ROBERT WISE IN INDIANA

An Honors Thesis

By

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Robert Wise is one of the most important figures in film history. As the director of many classics, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Run Silent, Run Deep* (1958), *West Side Story* (1961), *The Haunting* (1963), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) and the editor of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), Wise has proven that he can tell a story on the big screen as well as anyone else. But before he began climbing Hollywood’s ladder of success, young “Bob” Wise was just a kid from Indiana, who planned on becoming a journalist. However, as it seems to do so often, Fate changed these plans for Wise and pushed him in the direction of one of his greatest childhood loves – movies. Although a number of resources are available that discuss Wise’s career, few take the time to consider what his life was like before he left Indiana and what his relationship with the state has been like since his departure in 1933. The goal of this document is to discuss these issues.
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ROBERT WISE AND INDIANA: CHILDHOOD

Family background and early life in Winchester.

Robert Wise's parents, Earl and Olive "Ollie" Wise, were married on April 14, 1904 in Darke County, Ohio.¹ Olive Longenecker was presumably born in Darke County in 1886 because the 1880 census places her parents there and because a later census reveals that she turned 33 years old in 1919.² According to the 1920 census, Earl was born in Indiana in 1885, although it is uncertain exactly where he grew up or when he moved to Ohio.³ After Earl and Olive were married, they soon moved to Indiana, and based on information from the 1920 census, their first two sons, Lloyd Eugene Wise and David Edward Wise, were born there in 1905 and 1907, respectively.⁴ Although it might seem that the family moved to Winchester (where Robert was later born) right away, the 1910 census indicates that this was not the case – they were not in Randolph County at this time.⁵ However, it is certain that by September 10, 1914, the family had moved to Winchester because on that day Robert Earl Wise was born.

It seems that Robert had a relatively "normal" childhood. He enjoyed spending
time with children his own age, playing games such as "Red Light," a variation of the classic game, "Tag." In addition to playing games, Wise greatly enjoyed riding his scooter throughout his neighborhood. This apparently would work the young boy into quite a frenzy; one childhood friend recalls commonly meeting up with Wise on a street corner, and Bob would talk so fast that no one could understand him. While Wise sputtered on, his friend was left with no choice but to stand silently until he had finished his rant. The two then went their own separate ways, riding their scooters contently. (Perhaps this excited gibberish is why the 1920 census, taken just a few months after Wise’s fifth birthday, states that he was the only member of his household who could not speak English.)


Of course, his early childhood was not all fun and games – like all children, Wise eventually had to start school. The 1920 census indicates that he had already begun school by September 1, 1919 (just nine days prior to his fifth birthday). Although this was probably pre-school or kindergarten, as opposed to the first grade, it is interesting to note that he must have gotten an academic head start on his brothers, relatively speaking. Because Lloyd was born in 1905, he should have graduated from high school eighteen years later, in 1923 or 1924, and David, born in 1907, should have graduated in 1925 or 1926. However,
Lloyd did not finish school until 1925, and David did not do so until 1927, indicating that both of them started when they were a year older than Robert.\textsuperscript{11}

Regardless, after receiving only a few years of elementary education in Winchester, Robert would have to change schools. In 1923, Earl, a butcher by trade, decided to move the family to the nearby town of Connersville, Indiana, so that he could open a new meat packing company.

**Growing up in Connersville.**

The population of Winchester at the time the Wises left in 1923 was approximately 5,000.\textsuperscript{12} However, Connersville was approximately twice as large, with a population of nearly 10,000.\textsuperscript{13} In addition to the already-larger population, the city began a trend of annexing neighboring land in 1922, meaning that the number of potential customers for Earl would continue to grow.\textsuperscript{14} So, it was decided that Earl and his family would leave Winchester to move to Connersville in 1923, and soon thereafter, Earl opened the Connersville Packing Company.

