write for a large audience – his fellow students. It was an experience he described as being "fun and easy." "It just turned out," Vonnegut noted, "that I could write better than a lot of other people. Each person has something he can do easily and can't imagine why everybody else has so much trouble doing it." In his case that something was writing.

Looking back on his school days, Vonnegut felt lucky to have been born in Indianapolis. "That city," he writes in his collection "gave me a free primary and secondary education richer and more humane than anything I would get from any of the five universities I attended." Vonnegut also had high praise for the city's widespread system of free libraries whose attendants seemed, to his young mind, to be "angels of fun and information."

After graduating from Shortridge, Vonnegut went east to college, enrolling at Cornell University. If he had gotten his way, the young man would have become a third-generation Indianapolis architect. His father, however, was so full of sorrow and anger about having had no work as an architect during the Great Depression, that he persuaded his son that he too would be unhappy if he pursued the same trade. Instead of architecture, Vonnegut was urged by his father to study something useful, so he majored in chemistry and biology. In hindsight, Vonnegut believed it was lucky for him as a writer that he studied the physical sciences instead of English. Because he wrote for his own amusement, there were no English professors to tell him for his own good how bad his writing might be or one with the power to order him what to read. Consequently, both reading and writing have been "pure pleasure" for the Hoosier author.

To the young Vonnegut, Cornell itself was a "boozy dream," partly because of the alcohol he imbibed and also because he found himself enrolled in classes for which he had no talent. He did, however, find success outside the classroom by working for the

Before the end of his freshman year, Vonnegut had taken over the "Innocents Abroad" column, which reprinted jokes from other publications. He later moved on to write his own column, called "Well All Right," in which he produced a series of pacifistic articles. Reminiscing about his days at Cornell at an annual banquet for the

Vonnegut recalled that he was happiest at the university when he was all alone late at night "walking up the hill after having helped put the to bed."

Vonnegut's days at the eastern university were interrupted by America's entry into World War II. "I was flunking everything by the middle of my junior year," he admitted. "I was delighted to join the army and go to war." In January 1943, he volunteered for military service. Although he was rejected at first for health reasons – he had caught pneumonia while at Cornell – the Army later accepted him and placed him in its Specialized Training Program, sending him to study mechanical engineering at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and at the University of Tennessee.

Some have wondered how Vonnegut, who stresses pacifism in his work, could volunteer so eagerly to go to war. It is a question even Vonnegut has trouble answering. "As for my pacifism," he has said, "it is nothing if not ambivalent." When he asks himself what person in American history he would most like to have been, Vonnegut admits to nominating none other than Joshua Lawrence Chamberlin, college professor and Civil War hero whose valiant bayonet charge helped save the day for the Union at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Although Vonnegut received instruction on the 240-millimeter howitzer, which he later dubbed the ultimate terror weapon of the Franco-Prussian War, he eventually ended up as a battalion intelligence scout with the 106th Infantry Division, which was based at Camp Atterbury, just south of Indianapolis. It was while he was with the 106th that he met and became friends with Bernard V. O'Hare, who joined Vonnegut as a POW in Dresden and would go on to play a large role in the genesis of

On Mother's Day in 1944, Vonnegut received leave from his duties and returned home to find that his mother had committed suicide the previous evening. Edith Vonnegut had grown increasingly depressed over her family's lost fortune and her inability to remake that fortune by selling fiction to popular magazines of the day. She studied magazines," her son recalled, "the way gamblers study racing forms." Although Edith was a good writer, Vonnegut noted that she "had no talent

for the vulgarity the slick magazines required." Fortunately, he added, he "was loaded with vulgarity," when he grew up he was able to make her dream come true by writing for such publications as
and

Three months after his mother's death, Vonnegut was sent overseas just in time to become engulfed in the last German offensive of the war – the Battle of the Bulge. Captured by the Germans, Vonnegut and other American prisoners were shipped in boxcars to Dresden – "the first fancy city" he had ever seen, Vonnegut said. As a POW, he found himself quartered in a slaughterhouse and working in a malt syrup factory. Each day, he listened to bombers drone overhead on their way to drop their loads on some other German city. On Feb. 13, 1945, the air raid siren went off in Dresden and Vonnegut, some other POWs and their German guards found refuge in a meat locker located three stories under the slaughterhouse. "It was cool there, with cadavers hanging all around," Vonnegut said. "When we came up the city was gone. They burnt the whole damn town down."

