

Richard L. Hummel  
Rudi Prusok

## German-American Target Shooting Societies in Nineteenth-Century Illinois

### Introduction

Germanic (German, Austrian, Swiss) immigrants to America in the 1800s came in sufficient numbers to be able to re-establish important European cultural institutions in America: societies for singing, debating, playing instrumental music, gymnastics, seeking political power, and target shooting, among others. Wherever Germanic communities were located, shooting societies (schuetzenvereins) commonly organized, secured shooting ranges, and staged schuetzenfests as re-creations of shooting competitions in Germanic lands held since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Germanic communities in all parts of Illinois took part in this festive competition of arms. We describe the most well-known schuetzenvereins in Illinois, describing their history and shooting park locations. Suggestions are offered for future research addressing lesser known schuetzenvereins in Illinois.

### European Origins of Schuetzenvereins

More than six centuries ago, in central and eastern Europe, citizens of various Germanic cultures organized themselves into citizen "militias" to offer protection from threats to towns and other settlements. These groups enrolled male citizens who were expected to take part in practices with weapons used in their protective functions: bows and arrows, crossbows, and firearms after about 1520. The genesis of the organizations varied from town fathers, local feudal lords, to tradesmen who feared internal and external threats to social order.<sup>1</sup> These civil protection clubs required members to attend regular weapons practice sessions, usually on Sunday afternoons at the local shooting grounds, often the city ditch (moat). The clubs engaged in public relations efforts with the general population by staging periodic shooting contests as part of public carnivals with all kinds of food, drink and other popular entertainments. These were family and community affairs, not just gatherings of keen-eyed marksmen eagerly striving for marksmanship prizes. Invitations to shooting clubs of other towns

were sent out and reciprocal invitations received in turn.<sup>2</sup> These clubs flourished in areas of Germanic culture: Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Romania, among others. An important historian of shooting traditions succinctly summarizes their fates:

Town shooting associations reached their peak in the 16th century and kept their military importance until the 17th century. During the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) many shooting clubs perished . . . and . . . after the Westphalian Treaty (1648) . . . they [were] brought to life again. But never did they reach the importance they had held in the 16th century. In the 17th and 18th centuries, governments no longer favored shooting associations as they were superfluous to the needs of the regular armies, which had been introduced by then. Thus, shooting became a symbol of the jealously guarded protected privilege of townsmen to use arms.<sup>3</sup>

### Immigration to America

Substantial portions of Germanic immigrants to America in the nineteenth century were from urban areas of Europe and established themselves variously as professionals, craftsmen, or merchants in their new homes. Notable among them were the "Forty-eighters," refugees from the failed political revolutions of 1848-49. (Ironically, history records that shooting clubs took up arms on both sides of the political barricades.) Typically joining already established Germanic immigrant communities, they prospered and managed to recreate many salient cultural institutions they left behind. Shooting societies were one among many. Such societies were ubiquitous in Germanic communities in all states attracting Germanic immigrants: New York, New England, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Kentucky, California, Texas, etc. We limit our discussion to Illinois because one of the authors lives there, although Illinois is no more important to the history of German-American schuetzenvereins than any other state where they were established.

### What Is a Schuetzenfest?

Based on its European forebears, a schuetzenfest was a scheduled target shooting competition to which the host club invited surrounding clubs (regional, even national) to join in a program of 200-yard, off-hand target shooting with single-shot rifles. The event usually began with a parade of participating clubs marching to the shooting grounds, accompanied by an instrumental band. At the shooting grounds the host club officers welcomed the contestants in a short speech and wished all "good shooting." Some club or local or other dignitary would be invited to fire the first shot. Thereafter, the competition commenced with the orderly scheduling of various events using different targets during the course of the match. Cash and merchandise prizes for winners were both valuable and abundant. Food, drink, music, dancing, games for children and other amusements for non-shooters among families accompanying

contestants were typical and expected. The matches lasted at least several days and evenings offered banquets, distribution of prizes won during the day and dance balls. On the last day usually the schuetzen king was crowned. He was the shooter who had scored the highest on the king-honor target. He was crowned to reign for a year or until the next schuetzenfest and was given custody of the traveling shooting trophy (typically, a silver chain consisting of dated mementos selected and purchased by previous kings). The king was obligated to design, commission, or purchase the king-honor target for the next schuetzenfest. The crowning of the *Schützenkönig* and his selection of a queen from among the wives of the schuetzenverein members usually concluded the multi-day event.<sup>4</sup>