Robert finished his elementary education at Connersville’s Fifth Street School (less than a five-minute walk from his home at 520 Eastern Avenue.)\textsuperscript{15} In 1927, Wise joined the other children who lived inside city limits at the Connersville Junior High School (many country children, however, remained in rural schools until they were ready to start high school.)\textsuperscript{16} Without official school records or accounts from classmates, we cannot be certain of much about Wise’s elementary and junior high years; however, it is likely that Wise was a superior student throughout school. When students reached Connersville High School as freshmen in the late 1920s, they were placed into one of three scholastic groups, based on
past performance and what their future plans were. Those who did not plan to go on to college and who did not show great scholastic promise were put into one group; those who did not plan to go to college, but who were good students were placed into a second group; and, those who planned on higher education were placed into a third group. Robert Wise was placed into the third group.¹⁷ It is unlikely that he would have been allowed in this group without a strong scholastic background, so it is reasonable to assume that he had always been a good student.

Although he was a good student, Wise was not always studious – in fact, it appears that he was something of a troublemaker at times. In Wise’s senior yearbook, one of his classmates recalls being “bawled out” for skipping study hall one day to go to Elliott’s, a popular hangout across the street from the high school. However, he mentions that the same day that he got in trouble, “Bob Wise” did the same thing and slipped through the fingers of Connersville High School administrators.¹⁸ This mischievous behavior was not confined to school, however. Allen Sykes, a childhood friend of Wise, remembers the events of one
Halloween evening. The two boys, along with a couple of other friends, decided that instead of trick-or-treating, they wanted a bit more excitement. So, they decided to wreak havoc on outhouses of other Connersville citizens. The night came to a screeching halt, when, upon tipping over an outhouse, the boys heard a scream from inside. They ran away as quickly as possible, and the ever-elusive Wise escaped, unpunished, again.¹⁹

Despite occasionally causing mischief, Wise was a good student and also took part in multiple school activities, including a Latin club as well as a service-oriented organization, called the “Hi-Y” club (of which he was elected vice-president during his senior year), and he was a Junior Rotarian.²⁰ However, Bob was not the only Wise who enjoyed being involved in various organizations. Earl Wise was a member of the Rotary Club, and by 1927, he had become president of the Connersville chapter (which might explain Robert’s involvement with the Junior Rotarians.)²¹ Also, his older brother, Lloyd, was the business manager of the high school newspaper staff, and he was a member of the “Oidar Club,” an organization dedicated to studying radio broadcasting and related technology.²²

First tastes of show business.

Besides being involved in standard high school organizations, Wise got some of his first tastes of show business in school. Records show that he was involved in the junior high glee club, and he continued singing for one year in high school.²³ His experience singing earned him the opportunity to be a member of the chorus for a school production of the musical, Miss Cherry Blossom.²⁴ Although this is the only documented involvement that Wise had with high school musicals, he claims to have been involved “behind the scenes” for other productions.²⁵ This is very possible because every year the senior class produced at
least one musical, and these productions were very popular among all high school students; Wise certainly would have been very excited to have the chance to work on such big events.²⁶ Perhaps his involvement with these high school musicals would come in handy on the sets of West Side Story (1961) and The Sound of Music (1965) thirty years later.

However, Wise’s love for show business did not grow solely out of his experiences with the theatre. He came across his interest in film naturally enough. Both of his childhood communities had multiple theaters: Winchester had two (the Cozy and the Lyric)²⁷, and Connersville had three (the Vaudette, the Lyric, and the Auditorium).²⁸ It is difficult to determine how often the young Wise visited the local theaters in Winchester, although it is likely that he went to the movies with his parents or older brothers at least occasionally. Although he does not specifically mention the Winchester theaters, he recalls going to Indianapolis with his family on many Sundays for dinner and a movie at a theater called (confusingly enough) the Lyric.²⁹ It makes sense that if his parents enjoyed movies enough to drive to Indianapolis, they probably patronized local theaters fairly regularly as well.

