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Turner Societies in a Metropolitan Area: The Tri-Cities, 1852–2002

One recurring topic in German-American Studies is the influence of the widespread number of German social clubs or *Vereine*. The most influential of these were the *Turnvereine* or *Turngemeinden*, which were organized by reform leaders from the 1848 period of political upheaval in the German Confederation. From 1850 through 1865 these organizations stressed both physical activity (“sound body”) and adult education with lectures and libraries (“sound mind”). Since 1987, research into these early organizations, and their “invention” of an ethnic identity in America has led to the publication of more than 70 papers, articles or books.¹ This paper extends this research by examining the growth and decline of eleven Turner organizations in a bi-state (Iowa-Illinois) metropolitan area. The seven generations of membership in an area now known as the Quad-Cities offers a unique opportunity to analyze the reasons for the success and failure of the various clubs.

When Iowa became a state in 1847, a complex community of thriving frontier towns had evolved in eastern Iowa and western Illinois. They resulted from the early transportation problems of the Upper Mississippi River, in the area known to steamboat pilots as the Upper Rapids. The first migration of German-speaking settlers started in the late 1840s, and with an estimated population of 2,850 in 1848, the sprawling population grew to 18,425 by 1860. The rebuilt railroad bridge across the Mississippi River linked Chicago, the river towns, and the beckoning frontier of western Iowa. In the bridge cities of this early period, a metropolitan area emerged with three major shoreline urban centers: Davenport, Iowa; Moline and Rock Island, Illinois.

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The earliest Turner association was founded in Davenport, which was a flourishing town of 3,400 citizens in the early 1850s. The Turner leader was Christian Mueller (1823–1901), who had been the *Turnwart*, or gymnastics leader in Kiel, the largest city in the Duchy of Holstein. He joined twelve



Northwest Turner Hall, Davenport, Iowa, 1871.

others to found a local chapter on 3 August 1852, the first *Turnverein* in Iowa. They adopted the name of “Socialistic Turner Society,” representing the idealism of the forty-eighters.² That summer, the first gymnastic events took place in a public square in Davenport. In the winter, gymnastics continued in the loft of Fahrenholtz’s flour mill. Climbing up a narrow ladder must have been good exercise; the German-American historian August Richter commented that “je schneidender der Blizzard durch die Ritzen pfliff, desto eifriger wurde geturnt” (the sharper the blizzard winds blew through the cracks, the more zealously went the gymnastics).³ With an increase to 120 members, the officers decided to hold their first festival on 24 January 1854 in Le Claire Hall, and a woman’s auxiliary created a flag of red silk with the Turner motto, “Freedom, Education and Prosperity for all!” in a green oak wreath. The *Erster Sprecher*, Theodore Gülich (1829–93), formally accepted the flag for the organization and explained that the color red symbolized “der hereinbrechende Morgenschein, roth wie das glühende Leben, das der Vollglanz der Freiheit umstrahlen soll.” Amid cheering and the usual Turner outburst of “Gut Heil,” Gülich closed his speech with the powerful slogan, “Hoch auf die freien Frauen” (three cheers for free women).⁴



Moline Turner Hall.

Besides physical sports, this first Turner society spent equal amounts of time supporting the intellectual life of its members, and political involvement. Gülich began a series of public lectures, the nucleus of a library, and support of local politicians.⁵ Although the membership reflected a large number from the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, other North Germans found a safe haven in Davenport and were welcomed by the Turner organization. An example of this is in the experiences of the earliest song leader, 38-year-old Frederick Karl Mahnke, a former schoolmaster from the north German Duchy of Mecklenburg. According to Richter, he had been driven from his position because of opinions the authorities thought were subversive.⁶ He and his wife Augusta had arrived in Davenport in the mid-1850s.

The Davenport Turners were not esteemed by all of their neighbors, since they ignored the Sabbatarian beliefs of conventionally inclined settlers from New England, and held their gymnastic exercises on Sunday morning, public celebrations and Turner festivals also seemed to suggest a lot of beer quaffing; on 26–27 May 1856 the Davenport society had a regional celebration in Bomberg's beer garden on the bluff above the city. One of the most famous attendees was Wilhelm Pfänder from Cincinnati, the founder of the utopian settlement in New Ulm, Minnesota.

In a burst of optimism, before the recession of 1857 hit the Midwest, the society bought a wonderful site on the slopes of the river bluff in 1857. But the recession led to reduced contributions and the property was sold; other

German settlers argued that the supposedly "atheistic" Turner members were diverting funds from the struggling German Lutheran church. A year later, a special census showed that twenty-four percent of the population of Davenport was German-speaking.⁷ A majority of members decided to call their organization the Davenport Turner Society, to make it more acceptable to the growing population.

In the politicalization of the 1850s, Davenport German Turners played a decisive role, by supporting mass meetings to push for the nomination of Abraham Lincoln as the presidential candidate of the Republican party. Their political involvement was connected with two political leaders who were also powerful members of the Turners. Theodore Gülich and Hans Reimer Claussen led the Davenport supporters of Lincoln in demanding both the abolishment of slavery and a strong party statement denouncing the American (or as it was popularly called, the "Know Nothing") party and its anti-immigrant stance. These resolutions were submitted at Chicago on 18 May 1860 and were useful in German-speaking Republicans helping to win the Presidential nomination for Lincoln.⁸

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Across the river along the shoreline, the town of Moline received a steady increase in population including enough Germans to organize themselves into three competing organizations. Between 1858 and 1862 these organizations flourished: the "Turner Sextion Gegründet" was a singing society; the Germania Gesangverein published a list of officers; the Concordia Verein also began. This became a pattern for Moline Turner activities: primarily musical in nature, sports activities were added, but only individual members attained political office as residents, not as Turners. The situation in the other Illinois community of Rock Island remains vague. On 10 January 1855 a German Glee Club had been started, which sang at Littig's Brewery. A year later, Francis R. Ciolina, a medical doctor, gave a public lecture at the rooms of the German Young Men's Association. The Rock Island Turn Gemeinde was officially organized on 16 April 1857.⁹ The early membership remained reticent about their activities, perhaps because of organized religious opposition. Rev. C. A. Mennicke, later said the Turners "were bitter enemies to the Evangelical Lutheran Church."¹⁰

