

**G. W. Ristau Land Co.**

**G. W. Ristau & Sons**

Kaukauna – Wisconsin

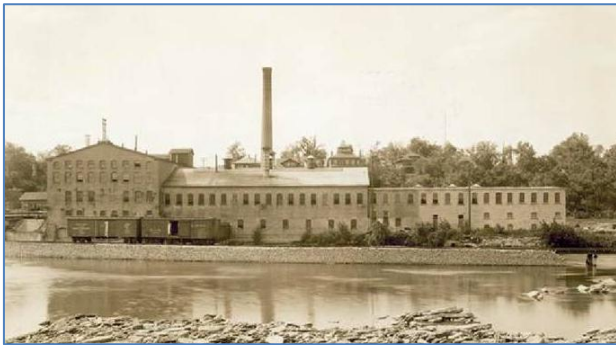


**Ristaucrat, Inc.**

**Updated story based on the well researched Ristau Family Story by  
Ben E. Humphries published in the Gameroom magazine in 1993.**

## The Ristau Family and Business – Kaukauna

Gustave W. Ristau was the son of German immigrants and was born on the 12th February 1872 in Herkimer, New York. His father Gottlieb Ristau (1837-1874) arrived 1871 in New York, and moved via a homestead in Minnesota to Wrightstown in 1874, employed by the government to work on the Fox River Dam at Kaukauna but unfortunately died the same year, when Gustave was only two years old. His mother Wilhelmina Carolina *Zimmerman* (1848-1930), married the farmer Adolph Schultz after about three years, but unfortunately Adolph Schultz died after only six years marriage in Iowa. Wilhelmina (*Minnie*) then moved to Williamsburg to work and support her young family, and finally on the 26th August 1888 she married the farmer William Falkenberg and the new home was made on a farm in York Township until 1919. Gustave had a half-brother Charles H. Ristau, born in Germany (1866-1916), a sister Emelie Ristau (1874-1949) and five half-sisters, Elizabeth Schultz (1877-1958), Anna Schultz (1879-1966), Ida Schultz (1881-1889), Wilhelmina Falkenberg (1891-1918), and Alma Falkenberg (1893-1987).



Atlas Paper Mill, Kaukauna



Hotel Ristau to the left

Gustave moved to Kaukauna in 1890 to his half-brother Charles, working like him and a few cousins at the Atlas Paper Mill. His brother became founding partner of the City Brewery in 1893 on Desnoyer Street with Peter J. Helf, and Gustave soon joined him in the brewing business. In 1896 Gustave and his brother Charles built the Hotel Ristau on the corner of Depot and Taylor Street, leaving the Helf & Ristau brewery in 1897, and operated the hotel and a saloon until 1909. However, Gustave was bought out of the hotel by Charles in mid-April 1906, and he entered the automatic piano business, operating a route from Fond du Lac to Northern Wisconsin. Gustave and Charles had years before furnished a room, the hotel saloon, for workers building a public school nearby and started operating automatic pianos as entertainment. Seeing the potential for this coin-op music business Gustave later began operating Regina Hexaphones which offered a choice of six selections for a nickel. He developed quite a business in the region, operating about 150 Hexaphones in addition to electric pianos. The Hexaphone was produced by the Regina Co. of Rahway in New Jersey from 1906 until 1921, and featured a cylinder mechanism and a large wooden

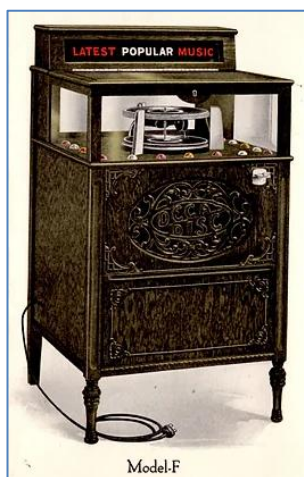
acoustic horn on the front of the machine. They were non-electric and had to be wound 3 turns by the patron after depositing a nickel and making the selection.