Wise had become an avid moviegoer in his own right by the time his family moved to Connersville. Many children enjoyed going to the movies by this time; every Saturday, kids from around the city piled into the Lyric, the Vaudette, and the Auditorium to see the weekly matinees, which were commonly Westerns or Action films.³⁰ However, Wise took to the movies a little more than most of his peers. He visited each of Connersville’s theaters “almost as often as the bills changed,” in order to keep abreast of what the stars were up to.³¹ Once, he won a contest and was able to see all of the movies at one theater for free all summer; he has claimed that he was “in heaven” that year.³² His movie-going habit was encouraged by the fact that all three theaters were easily within a ten-minute’s walk of his
house. The Vaudette (located at 604-606 Central Avenue) was even on the same block as the meat market that Earl and Lloyd opened in 1928 (located at 620 Central Avenue); one is left to imagine how many times Bob tried to talk his father out of making him work at the store and letting him go catch a film instead.

Of course, given the frequency that he went to the theaters, it is easy to see that the movies were much more than just a way for Wise to pass the time – he did not just go to the Saturday matinees to see his friends. Movies “took [him] out of [himself] into far away lands and situations and circumstances.” Naturally, they entertained him, but films were much more than just a form of amusement to him. Wise became enthralled with good stories – he lost himself in the images he saw on the screen. In fact, when he was nine or ten, he went one night to see a Douglas Fairbanks Sr. movie shortly after it had been released. He enjoyed the action and the story so much that he decided to stay through to see the film again. When it was half over, he felt a hand on his shoulder – one of his brothers had been sent to make him go home because he was not supposed to be out that late. Although Earl and Olive undoubtedly punished him that night for breaking curfew, this same love of movies and ability to become completely absorbed in stories would help him to achieve excellence in the film industry.
Despite his love for film, he had no idea that he would end up making a career in that industry. In fact, his dream was to go into journalism. He claims that by working for his father at the Connersville Packing Company and later for E.W. Wise and Son Meats (founded in 1928 by Earl and Lloyd), he was able to tell early on that he did not want to deal “one-on-one” with the public. After gaining some experience working (like his brother, Lloyd) for the high school newspaper, The Clarion, and working on his senior yearbook, he thought that journalism was for him. With the help of scholarship money, Wise was able to enter the world of higher education at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana, upon his high school graduation in 1932. He hoped to major in journalism, but he and his family ran into financial trouble that made this impossible. His scholarship only lasted one year and his father’s business had been hit hard by the Depression, so in the spring of 1933, he returned to Connersville, unable to afford a second year of college.
Going to California.

Luckily for Robert, Fate was about to step in. To understand how, though, we need to backtrack a few years. While Wise’s brother, David, was in school, he befriended a boy named Harry Schilling, whose father, Joseph, was the manager of all three theaters in Connersville. The two boys decided when they both finished high school that they would move to Hollywood to “try their hand in getting work at the studios.” Fortunately for David and Harry, Mr. Schilling was able to write the boys very good letters of recommendation because he knew many studio executives, and both young men were able to get jobs at RKO Studios. While Robert was in high school and college, David was working his way up at RKO, and he had landed an accounting job there by the summer of 1933. That summer, David returned home from Los Angeles for the first time since he had left Connersville and found that Robert could not return to Franklin College for a second year. Because there were few jobs in Indiana and because David was confident that he could get his little brother hired at RKO, the Wise family decided that Robert should return to Hollywood with David. Had it not been for the economic hardships of the Wise family in the early 1930s, Robert would have returned to Franklin in the fall of 1933 and would have gone into journalism; however, because E.W. Wise and Son Meats faltered, Robert was able to go on to his successful career in the film industry.
By August of 1933, Wise had left Indiana and had found work in Hollywood. After first serving as a “gofer” at RKO Studios, he worked his way up the ladder of success in the film industry. However, his connections to Indiana did not end in the early 1930s. Long after leaving Indiana, Wise has been known to proclaim, “‘I am not an ex-Hoosier, I am a transplanted Hoosier.’”44 Fittingly, the Hoosier state has honored Wise and his achievements on multiple occasions.

Wise with two high school friends in California, c. 1935. Left to right: Raymond Schneider, Wise, and Allen Sykes. (Courtesy of Allen Sykes.)
Indiana and Robert Wise: Awards and Recognition

Indiana remembers Robert Wise.