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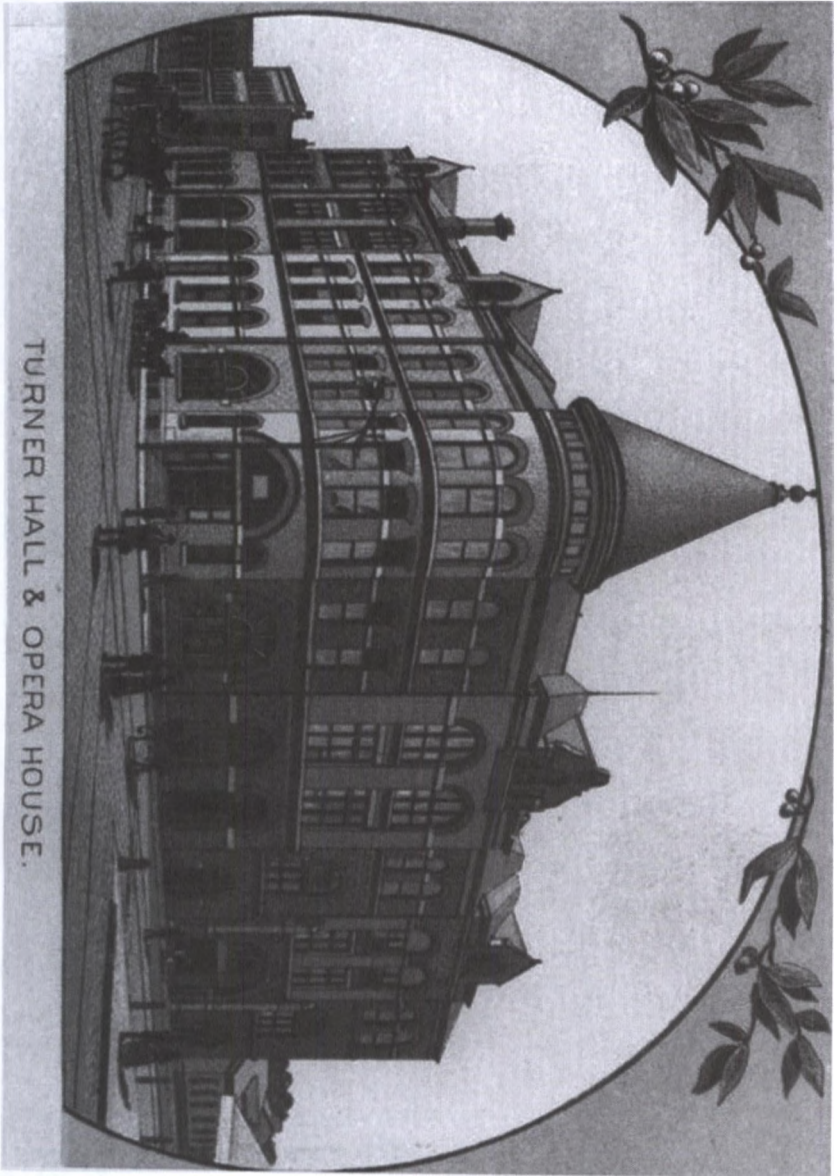
For Turner families, the period during and after the American Civil War was a time of institutional success; the dominant society in this bridged community accepted German-American ideas, behavior, and beliefs as physical exercise became a widely accepted positive attribute with millions of young soldiers in the area. Between the 1860s and the 1880s, this complex community of many towns was economically stimulated by expanding industrialization,

and continued migration. This created a period of influence and acceptance which was the precursor to the “golden age” of Turnerism. The population grew in the metropolitan area from 18,421 to 41,290 in 1880, making it the forty-sixth largest urban area in America.¹¹

The beginning of the “Bruderkrieg,” or the American Civil War happened after 15 April 1861 when President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers who would serve for three months. For the forty-eighters who had lost their chance for social reform in Europe, this became a glorious opportunity. The First Iowa Regiment, Company G, had ten German officers who set a tone of high moral purpose and expectation. One of the most successful officers was an honorary German, William S. McKenzie, from Scotland. Richter comments that “der das Deutsche Vollkommen bemeisterte und sich vorzugsweise in deutschen Gesellschaften bewegte” (he had mastered German perfectly well, and got along splendidly in German circles.)¹² German Turners from eastern Iowa became embroiled in the largest military engagement in North America up to this time, the Battle of Wilson’s Creek. Fought in southwestern Missouri, it was remembered as a great and glorious battle, the name engraved on top of the Civil War monument high above Davenport’s downtown. A 36-year-old Austrian immigrant, Captain August Wentz, was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the 7th Regiment, and was killed in the Battle of Wilson’s Creek on 10 August 1861. He became an instant media hero, with black bordered newspaper accounts elaborating on the martyred Turner.¹³

Two other Turner “heroes” returned to Davenport. Eduard Holzborn was a successful saloon owner who had fought at the first Battle of Bull Run in 1861, and survived. Another veteran, Ernst Claussen (the son of Hans Reimer Claussen), returned after his ninety day enlistment and started a lucrative law practice, specializing in helping young men avoid being drafted. Quotas had to be filled and where the young man lived was the basis of being called up. During the war, \$300 could pay for someone else to take the place of a young man with money. In Davenport, a popular form of draft insurance existed, however, legal representation was always useful.¹⁴ Claussen became a Turner leader, was selected as *Erster Sprecher*, 1862–72, and helped plan the new two story brick building, built by the Library Association, which rented out rooms to the group.

