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The German-American Turners: Their Efforts to Promote, Develop, and Initiate Physical Culture in Chicago's Public Schools and Parks, 1860-1914

Introduction

Throughout the United States, the move to develop public recreation and supervised physical activities grew out of the social reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century, the Dewey education movement and the development of ethnic community consciousness (Davis 1976). Social reformers such as Thorstein Veblen, Ray Stannard Baker, and Ida Tarbell; early champions of playgrounds and parks, like social economist Richard T. Ely (Betts 1974); and special ethnic groups such as the turners, who sought to continue a moral and physical way of life (Hofmeister 1976), all contributed to the eventual development of publicly sponsored recreation and physical education programs.

The purpose of this essay is to examine in particular the German ethnic community's contribution to the development of physical education and supervised recreation in the city of Chicago. The Chicago Germans waged three physical culture campaigns for the city's youth. Over a fifty-year period, from 1860-1914, the Germans (and turner members in particular) affected two major public institutions: the public schools and the parks. The first two campaigns were directed at the public schools with a focus on providing physical training for the students. The third campaign focused on the park commissioners in hopes that better services and supervised activities would be provided.

Background

Why were the Germans so influential in Chicago? Three factors contributed to their effectiveness: the Germans were a large segment of the population; they had an extensive communication network to develop consensus; and they had well-organized social groups dedicated to the development of physical culture. In addition, especially near the turn of the century, social reformers and followers of the

University of Chicago's John Dewey also became active in Chicago. The combination that was effective in other parts of the country thus also reached a critical mass in Chicago.

According to one report (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 December 1873), Chicago had become the second-largest immigrant depot in the country by 1870. Although the German migration to Chicago began in a modest fashion, with each succeeding decade there was a significant increase in their political clout (see Table).

Table
German Population of Chicago
1850-1920

	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920
Total Population	29963	109206	298977	503185	1099850	1698575	2185283	2701705
German Ancestry	4757	22230	52316	75205	161039	170738	182289	112288
% of German vs. Total Population	15.9	20.1	17.5	14.9	14.6	10.1	8.3	4.2 *
% of German vs. Other Foreign Born			35.94	36.71	35.73	34.7	24.27	13.89
% Increase of Population	570.3	264.6	173.6	68.3	118.6	54.4	28.7	23.6
City Size in Sq. Miles			35		178			198

(Keil and Jentz 1983; Burgess and Newcomb 1931; Department of Development and Planning 1976)

* First year where another country (Poland) had more foreign-born arrivals.

Newly arrived male adults continued to settle in Chicago, with the result that even in the 1880s, 75 percent of the heads of households were still first-generation Germans (Keil and Jentz 1983). By the eleventh census (1900), there were approximately 338,000 Germans living within the borders of the state of Illinois and 473,000 first-generation American offspring (*Chicago Tribune*, 16 January 1901). After 1900, immigration to Chicago continued at a significant pace, although the percentage of Germans decreased in relation to the total population. By 1920, three out of five Germans were second-generation Chicagoans (Keil and Jentz 1983).

Throughout the period (1860-1914), Germans accounted for roughly one-third of the total foreign population and eventually generated one-third of the city's foreign voting power (Ulrich 1885). Their influence was amplified by the fact that they totaled 24.7 percent of the city's "gainfully employed," many of whom were organized into strong labor unions (Townsend 1927).

So important was the German group influence that Lincoln considered their vote to be a deciding factor in the 1860 election (Gernon 1934; Monaghan 1942). The Germans—referred to as a "racial group" in early reports—possessed political clout. Their influence was illustrated by the

parades and petitions which they generated and the important political offices held (Monaghan 1942). According to Townsend (1927), they may have been the most important group in Chicago.