In recalling the aftermath of the bombing, which created a firestorm that killed approximately 135,000 people, for the Vonnegut described walking into the city each day to dig into basements to remove the corpses as a sanitary measure:

Freed from captivity by Russian troops, Vonnegut returned to the United States and married Jane Marie Cox on Sept. 1, 1945. The young couple moved to Chicago where Vonnegut worked on a master's degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago. While going to school, he also worked as a reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. Failing to have his thesis, "Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales," accepted, Vonnegut left school to become a publicist for General Electric's research laboratories in Schenectady, N.Y. As an aside, in 1971, the University of Chicago finally awarded Vonnegut a master's degree in anthropology for his novel

While working for GE, Vonnegut began submitting stories to mass-market magazines. His first published piece "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," appeared in Feb. 11, 1950, issue – an article for which he received \$750 (minus, of course, a 10 percent agent's commission). Writing his father of his success, Vonnegut confidently stated: "I think I'm on my way. I've deposited my first check in a savings account and ... will continue to do so until I have the equivalent of one year's pay at GE. Four more stories will do it nicely. I will then quit this goddamn nightmare job, and never take another one so long as I live, so help me God."

Vonnegut was almost as good as his word. He quit his job at GE in 1951 and moved to Cape Cod to write full time. Although he sold a steady stream of stories to a succession of magazines, the Hoosier writer did have to take other jobs to supplement his income. He worked as an English teacher in a school on Cape Cod, wrote copy for an advertising agency, and opened one of the first Saab dealerships in the United States. With his short stories, and novels like *Player Piano*, published in 1952, and *The Sirens of Titan*, released in 1959, Vonnegut was often typecast by critics as a science fiction writer. "The feeling persists," Vonnegut has said, "that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works, just as no gentleman wears a brown suit in the city." It was also during these years that his father and sister died.

In the novels Vonnegut published leading up to which also included such works as
and themes emerged that would find their full flowering with

There is, according to Vonnegut, an "almost intolerable sentimentality beneath everything" he writes – a sentimentality he might have learned from a black cook employed by the Vonnegut family named Ida Young. Young often read to the young Kurt from an anthology of idealistic poetry about "love which would not die, about faithful dogs and humble cottages where happiness was, about people growing old, about visits to cemeteries, about babies who die." The essence of Vonnegut's work might be best expressed by one of his characters, crazed millionaire Elliot Rosewater, who proclaims "Goddamn it, you've got to be kind." After all, Vonnegut has reminded us time after time, "pity is like rust to a cruel social machine."

After briefly touching on his World War II experience in other works – , for example, hallucinates that Indianapolis becomes engulfed in a firestorm – Vonnegut finally, in 1969, delivered to the reading public a book dealing with the Dresden bombing. is the story of Billy Pilgrim, like Vonnegut, a young infantry scout captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge and taken to Dresden where he and his other prisoners survive the Feb. 13, 1945, firebombing of the city. Pilgrim copes with his war trauma through time travels to the planet Tralfamadore, whose inhabitants have the ability to see all of time – past, present and future – simultaneously. The book is so short, jumbled and jangled, Vonnegut explained, because "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again."