While the rhetorical flourishes continued, now primed by the wartime success, a decade of elected German-American officials for both city and state offices, had blurred some of the early political distinctiveness. In fact, Samuel Ludvigh, famous for his satirical sketches, lampooned the Davenport Turners. “The library, I have been assured, consists of one volume of Freiligrath’s poetry. Fortunate Freiligrath! Now, is that not radicalism? Only forward,



Davenport Central Turner Hall, ca. 1890.

always forward, never backward and we German radicals will cause a revolution in American political, cultural, and social life such as the world has never seen! *En avant! Barkeeper* another glass of lager beer for the heat is becoming unbearable.”¹⁵

The Turner Hall provided an attractive gathering place for veterans, not only German-speaking members. Within a year, an unofficial group decided to hold a formal banquet, and it was then that the assembled veterans decided to create their own Grand Army of the Republic organization, much like the GAR units in Illinois. Thus the Civil War experience led to a Turner experience which helped validate the forty-eighters idealism, leading to greater acceptance within the community for German organizations. This first successful development in gaining community support led to an eventual change in their name, becoming the Davenport Turner Association in 1882. As a sign of this greater community acceptance, within two years the Scott County Democratic club began meeting at the Turner Hall.¹⁶

The second development which met with community approval, was the expansion of organized physical education. By 1872, Emil Schulz had become a full-time director of gymnastics; when he retired in 1879, August Reichard filled in for a time, and then Wilhelm Reuter, son of a regionally known gymnast in Milwaukee was recruited for the job, staying for thirty-two years (1880–1912).

The third development was the geographical expansion of the Turners, with a separate neighborhood association, Northwest Turners, organizing on 5 August 1871. Fourteen German immigrants met at Peter Jacobsen’s Hall, at the confluence of five streets, hence the designation “Five Points”. This club stressed euchre games and dances more than gymnasium classes or politics. They adopted the motto from Juvenal (60–140 AD) who argued that men should seek “*mens sana in corpore sano*,” a motto adopted by many American Turner societies. The “Five Points” area was in the center of a rapidly growing middle-class neighborhood, with many young families who depended upon the horse-drawn trolley car connections with the downtown business district.

At the same time, two small town Turner societies were organized nearby in 1869. Eldridge was located within ten miles of Davenport, and surrounding farmers started a *Sozialer Turnverein*, initially renting rooms. The society flourished because of transportation connections to Davenport on the nearby railroad lines, and later using the electrified suburban rail lines for special events and occasions. An equally small Turner society appeared in Buffalo, Iowa, which was approximately ten miles down river from Davenport. The members adopted as their name, the Buffalo Turner and Freeman’s Association and flourished from 1869 through 1961 as a purely social club.

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On the Illinois side of the river, Moline's Turner societies expanded and reorganized following the Civil War, leading to greater community acceptance. The Concordia Society sponsored a special event to raise funds for wounded soldiers in the Battle of Murpheesboro, featuring the Moline German String Band.¹⁷ In the next year, another Turner society rented rooms to open a *Schulverein*. By 22 July 1866, thirteen men organized the Turner Society and elected as officers H. Reeser, *Turnwart*, and Mitchell Schulheus, *Erster Sprecher*. They also voted to join the American Turner Society, becoming the seventeenth in the country. In the next decade they joined together with the Concordia Verein (educational) and the Germania Verein (musical and social). The three newly combined societies were known as the C. G. Turner Society.¹⁸

The bicentennial organization of 1876, sponsored a varied of activities, getting the most publicity from their physical activities. They sponsored a large Masquerade Ball in Timm's Hotel in the winter of 1877, and elections in 1878 with William Runge elected *Erster Turnwart*. Within a few years they were receiving public recognition for a gymnastic contest in Warner's Grove, and a metropolitan district *Turnbezirksfest* featuring calisthenics and olympic exercises: the Davenport Turners came in first with the Moline C. G. Turners coming in second.¹⁹

Rock Island's reorganization meeting of 18 September 1865, seemed successful with the members choosing the principles of "Durch Übung zur Kraft, durch Kampf zum Licht" (through exercise to power, through struggle to the light).²⁰ Lothar Harms later reminisced about his first meeting of 15 November 1867: a small group of regulars enjoyed occasional public lectures such as when Charles Kothy, teacher at the German English School, gave a concert and a lecture on "Humanity."²¹ Another prominent Turner, Johann Ohlweiler, Sr., migrated at the age of twenty in 1863, was elected alderman, and became a successful businessman.²² He was a member of the Rock Island Turners, serving as vice-president in 1882 and representing the society at a Milwaukee Turner convention. He was viewed in the community as a successful Rock Island businessman, not as a German-American; his son, John Ohlweiler, Jr., (1861–1929) reflected his further acculturation into the dominant, Americanized business society of Rock Island. The Ohlweilers were Democrats, and it perhaps is not a coincidence that the Democratic City conventions were held in the Rock Island Turner Hall, starting in the 1880s.²³

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The "golden age" of the Turner movement in the bridged cities, which became known as the Tri-Cities, was the period from 1880 through 1914. For the second and third generations, the Turner societies seemed at the center



Central Turner Society, 1955.

of community activities in the metropolitan area. By 1885 there was a total population of 44,000 which almost tripled to 136,395 by 1920.²⁴

In Davenport, the development of three Turner organizations reflected very different community strategies. The original downtown group became known as Central Turner's, befitting the "refinements" a new building in 1888, located next to the Grand Opera House.²⁵ The Turner Hall consisted of a large gymnasium, small ball room, and three "smoking rooms." In the basement was a club room with six nine-pin bowling alleys, with nearby cooling cellars for wine. On the second floor was another "smoking room," reception room and large dining room. The third floor had a central courtyard insuring natural lighting into all of the rooms. Nearby was the assembly room, library and reading room, two society rooms, and six guest rooms for the manager and his family.

A description of the inaugural ceremonies conveys the community perception of Central Turner's. On 18–20 May 1888, the dedication began with an opera on Friday night followed by a banquet with more than 500 guests. The locally prominent orator, Gustave Donald was the master of ceremonies, with speeches and toasts interspersed with various food courses.

The hyperbole of an anonymous reporter captured the atmosphere when he opined that "the feast of reason and the flow of soul" came together.²⁶ The three toasts were to "Davenport and the Germans," "Personal Liberty," and the "North American Turner Bund." This was followed with a series of tableaux which told the story of Germans in America. After a concert, there were calisthenic exercises by a class of fifty girls, a short concert by the Männerchor Turner Singing section followed, then wand exercises by a class of fifty boys, then sixty members performed the pyramids, followed by more music and parallel bar exercises. On Sunday night, those who could still enjoy the celebration, saw a grand opera, "A Night's Adventure in Grenada," featuring the soloists of the Hess and Metropolitan opera companies of New York City, the local Arion Society, and the singing section of the Turner society.