Gustave was married the 24th September 1901 to Amelia Zittlow, daughter of Franz and Pauline Zittlow, in the St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wrightstown, where his father was interred at the cemetery. Gustave (*Gus*) and Amelia (*Millie*) had a daughter, Mildred L. (1902-1990), and three sons, Alfred G. (1904-1993), Harold W. (1907-1978), and Arnold E. (1909-1968), and they raised their family at 329 Taylor Street in Kaukauna. In September 1912 Gus and Millie Ristau provided the funds for incorporation of the Player Piano Co. based in Milwaukee to rebuild pianos into players. The Ristaus were incorporating partners with Harley Clayton Kibbey (1875-1948) of the Kibbey Mfg. Co. in Chicago, and the piano cases were made by the Kreiter Piano Mfg. Co. in Marinette run by Waldemar Kreiter (1891-1951), son of the founder Conrad Kreiter (1859-1930), and rebuilt into players at new facilities in Milwaukee and Marinette. However, interests changed for Gustave W. Ristau and he traded his interest in the automatic pianos for some land and then went into real estate business and got away from the coin-op business.

Gustave's brother Charles Henry Ristau passed away aged only 49 on the 10th June 1916, and after ten years away from the coin-op business, Gustave drifted back into slot machines, purchasing equipment from Jennings, Watling, Mills, and Pace. As the interest in slot machines grew, Gustave and his three sons got into that part of the amusement business with the new company G. W. Ristau & Sons. The former company G. W. Ristau Land Co. was a prominent realtor and also registered for many years as a trader in insurance, sewing machines, and automatic pianos.

Alfred, the last living of the three sons recalled seeing the machines around the business and becoming interested in them and how they worked. As they grew up around the business full of the mechanical machines they all started working together with their father in about 1924, shortly after Harold finished high school. In 1927 their interest in inventions resulted in them developing a hobby of building model reproductions of mechanical equipment. In 1928 they completed two miniature locomotives scaled down from full-size blueprints. These locomotives were complete in every detail and all castings and patterns were made by the brothers in their modern workshop in Kaukauna. The models won first prize in a contest in Appleton and commanded widespread praise for their perfection to detail. Their creative abilities even resulted in the construction over several years of a 41 foot cabin cruiser which was completed in 1938. The boat contained several inventions well ahead of its time including a built in radio phonograph and electrically operated sliding doors. The coin-op route operated by the Ristau family continued to grow throughout the late 1920s with operations centering on electric pianos and Regina disc machines.

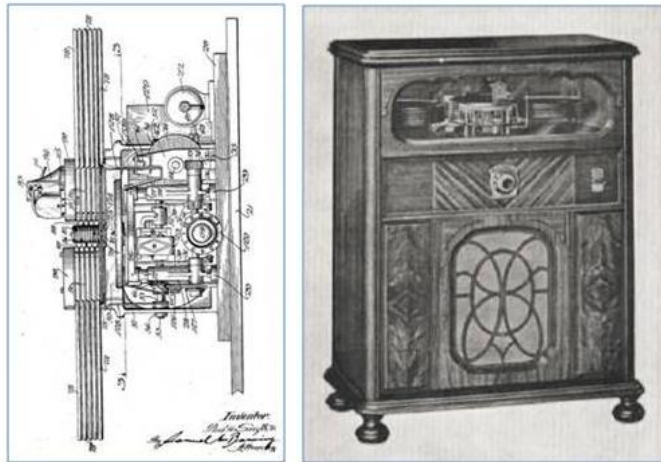
The enterprising Ristau family saw the potential of the newly emerging electric amplification and actually took on a large and enterprising project in 1928 by purchasing the major inventory of the Deca-Disc Company in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, run by plant manager Paul David Bodwell (1892-1953) and tool maker Henry William Bellows (1888-1986). The Ristaus bought out the machines contained in the inventory, between 450 and 600. They played 5 records on one side in sequence and then re-stacked them. The machines were originally acoustic, but Arnold converted them to electric amplification sound systems, especially the coin-op “Model F”, and they were sold throughout the country via advertisements in trade publications like Billboard. This was perhaps one of the first ads in the publication to advertize amplified automatic phonographs. The Ristau family company was at that time called The Atlas Sales Company. David C. Rockola finally purchased the remaining assets of the Deca-Disc Company, and later this tie was to result in the sale of the rights to an unsuccessful changer mechanism to Rock-Ola.