### The First Schuetzenverein in Illinois

The first shooting club we know about was established at the Swiss immigrant colony in Highland, Illinois. First interest in a shooting society was shown by some of Highland's Swiss colonists in 1853-54 when a makeshift range was hacked out of the prairie thicket. The group got serious in 1860 when they formed themselves as the Helvetia Sharpshooters Association. The opening of the Civil War delayed the next step of their evolution until early 1863 when the organization obtained a state charter (16 February 1863) and the donation of 31 acres for a shooting park offered by the Koepfli brothers, Solomon and Joseph, early arrivals in Highland. The arrangement was that the land would remain the property of the shooting club as long as it remained organized. If it disbanded, the land was to revert to the city of Highland. The 31 acres could never be sold by either the club or the city and must be used for its intended purpose, shooting, and well as serving the public as a park facility. It was named "Lindendale" (Lindenthal) Park and remains a valued community recreational facility to this day.

In that busy year of 1863, the Helvetia shooting club invited regional shooting clubs to attend their first schuetzenfest on 4 July. The entire community was enlisted to finish work on the shooting park with fences, steps, a well, a cellar for cool storage of beverages, and local rooms for those attending.<sup>5</sup>

### Midwestern Schuetzenvereins Form a *Bund*

The event was so successful that the next year, 1864, Highland was the site of an organizing meeting of the North American Schützenbund. Apparently, while the Helvetia club was first to organize in Illinois, it was soon followed by numerous others which suggests that the urge to organize target-shooting clubs among Germanic-American immigrants was being felt statewide. The following clubs were the original member organizations composing the North American Schützenbund (1865-72).

Chicago Schuetzen Verein, Chicago, Illinois  
Bloomington Schuetzen Verein, Bloomington, Illinois  
Dubuque Rifle Club, Dubuque, Iowa

Excelsior Rifle Club, Davenport, Iowa  
Indianapolis Schuetzen Verein, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Joliet Schuetzen Verein, Joliet, Illinois  
Milwaukee Schuetzen Gesellschaft, Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
Monroe Schuetzen Gesellschaft, Monroe, Wisconsin  
New Ulm Schuetzen Verein, New Ulm, Minnesota  
Peru Schuetzen Verein, Peru, Illinois  
Princeton Schuetzen Gesellschaft, Princeton, Illinois  
St. Paul Schuetzen Verein, St. Paul, Minnesota  
Southwest Chicago Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois  
St. Louis Schuetzen Verein, St. Louis, Missouri  
Helvetia Schuetzen Gesellschaft, Highland, Illinois<sup>6</sup>

Note that almost half (seven out of fifteen) of the founding clubs were from Illinois. Before we return to our history of Highland's Helvetia Schuetzen Gesellschaft, we must express our appreciation to the American Single Shot Rifle Association (ASSRA), which made available to us the contents of its journal and archives, composed of an ever-growing collection of documents concerning the schuetzen movement in America. One useful source retrieved from the Illinois section of the archives consists of a response sent by the archivist in 1986 to an inquiry to the membership of the ASSRA concerning the organizational structure of the Midwestern schuetzen movement. The archive revealed that the movement evolved through the following stages:

1. The North American Schützenbund was founded in 1864 and continued until 1872.
2. The eastern states formed their own Bund in 1872.
3. The Northwestern Schützenbund was founded in Chicago on 23 November 1878 and continued through 1883.
4. The Northwestern Schützenbund became the Western Schützenbund in 1884 and continued until 1896 under that label.
5. The Western Schützenbund joined with the Upper Mississippi Valley Schützenbund in 1896 (8 November) to form the Central Sharpshooters Union, which remained in existence until 1941.<sup>7</sup>

### **Back to Highland**

In 1865, Highland was the site of the first schuetzenfest of the North American Schützenbund, 28-31 May. The magnitude of this festival can only be imagined. Out-of-town participants took the train to within fifteen miles of Highland (station stop in Trenton, Illinois). Reports list 82 wagonloads of competitors making the overland trip from the rail station to Highland. Almost 40,000 (39,634) shots were fired at the targets of the local verein. Food and beverages consumed during the four-day event provide an idea of the large number of participants:

. . . 10 calves, 1 steer, 4 sheep, 150 pounds of sausage, 44 hams, 72 smoked tongues, 3 large hoops of Swiss cheese, and 400 loaves of bread. Evidently it took a large quantity of liquid refreshment to wash this down. They consumed 62 barrels of beer, 372 cases of Sodawasser, and and 2,700 bottles of wine. . . .<sup>8</sup>

This inventory of consumables consumed reminds us that the shooting contests were accompanied by collateral activities for wives and children: food, drinks, music, games, dancing, etc. The presence of alcohol (beer and wine) was traditional at European schuetzenfests but aroused concerns among the temperance-minded neighbors of American schuetzenfests wherever they occurred.

Highland, Illinois, remained a leader in the schuetzenfest movement by example if not by membership numbers. The large cities soon eclipsed the membership totals of the Helvetia Schuetzen Gesellschaft. The club's abiding eminence in Midwestern schuetzen circles is shown in the regional Schützenbund tournaments it hosted periodically throughout the rest of the "golden age" of the schuetzen movement: 1865, 1867, 1872, 1883, 1909. Its state charter (1863) required yearly business meetings, which kept it active in order to retain control of Lindendale Park.

#### Other Illinois Schuetzenvereins of Note

Chicago hosted numerous German-American schuetzenvereins, as well as clubs organized by other immigrant communities (near Germanic in our opinion): Denmark and Norway, to be specific. One Chicago schuetzenverein's history, the Chicago Schuetzenverein, has been uncovered in a turn-of-the-century article of reminiscences by Albert Boese.<sup>9</sup> The author claims that in the 1850s a loose organization under the name of Bürger-Schützengesellschaft was formed but did not acquire a dedicated range as the lake shore north of Division Street, the city limits, was available for shooting and "on the west side, they could shoot in Luther's or Eich's Garden and in Schoch's Garden which was somewhat to the west of the old Bull's Head."<sup>10</sup>

After the Chicago Schuetzenverein officially incorporated in 1865, it bought 40 acres of land for a schuetzen park in Lakeview, on Evanston Avenue near Graceland Avenue. A wealthy member backed the formation of a joint stock company, which raised the \$30,000 purchase price. The resulting shooting grounds were the host site for the second festival of the North American Schützenbund in 1866. This park served a typical multi-use function for Germanic families on weekend outings for a number of years. City residential growth, non-Germanic ire with Sunday consumption of alcohol and perhaps the inflation of the value of the property led the club in 1872 to seek other more remote grounds. A suitable property was purchased in Kensington, known at the turn of the century as West Pullman. Crocodile tears are owed to the memory of this club's displacement as they purchased one-eighth of a section (80 acres, 50 acres of prairie and 30 of woods) for \$10,000. They had sold their former

park for \$60,000. So, in their second venture of land acquisition, they secured twice as much land for one-third the previous price.<sup>11</sup>

The new schuetzen park also developed an enthusiastic constituency engaged in other recreational uses. Again city growth continued and led in 1893 to the sale of this second park for a tidy profit and the acquisition of about 30 acres in Palos Park, about 20 miles from the city. Regularly scheduled trains carried shooters and others to and from that park on weekends. In 1893 a great international shooting tournament took place from June to September in conjunction with the 1893 Columbus Exposition. However, this was staged on the old shooting grounds.<sup>12</sup>

The North-Chicago Schuetzenverein operated for many years and shot at the North Chicago Schuetzen's Park on Western Avenue, north of Belmont Avenue. These grounds were not owned by the club, however. When this club dissolved in 1895, many members joined the Chicago Schuetzenverein.<sup>13</sup>

The Joliet Schuetzen Verein was formed about 1864-65. Its club team won the team championship at the 1889 schuetzenfest of the Western Schützenbund held at Indianapolis, Indiana.<sup>14</sup>

Peru, Illinois, boasts the second oldest schuetzenverein in Illinois, its club organizing in 1861. A street, "Shooting Park Road," remains a reminder of its shooting past.