By 1910, the importance of the downtown Davenport Turner society was based upon three institutions: a short opera season, when traveling troupes appeared in the Grand Opera House, usually coming from Milwaukee; plays at "Turner Grand" [Opera House]; and drinking at the region's longest bar, in *der Linden* saloon, purchased from the board of the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition when it closed in August 1904. It was here that hard liquor was openly sold, although the state of Iowa required a monthly "mulct tax" for technical legalities (this referred to a fine for commerce in selling intoxicating liquors which were technically forbidden by Iowa law). At the famous Turner "refreshment room" on the first floor, games of chance and "skill" were featured. One of the most popular forms of gaming with cards, was the opportunity for customers to pay \$52 for a deck of cards in the hopes of receiving \$10 for every card on the top line of the played cards: the German-American version of the famous solitaire game, named after the Sarasota gambler, Richard Canfield (1855–1914).

In the early twentieth-century, the Central Turner emphasis used occasional fairs to raise money in late November. One of the first famous fairs occurred when the Turner Hall was proclaimed a free city named "*Krähwinkel*" (Crow Corner). The most famous one was called Old Heidelberg, held from 30 November through 4 December, where visitors could imagine themselves strolling through the streets, with the sights and sounds of the casino, and the Pretzel Alley Rathskeller.²⁷ This fair became an imprinted memory on the part of Davenport's German-Americans, with photos and references at the Scott County Fair, as late as 1972. Much of the humorous atmosphere was captured in a book of stereotyped humor written by W. L. Purcell.

Relying upon the original humor found in the fictionalized history of New Netherlands by Washington Irving, *The History of New York* (1809), with the eponymous Dietrich Knickerbocker, Purcell created a memorable but slanted view of the "good old days." His references were to the late

afternoon gathering of the *Alte Kameraden*, where the greeting was invariably *Goondacht*, and the old regulars drank their cold steins of beer; they selected liverwurst, pig's knuckles, *Schmierkäse*, or *Kieler Sprotten* from the free lunch table. In the early evenings, the groups would play pinochle, skat or sancho-pedre, "keepin' tab on the game with a piece of chalk, on a cloth-bound slate that had a sponge tied to it with a red string."²⁸ In the pinochle game, Purcell recalls that it could get noisy with players hitting "the tables [with] an awful wallop, hollern' '*schoeppe wie haus!*' meaning 'spades high, as big as a house.'"²⁹ One of the better players was Nicholaus Krambeck (1822–1901), 1st Ward Alderman (1881–82) and well-known neighborhood tailor, who was called *Ruthen Bur*, or "the jack of diamonds."³⁰

In this reimagined satire of the Turners, Purcell comments on the Grand Opera events, with typical sardonic wit: Herman Warnken would walk up and down the aisles, as in a baseball game, selling hot dogs, and hollering out *Heiss sind sie noch!* He continued in a humorous vein, by commenting that "bock beer day was a sorta national holiday around old Turner Hall."³¹ In a later section he referred to Pretzel Alley, and the first recorded instance of the idea of the State of Scott, different from the rest of Iowa, and superior in its Teutonic culture. He claimed that the humor of Pretzel Alley, was based on the political satire: the two political parties in this imaginary state, are the Weiners and the Pretzels. Of course, both parties are very much alike. The penultimate event is a dance at the Hotel Davenport ballroom, which was connected to the Turner Fair as a *Wurst-Blatt*.³² The significance of this lies with the insights and apparent "inside" comments about Central Turners at its peak of influence.

Looking at the structural changes at Central Turners, the growing expansion of services for women members is noticeable. The role of Central Turners provided leadership, which built upon some of the earliest ideas of *Gulich*, but were now spread throughout the Tri-Cities, at some, if not all, of the other societies. The period of the 1890s was one of national change in expanding programs for female participation. The first documented change occurred in Concordia Turners in St. Louis (1878), Syracuse (1884), Rochester (1884) and New York City (1891).³³ In the complex community which became known as the Tri-Cities (Davenport, Moline and Rock Island), this national tendency was noticeable. Central Turners had special gymnastics classes for the woman's auxillary in 1890; soon this was followed in Moline with the creation of an official auxillary in 1891, with girls classes available by 1908; the East Turners auxillary was organized on 1 December 1919.³⁴

One of the changed aspects of the later generations, was the death of the original Turner leaders. In Davenport, Henry A. Runge, alderman, died 14 June 1887; Ernst Claussen, veteran of the Civil War and first

German-American mayor, died 3 March 1892; his father, Hans Reimer Claussen, Iowa State Senator, died on 14 March 1894. Christian Mueller, Claussen's son-in-law, died on 10 September 1910. In Moline, the same generational change occurred: William Runge, alderman, died 27 June 1890; Dr. Peter Henry Wessel, seventh mayor of the city, died in 1917. In Rock Island, Johan Ohlweiler, Sr., Alderman, died in 1914.

At the same time, the public perception was one of continuity. There were cross-over connections between Turners and other German-American organizations, as the German migration began to end in the 1880s. Gustave Donald, famous poet and educator helped organize the Davenport Cremation Society (1885), became political editor of *Der Demokrat* (1887), and eulogist at non-religious funerals. The unofficial parade route always ended at Central Turners, with the Democratic torchlight parade of 7 November 1891 as typical; this route continued as late as the traditional "Mardi Gras" Halloween parade in October 1985. The other popular locations was the west side of the city where the August Wentz GAR reenacted a Civil War battle, on the grounds of the *Schütztenpark* on the west side of Davenport (4 July 1892).