The desire to create and invent which had been hiding in the Ristau brothers finally came out. Alfred (Al) did most of the inventions, with the help of Arnold (Arnie). They designed their own coin-operated phonograph machine and started to build the Ristaucrat “Model A” in 1931 using a mechanism designed by Paul Howard Smythe Jr. (1901-1968). The inventor Smythe developed and patented a changer mechanism with David Sampson Swarthout (1897-1976) as early as 1928, and he later went on to patent several other devices which ended up in major manufacturers jukeboxes in the mid-1930s.

The Ristau sharp looking double-stacking mechanism was all hand tooled and manufactured one at a time. The Ristau brothers produced about 100 of them by custom construction. “We went broke on that, as we tooled up especially for this machine ... the Depression started and everything went to Hell and when we started to tool it up we ran out of money” Alfred Ristau lamented more than 60 years later.

This automatic phonograph was really before its time Alfred recalled, it took a lot of money to promote and develop it correctly, and they did not have the resources to do it properly. The cabinet was their own design, and only the mechanism was patented by Paul H. Smythe Jr. after the venture failed. Alfred Ristau recalled that the mechanism later went to Rock-Ola, and the record stack mechanism design does look similar to models produced by the Rock-Ola company. The patent number 2,004,016 appears on the manufactures plate for Rock-Ola models including the model “1428”.



“Model A”

Mildred Louise Ristau married Frank Earl Meyer on the 21st June 1930, and he also immediately became involved in the family business. However, the Depression was a hard time for all coin machine manufacturers, but as time passed and money started to ease up a bit around 1932, the phonograph started to come into its own, said Alfred Ristau, “...and we realized that there could be a good market for them on a commercial scale”. But during that time we had been working on an idea for a remote method for operating a jukebox. In 1935 we invented the remote wall box. We started to patent it, but stopped, concerned that other companies would find out about it before we could sell it. The brothers had the paperwork ready on the remote, but ran into problems getting two electrical engineers familiar with the patent process to look it over. The processing fee was also a concern. WurliTzer was interested in it, so the Ristau brothers completed the invention and did not process the final applications. The design consisted of two wires connected to the main jukebox. “You would wind it up to the tune you wanted and then press the button. This put flashes over the wire, and the solenoid would pull the number. It was a fully functionally wall box” Alfred Ristau recalled.

The Ristau family went to Minneapolis to meet Homer Earl Capehart, the general sales manager for WurliTzer in North Tonawanda. “We gave them the first chance at the invention, which they bought. Part of the package was we got a couple of hundred WurliTzer “P-12” jukeboxes as part of the deal” Alfred Ristau said. The arrangement



truly put the Ristau family into the coin-op business. WurliTzer in North Tonawanda sold a lot of the “P-12” jukeboxes designed by Charles Nairn Deverall (1888-1972), Alfred recalled, and actually became concerned about a glut on the market, and began offering a trade-in program. The Ristau family began operating a route of about 50 miles around Kaukauna.



Ristau placing large order for Wurlitzer Phonographs.  
Left to right. Standing: Frank E. Meyer, Arnold E. Ristau, Alfred G. Ristau. Seated:  
Harry F. King (1888-1961), Harold W. Ristau, Ristau Sr., and Homer E. Capehart.

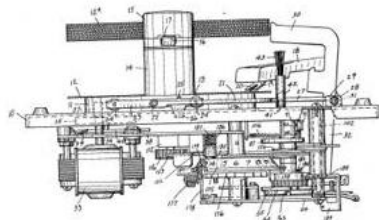
It is uncertain, what WurliTzer actually did with the Ristau wall box invention, but patent records show that the first company patent for a remote device was not applied for until 1938, an invention by engineer Russell Ira Wilcox (1879-1957), who also perfected and patented the now famed ‘Simplex’ mechanism.