Vonnegut's strange, yet fascinating, trip through World War II, which one critic called "an inspired mess," did not come easy. He worked on the book on and off for many years. In 1967, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and returned to Dresden with his fellow POW Bernard O'Hare to gather material for the book. Three years earlier, Vonnegut had visited O'Hare at his Pennsylvania home and received, as he recounts in the opening chapter to a rather chilly reception from his friend's wife, Mary, who believed the Hoosier author would gloss over the soldiers' youth and write something that could be turned into a movie starring Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. "She freed me," Vonnegut reflected, "to write about what infants we really were: 17, 18, 19, 20, 21. We were baby-faced, and as a prisoner of war I don't think I had to shave very often. I don't recall that was a problem."

He promised Mary O'Hare that if he ever finished his Dresden book there would be no parts in it for actors like John Wayne; instead, he'd call it "The Children's Crusade." Vonnegut kept his word.

with its recapitulation of previous themes and characters (such old favorites as Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater and Howard Campbell Jr. appear), brings together in one book all of what Vonnegut had been trying to say about the human condition throughout his career. With wild black humor mixed with his innate pessimism and particular brand of compassion, Vonnegut asks his readers not to give up on their humanity, even when faced with potential disaster – offering as an example Lot's wife who was turned into a pillar of salt for daring to look back at her former home.

Although Vonnegut considered the book a failure – it had to be, he said, as it “was written by a pillar of salt” – the public disagreed. Written during the height of the Vietnam War, *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s compassion in the face of terrible slaughter struck a nerve with an American populace trying to come to grips with the war and a society that seemed to be, at best, headed for major changes. After all, Vonnegut’s book was released during a year that saw such shocking events as Neil Armstrong taking the first step on the moon, the New York Mets winning the World Series, more than a half a million youngsters gathering on Max Yasgur’s dairy farm in New York for a music festival called Woodstock, and the uncovering of a massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American troops in a village named My Lai. *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s success, and the release of a feature film based on the book in 1972, gained Vonnegut a position as an American cultural icon. College students, in particular, responded well to Vonnegut’s sense of the absurd, his Cassandra-like warnings about the bleak future the planet faced. “I do moralize,” Vonnegut has admitted. He added that he tells his readers “not to take more than they need, not to be greedy. I tell them not to kill, even in self defense. I tell them not to pollute water or the atmosphere. I tell them not to raid the public treasury.”

For those wondering about the phrase “So it goes” which appears every time a character dies in *Slaughterhouse Five* (which happens 103 times, by the way), Vonnegut was inspired to use the phrase after reading French author Celine’s masterpiece, *Le Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Using the phrase, Vonnegut noted, exasperated many critics, and seemed fancy and tiresome to him too, but it “somehow had to be said.”

Since its publication, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has retained its reputation as Vonnegut’s greatest, and most controversial, work. It has been used in classrooms across the country, and also been banned by school boards. In 1973, school officials in Drake, N.D., went so far as to confiscate and burn the book, an action Vonnegut termed “grotesque and ridiculous.” He was glad, he added, that he had “the freedom to make soldiers talk the way they do talk.” I, for one, like Vonnegut’s idea on how to end book-banning in the United States. Under his plan, every candidate for a school board position should be hooked up to a lie detector and asked, “Have you read a book from start to finish since high school? Or did you even read a book from start to finish in high school?” Those who answer no would not be eligible for service on a school board.

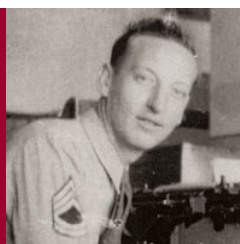
A final thought on *Slaughterhouse-Five* from its writer, who today continues to produce quality literature. Asked for his thoughts on the book, Vonnegut responded by claiming that only one person on the entire planet benefited from the bombing. “The raid,” Vonnegut said, “didn’t shorten the war by half a second, didn’t free a single person from a death camp. Only one person benefited – not two or five or ten. Just one.” That one person was Vonnegut who, according to his own reckoning, has received over the years about five dollars for every corpse.

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