For Northwest Turners, a newly built hall in 1904 included a gymnasium with a beer hall in the back. The Society sponsored district track meets, bowling and soft ball teams. They remained a community center for German-American non-members in three ways. First, until 1920 they sponsored an annual bird shooting contest for kids 8–11 years old. They used a dart board with a bird on it; whoever came closest became king or queen for a year.³⁵ Second, they began having county-wide Democrat and Republican rallies, starting in 1884 and continuing for a century. Third, the new hall ushered in a popular series of competitive dancing—any couple who could pay a nominal fee was entered; the judges would put chalk marks on the bottom of their shoes, and then unexpectedly stop the music; the couple with the chalk still left on the shoes won the prize money.

In this period, 1885–1915, a brand new organization was started in eastern Davenport. A popular volunteer hose company was disbanded by the city of Davenport when they adopted a professionally paid fire department; 16 volunteers enjoyed the club atmosphere so much that on 6 April 1891 they met and formed East Turners. The *Erster Sprecher*, was Chris Kuehl, and the first order of business was purchasing used gym apparatus: parallel bars, horses, horizontal bar, climbing poles, mats, punching bag, bell bar, Indian clubs, and dumb bells.³⁶ They also held Saturday night dances, and occasional Turner fairs, until enough money was raised to build a two story building, containing both a large gymnasium hall, and a cozy bar room in the basement.³⁷ This society, like Northwest Turner's retained a definite neighborhood identity and lasted in an organized fashion until 1998.



Men's Basketball Team, Moline Turners, 1941.

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In Moline, the C. G. Turner society continued to grow, erecting a modest facility in the city's downtown (1883), and the German Free School (1884). By 1888, they bought a parcel of land for Concordia Park on top of the River bluffs, using it for the next decade as a picnic spot, before selling the land, and building a larger center next to the school in the city's downtown.³⁸ Activities were reported on in the local newspaper in a seasonal pattern; the only change was a rift in the membership over the financial costs of the newly named German-English school. A group broke off and called themselves *Vorwärts*, hiring Adolph Oppenheimer, as a salaried gymnastics leader. After coming to some understanding, the societies combined, and donated 1,000 volumes of history and travel to the Moline Public Library.³⁹

With the money realized by selling Concordia Park to a land developer, the C. G. Turner Society built a brand new Turner Hall, and received favorable media publicity, with one headline entitled, "Frisch, Frei, Stark, Treu!"⁴⁰ This was the capstone of a long, campaign to have the physical culture aspect recognized in a positive light, first recognized in a newspaper description of the standard gymnastic routine practiced by the membership.⁴¹ One of the most successful ideas, was to encourage non German-speaking members to join. This resulted immediately in some successful basketball teams. John

McKeever (1892–1933) was a prime example of an Irish American featured as the star player on a winning Turner basketball game, the favorite winter sport of the American inhabitants of Moline. He not only won a lot of games for the young Turners, he also courted Minnie Knaack (1892–1973), the sweetheart of the society: she had a sixteen-inch waist when she married him on 20 June 1912.⁴²

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The metropolitan area had hidden internal problems, but superficially, the 50th anniversary of the founding of Central Turners in 1902 seemed be proof of success: There were 702 members, 100 women in the auxiliary, and 502 school children enrolled in Turner school activities.⁴³ But much of the new century's focus by younger German-Americans in the Midwest appeared new language clubs.

With the rise of a literary *Plattdüütsch*, organizers traveled to Midwestern cities, publicizing the new writers of northern Germany, such as Fritz Reuter and Theodore Storm. In Davenport, this led to the organization of a large Claus Groth society, which was actually a form of pre-paid funeral society, although named after one of the new Low German writers. The society appealed to the working class, and the building of a substantial "guild hall," a mile west of Central Turners. Its success stemmed from a substantial number of prominent German-Americans who had never belonged to or supported Turner organizations. The continuing interpretation of the failed attempt in 1848 to create an independent Republic of Schleswig-Holstein (much like Belgium in 1830), continued support for a German provincial view, and support for their own clubs since the 1850s.⁴⁴ A *Plattdeutscher Unterhaltungsverein* appeared near Northwest Turners in 1892. A decade later, the *Plattdeutscher Schwesternverein Einigkeit*, was incorporated in Scott County, Iowa. In Moline, a *Plattdeutscher Verein* was organized in 1893.⁴⁵ This group elected John D. Knaack, a first cousin to the wife of the Irish-American Turner basketball player, John McKeever, as president. They soon held a fancy ball with eighty couples, followed by a supper and program at midnight. Walter Ruhser was the guest speaker, and wore a *Plattdeutscher* suit, but speaking in English, "asked the society to encourage the members that they not forget the language as he had."⁴⁶ The society was incorporated in 1896. But eventually the *Platt* society disbanded, and many members returned to the Turners. In Rock Island, the *Plattdeutscher Schwester* continued until 1939.⁴⁷

In Rock Island, the Turners remained in existence, but needed help from other societies. Professor Reuter, who later taught at Davenport High School, taught short team gymnastics courses. The various German-language groups remained fragmented with the Männerchor a separate organization, meeting regularly at Huber's Beer Garden, on the edge of a German neighborhood,

two miles east of the downtown location of the Turners.⁴⁸ There were those long-term members who developed their own businesses frequented by German-speaking residents. Lothar Harms, who had arrived in 1866, opened the Hotel Harms in 1902, intending it to be a "landmark from the river": a roof garden added in 1904 immediately made it a center of German celebrations, but separate from the organization.⁴⁹

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From 1920 through 1960, the population of the metropolitan area grew from 136,000 to 319,000, representing the eighty-first largest urban center in America.⁵⁰ Turner membership stabilized, then actually grew and then nearly disappeared, with the organization disappearing from public attention. Of the six societies in 1920, four survived until 1958 when Central Turner's disbanded. For the fourth and fifth generations, some of the clubs survived in a diminished, and largely forgotten way. The period of American involvement in World War I (1917-18) was the disastrous turning point in the scope and influence of the Turner society in the Tri-Cities. For those Turners who lived through these tumultuous times, it must have seemed as if reality had changed over night. Instead of support and admiration from much of the community, with German-American membership on all major community boards and organizations, those same German-Americans, with Turners in the lead, had to accept derision, vandalism, and racism for the first time. For later historians, it is convenient to blame President Woodrow Wilson's handling of domestic dissent, but by opening the "veil of memory," scrutinizing the facts, and carefully generalizing from specifics, a very different story emerges from the sunset years of Turner history.⁵¹