In 1936, the creative juices of the Ristaus had started to flow, producing a patented coin-slide mechanism. Alfred Ristau was issued patent 2,096,560 for a ‘Coin Operated Device’, a coin slide mechanism, on the 6th January 1936. Alfred Ristau recalled that the mechanism was a vast improvement over other models, but before they could properly market it, the slug rejector was introduced by Rock-Ola in 1937 and it revolutionized the industry, making their invention un-necessary.

By this time the three brothers and the brother-in-law were working full-time in the business placing WurliTzer jukeboxes throughout the region. Gustave W. Ristau was recognized by WurliTzer in 1937 as one of nine of the oldest music operators in America. Only three years later he unfortunately developed Parkinson’s disease, and he turned over the business to his three sons, but continued to be active as semi-retired in the coin-op business until he died on the 10th February 1951 from complications of the disease.

Late in the 1940s and early 1950s Mildred L. and Frank E. Meyer were registered as proprietors of a tawern in Appleton, and probably no longer involved in the family company.

Slot machines were outlawed in Wisconsin in 1947, and the Ristaus sold their gambling machines and according to Alfred Ristau had some money and did not know what to do next. So the brothers started inventing again as a form of ‘research and development’ for a new product they could sell. Perhaps their earlier association with the Deca-Disc machines and their earlier work on the Ristaucrat “Model A” in 1931 inspired the creation of the 78rpm re-stacker mechanism. On the 2nd August 1946 the patent 2,546,136 for an ‘Automatic Record Changing Phonograph’ was applied for. It incorporated a reloading structure with lifting arms for repositioning the records after they were all played. As many as 12 records could be played and then restacked and prepared for another round of tunes. A couple of operating prototypes were developed and further refined. These changers took place between 1946 and 1949, resulting in patent 2,685,447 ‘Automatic Record Changer for Phonographs’ filed on the 27th August 1949. This mechanism was more sophisticated than the previous, and was specifically designed for the emerging 45rpm records. “The reason we went to a re-stacker was because small records (45rpm) came out. My brother, Arnold, and I were the first ones to get smaller records from RCA and we wanted to see what we could do for a smaller machine” said Alfred.



“45”

The re-stacker was originally made as a little coin operated machine with no selective ability. Then later on the “S-45” was introduced. Then from there the Ristaus built the “Dial-O-Matic” in two models. One machine had a phonograph only, the other a radio and phonograph combination. By the time they tooled up for the “Dial-O-Matic”, television had flooded the country and everybody was buying TV. “If we had come out a year sooner, we would have made a great success of it”, recalled Alfred Ristau. The Ristaucrat “45” non-selective was produced starting in the spring of 1950. The machine played twelve 45rpm records, and was a small 12 inches wide, 14 inches high, and 12½ inches deep, perhaps the smallest coin-op phonograph ever manufactured. It contained a 6-inch Jensen & Oxford speaker and a Sonotone cartridge with a sapphire needle. Weighing in at just 30 pounds, it was introduced to the industry in Billboard on the 24th June 1950 as the ‘Music Box for the spot you forgot’. The model was touted as having ‘precision engineering - with the exactness of a watch ... the strength of steel’. The initial models were available in either a dark

or light hardwood finish and could be set to play one or two selections for a nickel. The \$189.50 price to distributors made it appealing to less productive locations which could not justify \$799.- to \$1,200.- for the competition's full size jukeboxes.

The mechanism simply dropped the records and played them in the order stacked. By July of 1950 more than 1,200 were reportedly already on location in all 48 states and production was stepped up to 100 units per day in the Appleton plant. A competitive advertising campaign was launched to the industry in the summer of 1950, featuring half-page and quarter-page display ads in Billboard. By the end of the production run, more than 3,000 were manufactured.