Over the years, Robert Wise has received a great deal of attention within the state of Indiana, particularly within his two home communities. He has occasionally received recognition without returning to Indiana, such as on July 19, 2002, when he was named an Indiana Living Legend. However, he has been so touched by recognition three times that he has decided to make the trip back home.

The first time that Robert Wise returned to Indiana and was honored for his achievements was in March of 1967. Although he was only in the state for a few days, he was able to attend the Midwest premier of his film The Sand Pebbles on March 1 at the Lyric Theater in Indianapolis, where he had gone with his parents so often as a child. Also on that day, he was given keys to the cities of Indianapolis and Winchester.

Wise was able to return a bit longer the following year during the first week of June. On June 2, 1968, he finally got a degree from Franklin College; thirty-five years after he had to leave school, Franklin College awarded him an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree. Two days later, the city of Connersville had a banquet in Wise’s honor, and the mayor, Ralph Newquist, declared June 4, 1968 “Robert Wise Day” in Connersville. Likewise, the citizens of Winchester declared the following day to be “Robert Wise Day” in Winchester. (Unfortunately, both of these events were overshadowed by the shooting of Robert F. Kennedy, on the morning of June 5. However, as they say, it is the thought that counts.)

The next time Wise returned to Indiana specifically to be honored was November 3, 1990. On that night, a great number of old classmates and acquaintances from Winchester,
Connersville, and Franklin College, as well as many other interested Hoosiers, attended the dedication of the “Robert E. Wise Center for Performing Arts” at the Connersville High School (housed at a different location than when Wise lived in Connersville). Wise was apparently very touched by the thought, claiming that he would put this honor in the same category as the Oscars that he won for *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*. 50

**Robert Wise’s significance to Indiana.**

There are some people who feel that the people of Indiana (particularly those of Connersville) make “too big a deal” out of Robert Wise. In their opinion, although he has made “a couple of movies,” he has not given any money, to speak of, back to his home communities and, therefore, he does not merit the attention he has received. 51 While it may be true that he has not given a lot of money to Winchester or Connersville, these people may be missing the point of honoring Wise. The reason that communities celebrate their successful citizens is because it demonstrates to the young people in those communities that they can achieve great things no matter where they come from. 52 This hope, above all else, is what Robert Wise has given to his home state – this is why Indiana remembers Robert E. Wise.
3 *14th Census of the United States: Population Information for Randolph County, Indiana*.
4 Ibid.
6 "Interview with Childhood Friend Roy Barnes," Winchester, Indiana, April 19, 2003.
7 "Interview with Childhood Friend Anna Marie Gibbons," Winchester, Indiana, April 19, 2003.
8 Ibid.
9 *14th Census of the United States: Population Information for Randolph County, Indiana*.
10 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 80.
15 "Interview with High School Friend Raymond Schneider," Connersville, Indiana, February 22, 2003 (author's files)
16 "Interview with High School Friends Charles and Jacquemina (Mabee) Heck," Connersville, Indiana, March 10, 2003 (author's files).
17 "Interview with High School Friends Charles and Jacquemina (Mabee) Heck."
18 *Senior Siren*, (Connersville, Indiana: The Senior Class of 1932, 1932), p. 24
20 *Senior Siren*, p. 6.
21 *1927-1928 Connersville City Directory*, p. 17.
22 *1925 Cohiscan*, p. 63.
23 "Interview with High School Friends Charles and Jacquemina (Mabee) Heck."); See also, *Senior Siren*, p. 6.
24 *Senior Siren*, p. 6.
26 "Interview with High School Friends Charles and Jacquemina (Mabee) Heck."
27 "Interview with Monisa Wisener, of the Randolph County Historical/Genealogical Society."
28 Harry M. Smith, p. 142.
30 "Interview with High School Friends Charles and Jacquemina (Mabee) Heck."
32 Ibid.
33 Harry M. Smith, 142.
34 "Conversation with Robert Wisc."
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 *Senior Siren*, p. 6.