The real problem for Davenport was early and publicized support for Imperial Germany. Instead of a cautious and quiet response as in Moline, the membership and leadership of Central Turners in Davenport decided to use their organizational clout and reputation to criticize the federal government, and protect their individual rights and privileges as American citizens. While German war bonds sold briskly in 1914, Henry Vollmer, former mayor of Davenport, and former U.S. congressman, publicly solicited funds for the German Red Cross, leading up to a large rally which was held in 1915 to raise funds. The defining moment was the decision in 1917 to sponsor a British speaker to publicize the "war crimes" of the British army. The result was a huge rally and public speech in the Turner Grand Opera House, followed by the arrest of six prominent German-Americans, three of them with Turner ties.⁵² The trial and retrial of the "Davenport Six," cast a long shadow on the following decades. "Several persons confirmed that one German family left Davenport because of the anti-German feelings there, and one man stated that while at college he had seriously considered never returning to

Davenport because of the bitter feelings that had developed during the war.”⁵³ About the only positive aspect during World War I period, was the temporary use of the Grand Opera House as a makeshift community hospital during the influenza pandemic of 1918–19.

After the war, the high ideals and self-satisfied atmosphere of the early part of the century were replaced with the practical need for profits from illegal sale of liquor in the Prohibition days of the 1920s, to pay for the building’s mortgage. *Der Linden* saloon kept going with help from a secret tunnel under the street, connecting to an ice cream parlor. According to local legend, during Prohibition bootleggers could sneak in “hooch” from the innocent Anken ice cream parlor, and smuggle it under the street to Central Turners. At the same time, minor media coverage of gymnastics continued with professionally trained instructors, from the retirement of Reuter in 1912, until the end of the society in 1959.⁵⁴ The typical round of seasonal activities continued, occasionally with movies, but the traditional celebrations such as the masquerade ball continued.⁵⁵ Women’s activities continued successfully with the Central Turner’s Women’s Drum and Bugle Corp, from 1924–49.⁵⁶



Tri-City Turners celebrate repeal of Prohibition, 1933.

The Grand Opera House continued to be used for programs, parties and sporadic films. Arlene Vogel Philips said that in the 1940s, “our Girls Class would get up to the stage from the gym for *Schauturnen* programs by ascending an inclosed fire escape stairway from the alley by gym. We would want our turn in the gym and go to the stage when it was time.”⁵⁷ The bar and bowling alley remained the most popular attractions at Central Turners through the 1940s, when the theater was modified to provide modern, standardized ten-pin bowling alleys. One area of continued interest was the small island east of Credit Island, called Pelican Island today. Called Turner Island in the 1920s, two summer cabins were built by the Active Men’s Group, and the remnants can still be seen from the shore in 2006.

One colorful Turner from this period was Hertha Hildebrand. She was born on the third floor of Central Turners, where her parents Ludwig and Alma Berg managed the food and beverage services for the society; her father later served as secretary in 1921. After graduating from Davenport High School, eighteen-year-old Hertha eloped with Ernest Vogel. He was a commercial flyer who had a hanger: taking off from Bettendorf’s Wallace Field on the river front, was easily accomplished. Her fiancé piloted a war surplus Curtiss Flying “Jenny,” in a two-day flight to Chicago. Her brother-in-law had painted “Honeymoon Express 1924” in bold letters on the side, so everyone knew what was happening. They arrived in Chicago and ended up staying for their honeymoon at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, and may have danced to the music of Bix Beiderbecke who was playing with the house band.⁵⁸ The Central Turner Society lasted until the 1950s; the 155 members voted to disband, and they sold the property with the Turner Hall and Grand Opera razed in 1958.

The experience of the Northwest Turner Society differed from Central Turners, because their leaders stayed away from political involvement, stressing their social and sports activities, and survived through the 1980s. The remodeled building of 1926 featured a combination stage, gym and bar which worked fine for weekly social dances; sports was the second area with gymnastics, softball, bowling, volleyball, golf and track meets continued.⁵⁹ As late as 1979, a Turnfest at Augustana College in Rock Island, attracted more than 4,000 amateur athletes from the region.⁶⁰ One child of Turner parents remembers the Sunday afternoons of the 1950s, when the adults played cards and the children ran around the stage.

In the 1920s, East Turners flourished during Prohibition with only 188 members. It remained a neighborhood society, but “in days of bootlegging, one of the biggest Quad-City raids was pulled off at the East Davenport Turner’s Hall. The law dumped about a thousand gallons of booze (from a Carbon Cliff [Illinois] ‘cooker’) down the sewers.”⁶¹ By the 1940s, the membership

reached its height with nearly 500 members, as slot machines and "Barrel of Fun" tickets created large profits which replaced the illegal liquor.⁶² By the 1950s, these sources of revenue had ended so the club brought ladies boxing to Iowa! Quite a bit more professional than mud wrestling, the typical format was a Friday night boxing match; in one instance, Margie Fry originally from Davenport, fought Donna Dillenger of Columbus, Ohio in a first round boxing match in 1956.⁶³ The group continued to exist through the 1990s, until the decision to disband came in 1998.