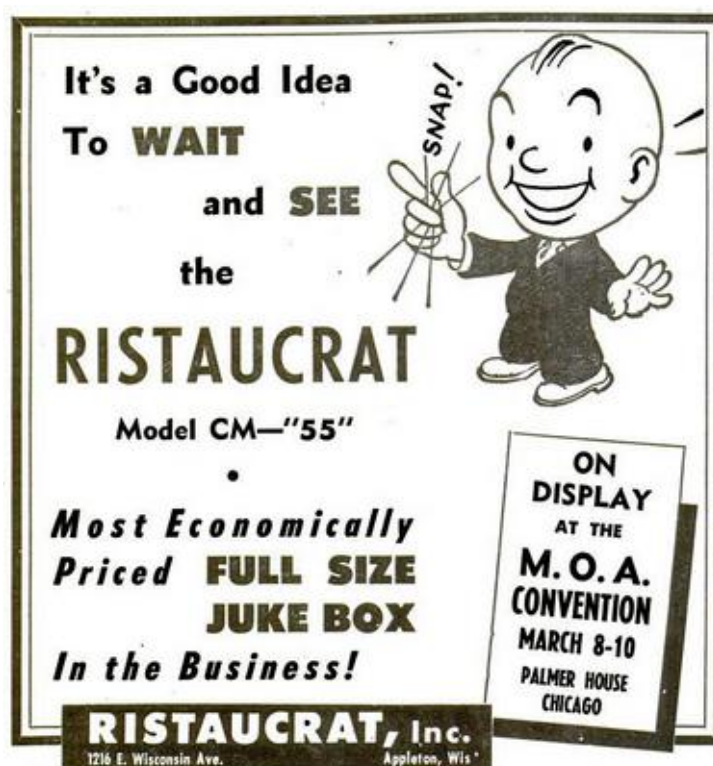
"S-45"

More advances by the Ristau brothers produced a selective and much more attractive model called the "S-45" in 1951. Selling for \$289.50, the "S-45" was more popular due to its small size and reliability. About 5,000 were manufactured at times as many as 100 units per day were produced at the plant in Appleton, which employed about 50 people. Ristau built its own radios and mechanisms for all of its models, but bought the Webster electric amplifiers. Alfred Ristau recalled the "S-45"s were the best machines made and that they just ran and ran. They were good for operators. "We were concerned about...taking people's money for orders and the company as concerned about quality and them being shipped back. Therefore, everything was done in house and the machines provided years of service without any problems", remembered Alfred Ristau. But the miniature counter-top jukebox was doomed simply by its own limitations of size. By the mid-1950s the 160- and 200-play jukeboxes were already the standard. Ristau closed the production on the "S-45" in 1954.

At the MOA convention in March 1954 the Ristau Inc. introduced a new 100-selection jukebox called the Ristau "CM-55". The machine had a glass-domed top, a silver-colored dress panel and speaker front, and a limed-oak cabinet. There were two complete stacking mechanisms, each holding 25 records. The records were stacked on two 45rpm-spindles and could be played on both sides. When all records



had been played, the mechanism automatically restacked the records. The selector panel was in the middle of the unit, and the buttons were arranged from A to J and from 1 to 10. The weight of the machine was 275 pounds, and the price was set at \$695.-. The general manager of Ristaucrat Inc. at 1216 East Wisconsin Avenue in Appleton, Joseph J. Cohen, stated that shipments of the new machine would begin two months later *[the editor has never seen a photo of this model]*. Present at the MOA convention in Chicago were also the company chief engineer Andrew Maxim (1915-1958) and the inventors Alfred (Al) and Arnold (Arnie) Ristau.



