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American Turners Local Societies

Collection, 1866-2006

Mss 038

American Turners Local Societies Collection, 1866-2006

Ms 038

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ABSTRACT

Many Germans immigrated to the United States following the failure of an 1848 revolution designed to introduce democratic reforms into the governments of the German states. Among these immigrants were members of the Turners, an athletic and political organization founded in Germany during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Turners quickly established societies (known as Turnverein or Turngemeinde) in the American cities in which they settled. These societies served as athletic, political, and social centers for German communities in the United States. The Turners' most important contribution to American life in their communities has been their advocacy of physical education and fitness. Turners successfully lobbied local school boards in many cities for the inclusion of physical education classes in the curriculum, and Turner instructors served as the directors of physical education programs in many school systems in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The American Turners Local Societies Collection includes constitutions and bylaws, anniversary publications, brief histories, event programs, newspaper clippings, and photographs from approximately 162 of the Turner societies that have existed in the United States.

ACCESS

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ACQUISITION

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A89-12, A90-22, A90-30, A90-33, A90-35, A91-11, A91-23, A91-40, A91-45, A93-15, A93-20, A93-21, A93-33, A93-34, A93-60, A94-9, A94-12, A94-13, A94-17, A94-23, A94-31, A94-32, A94-65, A94-66, A94-67, A94-68, A94-69, A94-70, A94-72, A94-73, A94-74, A94-75, A94-77, A94-78, A94-79, A94-80, A94-81, A94-82, A94-84, A94-102, A94-103, A94-104, A94-114, A94-115, A94-116, A94-117, A94-118, A2000/01-024.

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HISTORICAL NOTE

The Turner movement began in Germany during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852), a teacher in Berlin, began conducting outdoor physical education classes in 1811. Jahn developed a system of gymnastics that emphasized the use of apparatus like the parallel bars, the rings, the balance beam, the horse, and the horizontal bar (all invented by Jahn). His goals were to promote both physical fitness and German nationalism. Over the next three decades gymnastic societies that followed Jahn's principles of physical fitness opened in many German cities. The societies were called "Turnverein"(gymnastic societies) and their members were known as "Turners" (the German word for "gymnasts"). These societies served not only as centers for exercise but as gathering places for people who advocated democratic reforms in the governments of the German states. When the 1848 revolution began, many Turners actively supported it. Fearing for their freedom or even their lives when the revolution failed, many of these Turners fled to the United States.

The immigrant Turners quickly established gymnastic societies in their new country. The Cincinnati Turngemeinde, organized on November 21, 1848, is generally credited with being the first Turner society organized in the United States. By 1850 Turner societies were operating in Baltimore, Boston, Louisville, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, and St. Louis. In that year delegates from Turner societies met in Philadelphia and founded a national organization, the *Vereinigte Turnvereins Nordamerika* (United Turner Societies of North America, now known as the American Turners). The number of Turner societies continued to grow during the 1850s. The majority of the societies were located in an area stretching from southern New England southward to the Middle Atlantic states, then westward through the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes region to the northern portions of the Mississippi River Valley and the Great Plains.

The 1850s were a time of challenge for Turner societies. The influx of immigrants from Ireland and Germany during the 1840s and 1850s sparked the rise of a nativist movement concerned about the growing numbers of Catholic and German-speaking peoples in the United States. The movement spawned the American or "Know-Nothing" Party (so-called because members would respond "I know nothing" when asked about their activities). The party's political agenda included a limit on the number of immigrants allowed into the United States and a denial of voting rights to foreign-born residents. Turner societies worked against the Know-Nothing Party, and violent clashes between members of the Know-Nothing Party and German immigrants (including members of Turner societies) occurred in many cities, especially during elections. By the late 1850s the Know-Nothing Party had waned in influence and the violence ended.

Turners participated in the Civil War in large numbers. Many northern societies became inactive or even disbanded because so many of their members were serving in the army. After the war the Turners experienced a period of sustained growth. In 1871 the Turners had a total of 10,200 members in 148 societies. By 1880 the numbers had risen to 13,000 members in 186 societies. 1893 was the highwater mark; membership stood at nearly 42,000 in 316 societies. The Turners drew new members both from recently arrived immigrants who had belonged to Turner societies in Germany and from the descendants of Turners who had arrived in the United States in the 1840s and 1850s.

The Turners' emphasis on physical fitness extended beyond the gymnasiums of the Turnhall. The Turners' 1880 national convention passed a resolution calling on its members to work for the introduction of physical education into the curriculum of the nation's public school systems. The Turners took up the issue with enthusiasm and over the next twenty years enjoyed many successes. Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and St. Louis were among the cities where Turners' lobbying helped convince school boards to add physical education classes. Turner instructors served as directors of physical education programs in many school systems.

The twentieth century was generally a period of decline for Turner societies. Many factors contributed to this situation, including anti-German sentiment during the world wars, lost income due to Prohibition and the Great Depression, the movement of Turner members into the suburbs, increased competition from other athletic and physical fitness facilities, and a reduced sense of German ethnic identity. Many societies closed as a shrinking membership base and financial problems left them unable to support their operations. Some of the societies that have survived gave up their athletic programs and became primarily social organizations. By 1999 only 59 Turner societies that were part of the American Turners remained active.

REFERENCES

Metzner, Henry. *History of the American Turners*. 4th rev. ed. Louisville, KY: National Council of the American Turners, 1989.

Pumroy, Eric L., and Katja Rampelmann, comps. *Research Guide to the Turner Movement in the United States*. Bibliographies and Indexes in American History, no. 33. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.

RELATED MATERIALS

American Turners Records, 1855-1999, Mss 030, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Athenaeum Turners Records, 1851-1994, Mss 032, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Indianapolis South Side Turners Records, 1893-1956, Mss 045, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Pumroy, Eric L., and Katja Rampelmann, comps. *Research Guide to the Turner Movement in the United States*. Bibliographies and Indexes in American History, no. 33. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection provides historical information about 163 Turner societies, both active and disbanded, in the United States. The societies come from 26 states and the District of Columbia, with the states of Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York, Wisconsin, Missouri, New Jersey, and Iowa being the most heavily represented. The societies are organized alphabetically by state, then alphabetically by city, and then (when necessary) alphabetically by society name within city. The collection is of limited use for genealogical research.

Items found in the collections include constitutions and bylaws, anniversary publications, newsletters, histories, event programs, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Most of the material is written or printed in English, but many of the items from the period before 1918 are in German. The amount of material for each society varies greatly. Some societies have only one or two items in the collection, while the material from other societies fills several folders. Three societies in particular are well-documented in the collection: the Louisville Turners, the American Turners Detroit, and the Concordia Turners of St. Louis. The files for each society include several anniversary publications, event programs, newspaper clippings, and extensive runs of their newsletters. These records offer a detailed description of the histories, activities, and individuals involved with the three societies.

The book *Research Guide to the Turner Movement in the United States*, compiled by Eric L. Pumroy and Katja Rampelmann, can partially serve as a guide to this collection. Chapter 3 of the book contains a listing of records and publications from many individual Turner societies found in various repositories in the United States. Those items with the location code InIU will be in this collection. The book thus provides more detailed information about the materials available in this collection for each society.

A photograph inventory is located at the end of the series list. While the inventory does not give a description of individual photographs, it does list each society that has photographs in the collection. The photographs are also noted with their societies in the Local Societies box listing.

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