Princeton, Illinois was witness to schuetzen matches at the local brewery circa 1873. The Princeton Schuetzen Gesellschaft obtained a five-acre range west of the city and conducted matches until at least 1900.<sup>15</sup>

Other known Illinois Germanic-American shooting clubs await historical treatment. Many may have existed only briefly and/or registered but few members. Further research will answer those questions. The ones identified so far are:

1. Saline Schuetzenverein, Grant Fork, Illinois.
2. Det Norsk Skytterlag (Norwegian Sharp Shooters Association), Chicago, Illinois.
3. Turngemeinde (Sharpshooters), Chicago, Illinois.
4. Elgin Amateur Rifle Club, Elgin, Illinois.
5. Elgin National Rifle Club, Elgin, Illinois.
6. Schuetzenverein, Belleville, Illinois.
7. Bloomington Rifle Association, Bloomington, Illinois.
8. Rock Island Sharpshooters Society, Rock Island, Illinois.<sup>16</sup>

Additional Illinois shooting clubs formed before 1900 have been identified by the ASSRA archivist. While some are clearly German-American, others may have changed their names or adopted target-shooting programs other than the schuetzen tradition. Future research is necessary to locate and sift the evidence.

9. Aurora Sharp Shooters Society, Aurora, Illinois.
10. Brazilian Rifle Club, 5926 S. Halstead St., Chicago, Illinois.
11. Collinsville Schuetzenverein, Collinsville, Illinois.

12. Danish Rifle Association, Chicago, Illinois.
13. Dearborn Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
14. East St. Louis Schuetzen Gesellschaft, East St. Louis, Illinois.
15. Evanston Prairie Shooting Club, Evanston, Illinois.
16. Lake View Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
17. Manhattan Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
18. Marlin Rifle Club, Rock Island, Illinois.
19. Morrison Rifle Club, Morrison, Illinois.
20. Mount Morris [Rifle Club?] Mount Morris, Illinois.
21. North Shore Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
22. Peck's Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
23. Peoria Rifle Club, Peoria, Illinois.
24. Piasa Rod and Rifle Club, Alton, Illinois.
25. Post 28 G.A.R. Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
26. Sandwich [Rifle Club?], Sandwich, Illinois.
27. George H. Thomas Post (G.A.R.) Rifle Club, Chicago, Illinois.
28. Warren Rifle Club, Warren, Illinois.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Amerikanische Jagd- und Schützen-Zeitung*

The *Amerikanische Jagd- und Schützen-Zeitung* was published 1886-96, appeared twice monthly, and served as the official voice of the Western Schützenbund. Its publication history corresponds almost perfectly with the organizational life of the Western Schützenbund, which formed out of the Northwestern Schützenbund in 1884. The Western Schützenbund joined with the Upper Mississippi Valley Schützenbund in 1896 to become the Central Sharpshooters Union, as noted earlier.

The newspaper is reported to have published 1,250 copies of each issue in 1890. Its office address was 14 and 16 Canal Street, Chicago, Illinois. This paper offers a treasure trove of information about schuetzenverein activities in the Midwest during these years. It offers a window into the schuetzen culture of the time and the issues deemed of interest to its German-language readers. The Chicago Historical Society library holds the first three years of the newspaper's issues. The ASSRA archivist generated translation notes while perusing the Chicago Historical Society library's holdings. A facsimile set of those holdings was produced and deposited in the ASSRA archives. The translation notes reveal the following topics covered in the newspaper:

1. Reports of match results from member schuetzenvereins.
2. Announcements of upcoming schuetzenfests and results after the events.
3. Lists of member schuetzenvereins and the numbers of members for whom they pay dues.
4. Hunting articles about North American and European hunting venues.

5. Reports of European shooting events.
6. Advertisements from businesses in the German-American community only remotely related to shooting or not at all.
7. Advertisements of products directly relevant to shooting, often from non-Germanic companies.<sup>18</sup>

A larger question is whether other German-language sources similar to this newspaper exist but remain undiscovered. As noted earlier, the Western Schützenbund evolved into the Central Sharpshooters Union in 1896. East coast and west coast schuetzenbunds may have published similar documents. The English-language sporting press reported on German-American schuetzenfests, but not from the inside. Some hostility and marginalization are apparent in English-language accounts. The restriction of schuetzenfests to 200-yard offhand shooting distinguished them from the target matches conducted by the National Rifle Association at longer ranges and from three or more shooting positions.