In Moline, the membership drives successfully brought in new members: the total had reached 2,000 in 1926; even with the Depression taking its toll, the membership in 1941 was about 1,600 making this Turner society the largest in the country; it decreased to 1,200 in 1953; by 1958 it had fallen to 700.⁶⁴ In the 1930s, "the majority of the members were not of German descent; approximately 300 Moline Turners served in World War II, and sixteen were killed in action. The society throughout this period continued to compete in gymnastics, bowling, baseball, track and field, and volley ball.⁶⁵ In the 1940s, one child of Swedish-American descent, recalled card games in the Turner hall, and sports outdoors.⁶⁶ One of the last large, Moline Turner celebrations was a 90th anniversary in 1950. This was a good example of carefully crafted ethnic media publicity, appeared in the article "Gut Heil and Bahn Frei."⁶⁷ By the 1960s, membership had dropped, but the society decided to try one last gambit which had worked in 1898: buying the former Oakwood country Club lounge, with swimming pool, with the proceeds from selling their down town corner lot. This decision of 1970 did not work out, but the society faltered along until they disbanded in 1983.⁶⁸

The best source for the history of the Moline Turners was Bernard ("Bunny") Wahe, unofficial historian. He was quoted in 1958 in viewing the Turner impact from a localized, Moline point of view. They "expressed their belief in the United States of America as a democracy in a republic established upon the principles of freedom, justice and humanity, and recognized in the harmonious education of body and mind one of the most important [groups] . . . for preserving and perfecting this democracy."⁶⁹

* * *

The concept of identity politics, first developed in the first half of the twentieth century, offers insights into the Turner organizations of one metropolitan area. Rather than organizing solely around party affiliation, identity politics works to expand the political influence of a specific constituency whose leaders feel marginalized within the larger political framework. In the Tri-City area of the late nineteenth century, the original Davenport Turner organization, eventually designated as Central Turners, began to use identity politics in the election of the city's mayor. Although German-speaking

alderman were elected in Davenport as early as the 1850s, the first German speaking mayor, Ernst Claussen (1833–92) became the 46th mayor in 1883.⁷⁰ For the next ninety years, the German-American mayors of Davenport were also members of either Central Turners or Northwest Turners with one exception.⁷¹ Even with the end of Central Turners in the late 1950s, the identification of German-American politicians with the office of mayor transcended political party with five of the fourteen Democrats, and nine Republicans during the 72 years of control during the period 1883–1974. Northwest Turners remained a popular location for pre-election suppers for both Democrats and Republicans parties until the disbanding of the organization in the early 1990s. Its leaders had always stressed the social activities of the Turners, and this strategy allowed the society to continue to exist for 40 years longer than Central Turners.

The Moline Turners experience followed that of Davenport's Northwest Turners in stressing the musical and sports opportunities of the club. The five German-American mayors of Moline combined for 40 years of service over the same period as Davenport, 1885–1977. However, the more marginal German ethnicity led to the Mayors clustering in three periods of time: 20 years in the late nineteenth century, 16 years during the 1933–49 period, and four years in the early 1970s. With only one mayor known to have belonged to the Moline Turners (P. H. Wessell), the connections with the politics of identity seem to be undeveloped in this part of the metropolitan area.

Rock Island Turners offer a completely different experience with politics. Over one 157 years of mayors, German-Americans were elected only seven times, for a total of forty-four years. The election of William Frizzell (1852–54) was followed by a fifty five year gap before H. C. Shaffer served one term (1907–9). Fourteen years later Walter Rosenfield served (1923–27) without any identifiable German-American winning for twenty-six years, until three mayors (1953–65) served. Twenty-eight years later, Mark Schwiebert served for twenty years, as the longest running mayor in the city's history. Only one mayor was known to belong to the Turner organization which ended in 1920. It would appear that in this city in the metropolitan area, the assimilated German-American was nominated and elected in four different periods of the city's history.

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Notes

¹A checklist of the Society for German-American Studies from the annual bibliography from 1987 until 2007 contains seventy-four entries.

² August Richter, *Geschichte der Stadt Davenport* (Chicago: 1917), 512. All but two of the Turner groups studied in this paper chose to flaunt superstition and began with thirteen members.

³ *Ibid.*, 515–16.

⁴ *Ibid.* The use of localized spelling and dialect vocabulary at times seems questionable, but the Iowa readers of his first volume of history understood that “The red looked like the red of dawn, like ‘glowing’ life which should burst on the full splendor of Freedom.”

⁵ Hildegard Binder Johnson, “List of Lectures and Debates Given Before the Davenport Turngemeinde [1857–1917],” *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 44, no. 1 (January 1946): 54–60. Elmer Schultz Gerhard, “Library of the Davenport Turngemeinde,” *American-German Review* vol. 5 no.12 (June 1946): 33–35, 37.

⁶ Richter, 517.

⁷ Franc B. Wilkie, *Davenport, Past and Present* (Davenport: Luse, Lane & Co., 1856), 24; see also Theodore Schreiber, “Early German Pioneers of Scott County, Iowa,” *American-German Review* 8, no. 2 (December 1941): 22.

⁸ F. I. Herriott, *History of Davenport and Scott County*, ed. by Henry Downer (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1910), 839–46. The actual decisions inside of *Das Deutsches Haus* in Chicago on 18 May 1860 remain shrouded in mystery, but have been carefully summarized by Jörg Nagler in his unpublished essay presented at a conference at the Max Kade Institute in Madison, Wisconsin, October 1986.

⁹ *Rock Island Argus* (10 January 1856; 27 January 1856); *Rock Island Past and Present* (1877), 173.

¹⁰ *5-Jähriges Jubiläum*, 22.

¹¹ William Roba, *The River and the Prairie* (Quad-Cities: Hesperian Press, 1986), 75.

¹² Richter, 523.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Roba, 78. For a premium of \$136, you could receive \$330 if liable for the draft. From the Civil War's first draft of 292,441 men, 52,288 or 17 percent avoided service by paying the money for a substitute.

¹⁵ *Die Fackel*, 20 (1867 / 1868). University of Missouri, St. Louis, St. Louis Mercantile Association Library, Special Collections, clipping.

¹⁶ Richter, 528.

¹⁷ *Moline Union* (21 January 1863).

¹⁸ Fred Klann, *Moline Dispatch* (25 September 1958); *Moline Review*, (11 February 1876). Katja Ramplemann succinctly summarized this tendency in another context: “Instead of joining forces they split and became each other's most despised rival. The story is a common one among German-American intellectuals. *Yearbook of German American Studies* 38 (2003): 329.

¹⁹ *Moline Review* (5 Jan 1877, 4 January 1878, 18 June 1880, and 25 June 1880).

²⁰ *Rock Island Argus* (20 September 1865). This is the same time that the German School Society organized itself on 26 June 1865, on a similar basis with Moline and Davenport.

²¹ *Rock Island Argus* (15 August 1875).