In order for the Germans to retain their cultural heritage but at the same time to introduce newly arrived residents to the ways of American life and to organize into socially conscious groups, German newspapers flourished. Approximately 236 German-language newspapers, which operated as daily, weekly (Sunday), semi-monthly, or monthly publications, were established in Chicago and its surrounding communities between 1848 (*Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 21 April 1848) and 1925 (Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project 1942). Of these, the majority began during the 1880s (Arndt, and Olson 1976). The newspapers, almost entirely written in the German language, were eclectic in nature. They ranged from trade (jewelry, plumbing, brewing, or farming), medical services, theatrical, humor, evangelical, sports (*Amerikanische Jagd- und Schützen-Zeitung*, 1886-98), to radical socialist (*Der Anarchist*, 1888-94).

Physical Culture Concerns

The earliest *Turnverein* (gymnastic and social club) was established in Cincinnati in 1848 by the exiled Friedrich Hecker (Seibel 1954). The teachers were selected based on who had the most experience under Friedrich L. Jahn (1778-1852), the "Father of Gymnastics," who conceived the idea that Germany's morale could be restored by building up physical and moral powers through the practice of gymnastics (Hofmeister 1976). As Germans settled throughout America, they founded *Turnverein* fraternities in order to practice the teachings of Jahn. As the societies grew, the need for trained teachers became evident. After 1853, *Schulvereine* (school societies) were implemented as non-sectarian schools for teacher training (Metzner 1911). At the third National Turnfest held in Chicago in 1869, the idea was formulated that one national program and training school for teachers should be developed (Koeber 1942). The Normal School of the North American Gymnastic Union (established on 22 November 1866 in New York City) was chosen to serve as the national turner training school. The third time the training program was offered it was moved to Chicago until the fire of 1871, at which time it then became a traveling school until 1875 (Metzner 1911; Knapp and Hartsoe 1979). After many years of operating in Milwaukee, the Normal School finally became a part of the School of Physical Education of Indiana University in 1941 (Northwest Turners 1960).

In Chicago, the first German gymnasium to be opened was Irving Hall in 1852 (Hofmeister 1976). By the summer of 1854, Professor H. G. Ottignon from New York was hired as the instructor. The need for and popularity of a gymnasium for social, cultural and physical activities was evidenced by the fact that every four years, a new *Turnverein* was established on Chicago's south and west sides (Wood 1881). By 1896, at least twenty-four turner societies had been registered in Chicago (*Chicagoer Freie Presse*, 2 July 1896).

Prior to the Civil War, the interest of the turners in physical activity and training stemmed from the teachings of "Father" Jahn and the importance of having a strong, standing citizen group ready for war. It is not surprising, therefore, that turners were prominent members of the Union Army. The numbers and organizing ability of the Germans, in general, can be illustrated by the fact that in the spring of 1861, approximately 9,000-10,000 soldiers responded to President Lincoln's call for Union volunteers; of this number, 5,000-6,000 were turner-trained Germans (Knapp and Hartsoe 1979).

Additionally, twenty-five regiments, several from Chicago, were composed solely of turners. For example, on 17 April 1861 one hundred and five members of the Chicago Turngemeinde were organized as the Turner Union Cadets and later named the Hecker Regiment (Greiner 1952). It has also been estimated that possibly as many as fifty of the Union generals were of German birth, at least half of whom were probably turner-trained at one time (Seibel 1954).

After the Civil War, the turner societies changed their names to reflect the new values in society and became known as German-American turners. New efforts were focused on the public schools, as evidenced by a unanimous resolution adopted by the national turners in 1866 and forwarded to Congress:

It is the duty of this organization to support all attempts to raise the intellectual standard of the people and to promote the non-sectarian education of youth by establishing and furthering good schools. (North-west Turners 1960)

In Chicago, efforts by German newspaper publishers, such as Balthasar Rau, urged the spread of the value of physical education. Rau believed that the papers should be used as constant propaganda to induce the municipal administrations to introduce gymnastic work in the public schools (*Der Turner*, 3 June 1892).

Physical Education in Chicago's Schools: The First Campaign

Through the influence of the turners, by lifestyle example and newspaper articles, educational leaders of the board of education in the city of Chicago began to call for a system of physical training as early as 1861 (Dore 1861). The motivation was the desire to improve the health of the students. Based on the principles of the turner movement, Dio Lewis' "New Gymnastics" and exercises published for the Oswego, New York, schools (Wells 1861), the board thought that exercises would be a remedial cure for those youths who suffered from such conditions as mental fatigue, shoulder stooping, wan complexion, and enfeebled physical constitution (Wells 1860).