### Where Are They Now?

Although this paper addresses the nineteenth-century target-shooting clubs primarily in Illinois, it is instructive to note the demise of these Germanic-American shooting clubs in virtually all parts of the United States. The salient cause of their termination was World War I and the anti-German hysteria that erupted among the mass media and politicians. The Germanic-American community had maintained dual "cultural citizenship" more than any other immigrant group. Germanic institutions continued to flourish up to World War I and presented visible symbols to be attacked by patriotic forces venting their superheated paranoia. German-language publications of all kinds ceased production. German-language classes were withdrawn from secondary school and university course offerings. Germanic classical music disappeared from concert programs. Financial and business institutions with Germanic labels anglicized their logos. The shooting clubs were caught up in this rush to abandon provocative elements in their public persona. Very few survived the war intact, and where they survived, they earnestly shed their Germanic labels.

Revival of interest in Germanic-American schuetzen target matches achieved critical mass in 1948 with the formation of an organization of collectors and shooters of schuetzen-style target rifles used during its golden age, 1865-1914. This organization, the American Single Shot Rifle Association, continues to support the study of Germanic-American schuetzen traditions and the use of traditional (original and reproduction) target arms in target shooting tournaments staged at its national range in Warsaw and Etna Green, Indiana. As noted earlier, the archives of the association are the premier source of information about this neglected topic within German-American Studies. Those archives welcome requests for information from researchers on this topic. Information is organized by state and awaits refinement and crafting



into additional pieces of the whole picture of Germanic-American schuetzenvereins in nineteenth-century America.

*Eastern Illinois University*  
Charleston, Illinois

*Northern Michigan University*  
Marquette, Michigan

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Hummel and Gary S. Foster, "Germanic/American Shooting Societies: Continuities and Change of Schuetzenvereins, *International Journal of the History of Sport* 15,2 (August 1998): 186-93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Jaroslav Lugs, *A History of Shooting* (Feltham, Middlesex, UK: Spring Books, 1968), 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Schuetzenfest: A German-American Tradition*, Museum of Our National Heritage: Exhibition Catalogue (Lexington, MA: Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library Inc., 1991), 3-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Centennial History* (Highland, IL, n.d.), 91-100.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Westergaard, "The Century-Old Schuetzenfest," *American Single Shot Rifle News* 41, 4 (July-August 1987): 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Rudi Prusok. Letter to "Mr. Henry," 8 March 1986, ASSRA archives.

<sup>8</sup> Westergaard. "The Century-Old," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Boese "The Evolution of Schuetzenvereins in Illinois," *Deutsch-Amerikanische Geschichtsblätter* 1, 2 (1901): 48-51. Cited here in the translation by Eric Stahl published in *ASSRA Newsletter* 34,1: 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> Boese. "The Evolution," 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Curt Johnson, *Gunmakers of Illinois* (Shumway, York, PA: Shumway, 1997), 1:20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>17</sup> Rudi Prusok, notes on contents of "Illinois" file in ASSRA archives (n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> Rudi Prusok, translation notes concerning copies of *Amerikanische Jagd und Schuetzen Zeitung* in ASSRA files (n.d.).

## Works Cited

Boese, Albert. "The Evolution of Schuetzenvereins in Illinois." *Deutsch-Amerikanische Geschichtsblätter* 1,2 (1901): 48-51. Translated by Eric Stahl and published in *ASSRA Newsletter* 34,1: 5-7.

*Centennial History* (Highland, IL, n.d.), 91-100.

Hummel, Richard L., and Gary S. Foster. "Germanic/American Shooting Societies: Continuities and Change of Schuetzenvereins." *International Journal of the History of Sport* 15,2 (August 1998): 186-93.

Johnson, Curt. *Gunmakers of Illinois*, vol. 1. York, PA: Shumway, 1997.

Lugs, Jaroslav. *A History of Shooting*. Feltham, Middlesex, UK: Spring Books, 1968).

Prusok, Rudi. Letter to "Mr. Henry," 8 March 1986. ASSRA archives.

Prusok, Rudi. Notes on contents of "Illinois" file in ASSRA archives (n.d.).

Prusok, Rudi. Translation notes concerning copies of *Amerikanische Jagd und Schuetzen Zeitung* in ASSRA files (n.d.). 19 May 2002.

*Schuetzenfest: A German-American Tradition*. Museum of Our National Heritage: Exhibition Catalogue Lexington, MA: Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library Inc., 1991.

Westergaard, Chris. "The Century-Old Schuetzenfest." *American Single Shot Rifle News* 41,4 (July-August 1987): 1-2.