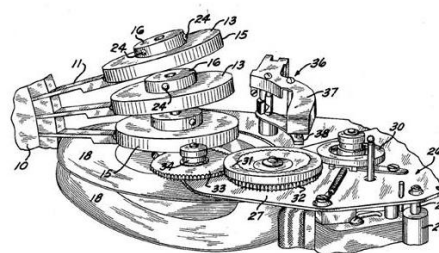
However, the production run must have drained the funds, and by the 1st June 1955 Ristaucrat Inc. was liquidated, and Comax Inc. announced it had purchased all patents, manu-facturing rights, and equipment of the company. However, this had no effect on the Atlas Manufacturing Co. at Taylor Street in Kaukauna owned by the Ristau family. But the invention was not to end there. In a business agreement, the manager Joseph J. Cohen ended up with rights to the re-stacking mechanism. Cohen and Comax Inc. later reportedly negotiated with The Seeburg Corp. and sold the Ristau device for use in developing their Background Music System which was offered from 1960 to 1963. Of three patents listed on the background system model BMSXT, two are Ristau's 2,546,136 and 2,685,447. Actually, the company Comax Inc. based in Hopkins, Minnesota, introducing the Comax "M-405" with Ristau re-stacker, was headed and owned by Joseph (Joe) J. Cohen (1907-1970), his brother

Jacob (*Jake*) B. Cohen (1911-1980), and Edwin M. Marheine (1920-1965), all three were former executives of the Ristaucrat Inc..

Not to be stopped by advancing technological changes, the Ristaus again went into a 'research and development' mode. Working to devise a mechanism which could handle more records, they succeeded and applied for patent 2,979,336 'Turntables for Automatic Record Changing Phonographs and a Driving Mechanism' on the 15th August 1956. This device was used in two known prototypes, a selective and a non-selective machine. Also a 32-selection counter-top prototype was developed.

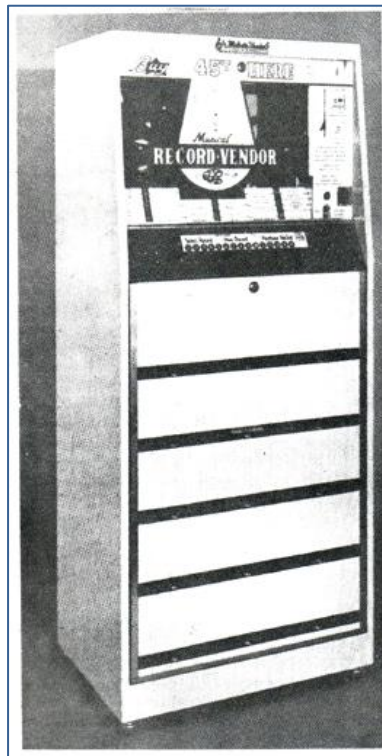


"Ristaucrat 100" (Rosmalen, 1992)



Then as a test, an actual full-sized jukebox was manufactured offering 100 selections. It featured dual tone arms, and played both sides of the 45rpm record. Between 40 and 50 were built and sold primarily overseas by a Chicago distributor. With cabinet styling a cross between Seeburg "B-100" and "L-100" and a WurliTzer "2100", the jukebox featured a rotary selector which offered 50 numbers and 'A' and 'B' buttons to choose the correct side. One odd feature of the jukebox was a circular red 'tail-light' in the lower portion of the grille. Alfred Ristau commented they were "pretty nice machines, but the jukebox business started falling apart about the time we got started". At least one machine survived, as one "Ristaucrat 100" (Atlas Mfg. Co.) showed up at the 1992 Rosmalen jukebox show in The Netherlands, and is now in a private collection. These machines would never have been produced if it had not been for negotiations with Raymond T. Moloney of Bally Manufacturing Co., who convinced the Ristau brothers to produce them to illustrate their capabilities as commercial machines. According to Alfred Ristau, Bally Manufacturing Co. was again considering entering into the music market with a jukebox in order to be

competitive, just like they did in 1945 with the Gabel business agreements. The project was dropped sometime after Raymond T. Moloney's death on the 26th February 1958.



