

Max Kämper's Introduction to the New World

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Abstract

Twenty-seven year old engineer Max Eduard Kämper arrived in America at 4:00 pm on May 16, 1907 and was greeted by a thunderstorm. His presumed goals were to study American manufacturing methods, learn English, and enrich himself musically. New York had so many German immigrants at the time that German was the second most common language spoken in the city. He stayed at the Belvedere House at the corner of 4th Avenue and 18th Street, and the next day visited acquaintances in Newark. He visited New York landmarks and May 20 visited the famed Hippodrome theater. He moved on May 25 to a furnished apartment at 306 East 14th Street, away from the teeming unsanitary tenements of lower Manhattan.

Kämper visited Lidgerwood Hoisting Machines on Dikeman street in Brooklyn near the Brooklyn Bridge on June 3. He applied for employment and began work on Friday, June 7. The firm manufactured steam powered construction elevators and suspension cableways. His beginning salary was \$16 weekly, which was increased to \$18 in August. He carefully wrote all expenditures and salary in his diary, with his last salary from Lidgerwood paid in November.

Max's letters home reflected resentment of the disorganized immigrant culture he found about him. He began to immerse himself in the culture of the city as his English language skills developed.

Music and the arts occupied much of his free time. He began violin lessons with Frau Schwende in Brooklyn on June 17, and purchased a copy of Beethoven sonatas on July 13. He noted it was 95 degrees on July 18 and he had a hay fever attack on July 24. He visited Coney Island with friends from the German student association, Motiv, and corresponded with Motiv colleagues in Germany. An acquaintance, Franz Voelker, spent a night with him on September 26 and the next day Max traveled by train to Inwood, a farming area on the northern tip of Manhattan Island. Records indicate Carl Voelker, perhaps the father of Franz Voelker, lived at 216th street and Bolton Road in Inwood. Many diary entries record the visits he had with the Voelkers, including visits on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

On December 7, Max moved further north in Manhattan to 45 West 25th street, and January 18 moved nearby to 40 West 25th Street. He no longer needed to be near his work at Lidgerwood and the move brought him nearer the cultural center of the city. He heard concerts, visited museums and attended the theater. On December 14, he heard renowned tenor Enrico Caruso sing at the Metropolitan Opera House.

During his 8-1/2 month stay in New York he visited nearly all the famous places in the area, including trips to Buffalo, Albany, and Niagara Falls in New York and New Haven, Connecticut. His diary reflected a change in 1908 as he prepared to leave New York. He visited a steelworks or foundry on January 11. He visited the Voelker's at Inwood on January 31 and said farewell to two other friends on February 1. On February 3 he left New York for the South Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) Steel works. He traveled west visiting steelworks and foundries until he arrived at Louisville, Kentucky on February 22. He took the train to Mammoth Cave on February 24, apparently intent on seeing this natural feature that famed German engineer Max Eyth had visited and surveyed in 1867.