Classroom teachers led exercises in Chicago's elementary schools. Basing the activities on the turner calisthenic model, the board expected teachers to have students exercise next to their desks, moving their arms and legs, marching in place or changing positions, on command and by a special count. The exercises were conducted for a period of three to

five minutes, as often as once every half hour. Although the exercises were found to be beneficial by a teacher review group, no regular program or time for the calisthenics was established. Consequently, when, where, how, or if the exercises were conducted was left up to a teacher's discretion (Dore 1861).

During the fall of 1866, various local German societies petitioned the board of education to extend their efforts to the secondary level (*Die Staatszeitung*, 6 September 1866). A "specialist" from a *Turnverein* was brought in and implemented a program for two semesters in 1867 (Board of Education 1863). Although the project was considered successful, the board pleaded financial constraints, and the "experiment" was abandoned (Brentano 1868).

The Second Campaign

Efforts to integrate physical education as a part of the curriculum were directed by the various superintendents of schools for fifteen years. Finally, in 1885, the turner societies, led by second-generation forty-eighters who became concerned with the rapid ill effects of urban life on children became determined to promote physical training in *all* public schools. This time, the board of education appointed a special "Committee on Physical Culture" which consisted of four members of the Chicago *Turngemeinde* (Pesavento 1966). The committee implemented a successful pilot program at an elementary school which the teachers could easily implement without the benefit of a "specialist." Unlike the 1866 experience, this project led to the hiring of a regular instructor to oversee the work of the elementary teachers in four grammar school programs (Special Committee 1886). Steady growth was funded thereafter.

By 1900, schools were being built with a gymnasium (Williams 1926), graded manuals were developed (Suder 1886), a full-time director and special teacher of physical education was hired (Chicago Public Schools 1901), and physical education had been divided into specialty areas with different emphases (Suder 1901). All of these innovations were brought about through the farsightedness of certain members of the board of education who worked in conjunction with (and under pressure from) turner societies.

During this second campaign (1885), German exercise "specialists" were hired for the secondary level, eight turner-trained teachers brought physical culture to the forty-eight elementary schools, a calisthenics manual was adopted (insuring that all students were being instructed in a similar fashion), and turner Henry Suder had been hired to supervise the city's school physical training (*Die Staatszeitung*, 6 September 1866).

The Park and Playground Movement

During the early stages of the industrial revolution, many large American cities had already begun to provide municipal land specifically for parks. New York City's Central Park (established in 1856) was the first park created solely as a pleasure garden. The idea of using city land

as pleasure gardens to serve the people was the central idea of the park movement (Lutzin 1979). In Chicago, by 1869, three separate park districts (the South, West and Lincoln) were created for a similar reason (Eastman 1914).

While large green open areas provided some relief from the congestion of urban life, Chicagoans used the parks for passive activities, unstructured and unsupervised, many times creating their own recreational experiences (Benjamin 1982). Chicago social reformers, such as Jacob Riis of the Municipal Science Club (Halsey 1940), were concerned that supervised, wholesome play activities were lacking for children and that many of the parks were not accessible to the people who needed them the most. Eventually, Mayor Harrison, influenced by social reformers, created a special park commission on 6 November 1899 (Jackson 1901). This commission was charged with three specific objectives, to:

1. establish playgrounds in the congested sections of the city as rapidly as finances permitted;
2. study the need of playgrounds in the districts and to disclose ways of meeting those needs, and
3. study the three park boards of the city with a view to determine their relation to the play and recreational problems of the community (Perkins 1904).

In essence, the commissioners' mission was to create "play parks" located nearer to the people since the people could not easily travel to the parks (Rainwater 1922).