"Melodie-Vendor"

The Ristaus continued to experiment with the new rotary style mechanism and through a new business arrangement it was incorporated in 1964 into an unusual device called a "Melodie-Vendor". Produced at a plant in Appleton by the Vend-It Corporation, the machine was a combination jukebox and record dispensing unit. The device was a 'try-it-before-you-buy-it' machine and according to a newspaper from the day 'the phonograph plays both sides of the records which are selected. Money deposited in the machine to hear music is credited toward the purchase of the 45rpm record'. The machine held 15 records which could be played on both sides. Each of the 15 dispenser compartments held 15 records. When the amount of money deposited into the jukebox equaled the price of the record (\$1.- suggested), the record selected was delivered automatically. Part of the 45rpm Ristau re-stacking mechanism was put to an unusual use on the machine, in that the spindle was adapted in an 'upside down' position and dropped the records onto a slide when they were dispensed. Alfred Ristau recalled that about 50 of the models were produced. There was an interesting paradox with them, Alfred related. Back in those days, most department stores such as Woolworths sold records from open racks. When a "Melodie-Vendor" was installed, proprietors found that the kids would often go elsewhere to look at records. The theft-proof nature of the devices prevented young people from stealing records, and apparently businesses figured it was better to have

a few discs stolen with lots of kids around than control inventory. About 100 vending machines were also produced without the playing mechanism on top.



“Model 200M”

The rotary mechanism was also incorporated into the “Model 200M” which played 50 records on both sides. According to the promotional brochure, it was ‘especially for dance studios’. The machine was partially selective in that nine different styles of music could be loaded into the carousel. Each of 8 recording sections held 5 records for 10 selections each. The ninth position held 10 records for 20 selections. Once a category was selected, the “Model 200M” played continuously until another style was chosen. It is not sure how many were produced, but they were used in about 40 supermarkets throughout Wisconsin. The rotary mechanism was no longer used by the Ristaus after the “Model 200M”, and according to Alfred Ristau, the patent was never sold or used in any other device. Within a few years all the Ristau brothers were retired and no longer involved in the coin-op business.

The Ristaus were one of many threads which make up the colorful tapestry of the coin-op industry. Their contributions even today live on in their inventions which are sought after by collectors worldwide. Inventions such as the rare “Melodie Vendor” show up in collections and coin-op shows to the admiration of collectors. There is a lot of history behind every machine, and many inventors such as Alfred, Harold, and Arnold Ristau, have made contributions that live on in coin-op history as well as collections worldwide.

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**Thanks to Ben E. Humphries and the following contributors to the original Ristau story published in 1993 for preserving the information for the future: Alfred Ristau, John Rinaldo, David Kelley, Rich Carbone, Mike Pacak, and Robert Favicchio.**

*Gert Almind, 01-2017  
Revised, 04-2024*





Gustave W. Ristau

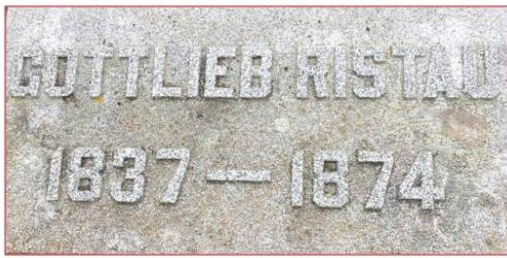


Standing: Minnie Falkenberg (Teggatz), William Falkenberg, Alma Falkenberg (Witte),  
Millie Zittlow (Ristau), Anna Schultz (Wetzel), and Minnie Zimmerman Falkenberg.  
Seated: Elizabeth Schultz Eckhardt holding Lyle Eckhardt, George Eckhardt,  
and Emelie Ristau (Werner).



Highland Memorial Park, Appleton





St. John Evangelical Lutheran Cemetery  
Wrightstown, WI



Immanuel's Lutheran Cemetery  
Williamsburg, IA



Highland Memorial Park, Appleton



Highland Memorial Park, Appleton



Highland Memorial Park, Appleton



Highland Memorial Park, Appleton



Charles Henry Ristau  
October 3, 1866 – June 10, 1916  
Holy Cross Cemetery, Kaukauna