²² *Rock Island Argus* (4 May 1872); there is a group photo of successful businessmen, including Ohlweiler Sr., in *Picturesque Tri-Cities* (1902), 370.

²³ *Rock Island Argus* (8 March 1882).

²⁴ Roba, 97.

²⁵ *Infoblatt*, 8, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 22–24.

²⁶ “Gut Heil!” *Davenport Democrat* (20 May 1888).

²⁷ Richter, 535, 539; the Schützenpark Gilde has published a booklet containing the Davenport *Democrat* commentary about this Turner Fair. www.SchuetzenPark.info.

²⁸W. L. Purcell, *Them Was the Good Old Days* (Davenport: Purcell Printing, 1922), 133. The *Kieler Sprotten* were smoked sprats, similar to herring, about three inches long. This information was furnished by Dr. Ingo Schwarz, Von Humboldt Foundation, Berlin.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 141. Here and in other places, the word usage reflects the locale where Plattdeutsch comingled with proper Hochdeutsch, in the satirical dialogue.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 141–42.

³¹*Ibid.*, 139.

³²*Ibid.*, 212–14.

³³Annette Hoffman, "Lady Turners in the United States: German American Identity, Gender Concerns and Turnerism," *Journal of Sport History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 386, 388–389.

³⁴Richter, p. 531; "Ladies Athletes," *Moline Review-Dispatch* (5 September 1890); *Moline Review-Dispatch* (17 June 1892); Julie Jensen, "Century of Gemütlichkeit," *Times-Democrat* (3 August 1971).

³⁵Jensen.

³⁶Davenport Public Library, Sloan-Richardson Special Collections; "Reminiscences," Secretary of East Turner.

³⁷Bill Wundrum, *Quad-City Times* (27 July 1998).

³⁸*Moline Review-Dispatch* (1 January 1884); *Moline Dispatch* (14 August 1897).

³⁹*Moline Dispatch* (21 April 1913, 14 November 1941); *Moline Review-Dispatch* (11 November 1898). See also Elmer Schultz Gerhard, "Library of the Davenport Turngemeinde," *American-German Review* 12, no. 4 (June 1946): 33–35, 37.

⁴⁰*Moline Dispatch* (15 January 1901); Knaack Family History, Archives, Scott Community College Library, Bettendorf, Iowa.

⁴¹"A Pleasant Visit," *Moline Review Dispatch* (22 February 1889).

⁴²*Moline Dispatch* (20 June 1912; 24 June 1933).

⁴³*Davenport Democrat* (26 August 1902); the classic interpretation was written by Hildegard Binder Johnson, "German Forty-Eighters in Davenport," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 44, no. 1 (January 1946): 3–53. She makes a very strong case for financial difficulties before 1910, but fails to consider two salient facts: Central Turners was only one of six Tri-Cities Turner societies; the inclusion of German-Americans who were not Turner members at money-making functions allowed the societies to continue for another seventy-five years.

⁴⁴*Davenport Demokrat* (27 March 1898). This detailed the public pageantry associated with the 50th anniversary, which happened four years before the Turner celebration.

⁴⁵*Moline Review-Dispatch* (17 March 1893).

⁴⁶*Moline Dispatch* (25 March 1895).

⁴⁷*Rock Island Argus* (14 December 1918) describes the typical activities of this social group. They are listed in the 1939 City Directory but not in 1940.

⁴⁸*Rock Island Argus* (10 August 1902).

⁴⁹"Lothar Harms Turned Vision Into Reality," *Rock Island Argus* (16 February 2003).

⁵⁰Roba, 121.

⁵¹William Roba, *German-Iowan Studies; Selected Essays* (New York: Lang, 2004): 45–59.

⁵²Steven Wrede, "The Americanization of Scott County," *Annals of Iowa*, 44, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 628–37.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 637.

⁵⁴"Turner Units to Drop Gymnastics," *Davenport Times* (15 May 1959).

⁵⁵"Turner's Mask Ball Attracts More Than 600," *Davenport Democrat* (10 February 1929).

⁵⁶*Infoblatt* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 6.

⁵⁷Quoted by Harry Prinz, "The Inside Story of the Davenport Turner Hall," *Infoblatt* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 9.

⁵⁸Obituary, 9 December 2004; "The Safest Way to Get Greatest Thrill in Life is on Airplane Journey," Davenport *Democrat* (20 July 1924); Information on Beiderbecke appears in Richard Sudhalter, *Bix, Man and Legend* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1974), 112, 350.

⁵⁹Jensen.

⁶⁰Glenn Proctor, "Changing Times at the Turners," *Quad-City Times* (20 October 1980).

⁶¹Bill Wundram, *Quad-City Times* (27 July 1998).

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Rock Island *Argus* (7 February 1956).

⁶⁴Fred Klann, *Moline Dispatch* (14 November 1941; 26 October 1949; 12 December 1953; 18 September 1958).

⁶⁵This is illustrated by a large number of periodicals in the Rock Island County Historical Society collection. Of particular usefulness were files of clippings, scrapbooks, photographs, and brochures. In addition, there are bound volumes of the *Moline Turner News* (1937–43, 1946–48, 1950) and *The Turner* (1974–75).

⁶⁶Jim Sandstrom (1934–95); this is also shown in the membership list of the Auxiliary. *Ladies Auxiliary Reference Book* [1930]. Rock Island County Historical Society.

⁶⁷Davenport *Times* (10 June 1950).

⁶⁸Rock Island *Argus* (26 February 1971).

⁶⁹*Moline Dispatch* (18 September 1958).

⁷⁰The biographical information for the mayors of the Tri-City metropolitan area is derived from *Biographical Historical Portrait Gallery of Scott County, Iowa* (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1895); Henry Downer, *History of Scott County* (1911), vol. 1, 693; *Who's Who in Davenport* (Davenport: Robert Baldwin Corporation, 1929); *Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men; Davenport, Iowa* (Davenport: Citizen's Historical Association, 1939).

⁷¹The seventh-fourth mayor of Davenport, Kathryn (Goll) Kirschbaum, was not a member of any metropolitan Turner clubs.