The commission recommended establishing play parks in areas of the city which contained the greatest population density (Halsey 1940). Of the three park districts, commissioners from the South District were the first to create a system of small play parks (one to five acres) and thus begin what play historian Rainwater (1922) termed the "recreation center stage" of the play movement. Eventually, the West Park and Lincoln Park districts duplicated the original efforts of the South Park commissioners, creating small playground-type parks or squares throughout the immigrant districts (Perkins 1904; Eastman 1914).

The play parks were all developed and built with similar characteristics. These consisted of an outdoor and indoor (fieldhouse) physical plant. Each fieldhouse contained an assembly hall with stage and cloak rooms, a men's and women's indoor gymnasium with locker rooms, shower baths and toilets, two to four club rooms, a refectory, and a branch of the Chicago Public Library (South Park Commissioners 1908).

The outdoor physical plant was created to encourage active, supervised recreation over passive activities. For children, there were swing sets, teeter-totters, giant slides, wading pools, sand bins, and an open area for games. The outdoor men's gymnasium was equipped with an iron pipe frame holding traveling rings, climbing ladders, poles, and slanting beams (all modeled after the turner equipment). The women's outdoor gymnasium had similar equipment. Additionally, at each park there were ball diamonds and fields and athletic (track) ovals, and some had lagoons for boating, stables for riding, and tennis courts. All but one

of the parks had an outdoor swimming pool with lockers (Foster 1916). The types of recreational activities which were encouraged fell into five general categories. They were:

1. the physical, such as gymnastics and ball games;
2. the manual, such as shop classes;
3. the social, as in dance, party or club activities;
4. the aesthetic, including dramas and concerts, and
5. the civic, such as public service lectures (Osborn 1928; Rainwater 1922).

The Third Campaign

Although the playground movement in Chicago was initiated through the actions of social reformers and the park commissioners, the turners did influence the developmental direction of the play parks in three prominent ways. The first influence of the German-American turners came indirectly. Due to their already developed political clout, significant ethnic population proportion and established record in the development of sound physical training, gymnastic classes were instructed on the turner model (DeGroot 1907). Each class included tactics and marching, mat and tumbling exercise, apparatus work or dance steps for girls, and organized play and team games (South Park Commissioners 1905).

Not only was the gymnastics instruction modeled after the work carried on in the *Turnvereine* but many of the playground directors and superintendents had received their initial training at the local turner clubs, leading to a second, administrative influence. For example, the second chairman of the special park commission was turner alderman Ernst F. Herrmann (Perkins 1904). Additionally, Theodore A. Gross of Turn Verein Vorwaerts served for thirty-five years as superintendent of the municipal playgrounds (Koeber 1942) and George Sonnenleiter, Sr., was a municipal playground director for over twenty years (Schrader 1960).

The third and most direct influence of the turners was made through their efforts to organize and secure sites for the proposed play parks. In 1895, the Turn Verein Vorwaerts (Northwest Turners) gathered fifty-six thousand signatures and petitioned the West Park commissioners to establish a park near a German area (Schrader 1960). Legislative authority was granted and on 22 August 1896 the first playground with natatorium was erected at Douglas Park and dedicated by Governor John P. Altgeld (who was born in Prussia in 1847) (Currey 1913; Koeber 1942). The community-conscious efforts continued throughout the period of small park development. One example was the erection of the "German Building" in Jackson Park (South Park Commissioners 1897).

The Chicago Park Commission (established in 1839, two years after the city of Chicago was incorporated) worked independently but in a parallel fashion to the school board. The South and West Park commissioners (1895) attempted to provide places for supervision and physical training for young children and activities for its adult residents. Heavily

influenced by the German-American turners, a growing tide of civic responsibility, and the belief that physical training was indeed a positive method to curb juvenile delinquency, the commissioners developed a year-round, sixteen-hour per day program which was unparalleled in any other city of the nation at the time (South Park Commissioners 1908).

Conclusion

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the German-American community played the principal role in bringing physical culture and training to Chicago public institutions. From a base of politics and ethnic community consciousness, they helped to shape the emerging social values of the time. They then translated those values into changes in the public schools' curriculum and into the development of a unique park system and its programs.

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