

The Importance of the American Turners on Society:

Highlighting the American Turners Toledo

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance and origins of the American Turners on a national and local level. The American Turners have deep roots from Germany as far back as the 17th century. They had a great influence on American society in the 19th century and are still of importance today. These people were unified by different causes throughout the ages, but this allowed for them to do great things. Some of the most notable achievements of the American Turners are: preserving their German heritage, fighting in the Civil War, and instituting physical education in schools. The American Turners Toledo is our local Turner club in the area. In today's society the principal values of the Turners is not as prevalent. This causes lack of membership and decreasing knowledge of what the Turners are. It is of utmost importance to educate the community on what the American Turners are and what they have to offer to the betterment of the population.

The Importance of the American Turners on Society

The Melting Pot...One of the United States of America's famous nicknames. America has been a nation of immigrants, and this is reflected by our multicultural society. Although immigrants from all around the world have come to America, German-Americans have been one of the largest immigrant groups. Today nearly 40 million Americans claim German ancestry (Library of Congress, 2022). A lot of German culture and traditions have made the American mainstream unbeknownst to many. Many German traditions are showcased today by Oktoberfests, carnivals(mardi-gras), and German American Days. (Hofmann, 2015).

In order to initially preserve German culture, German immigrants had organized themselves into vereins. In 1916-1917 there were 6,586 separate German societies in the United States. Many of these vereins were *Turnvereins*. The overall purpose of *Turnvereins* was for physical education and development. Turner halls hosted Turner activities and were overall social centers for German immigrants. There have been over 700 Turner societies that have existed in the United States. Although many are still in existence today, no one seems to know about it. (Hofmann, 2015)

According to the Principles and Statutes of the American Turners (1984),

“ The American Turners, a federation of Turner Societies in the United States Of America and Canada, is organized to promote health and physical education, cultural education, and rational thinking, in order to advance the health, happiness and progress of mankind.”

(American Turners, 1984)

The duty of the (Turner) Societies is to provide education in health and physical education for all ages, while promoting cultural and intellectual growth, and good moral character. All Turners strive to fulfill their motto, “ A Sound Mind in a Sound Body”, they should attain this through planned programs for health and physical education, cultural education, and recreational and social programs. Also each society should strive for participation in civic worthy projects at both the national and local levels. (American Turners, 1986)

Our local Turnverein is the American Turners Toledo currently located in Perrysburg, Ohio. This society was founded in 1926 in Toledo and eventually built a Turnerhalle on Collingwood Ave. This Turnerhalle is where the Toledo Turners resided from 1934 until 1991. The loss of the Turnerhalle on Collingwood marked a change in what the American Turners Toledo used to be. The original intentions of the American Turners Toledo is no longer prevalent

in today's society. At the Turners people could have a close knit community that was not typically available in the outside world. These members were alike in sharing the same genealogical background. Many immigrants were part of the Turners because it helped them feel at home. These immigrants then spread their influence to the community and members who were not born in Germany. All of these members were able to bond while training in athletics, at social gatherings, or through cultural activities. These events are reminiscent of the Turners that once was. In today's society these social events are not as prominent and people are more involved in their own lives than to attend these events. Slowly organizations like the American Turners Toledo are losing popularity. This decrease in membership makes it difficult for the society to function as it should. This is why it is vital to spread awareness about these societies and the importance they hold to the community.

An Introduction to Turnen in Germany

Turners originated in 17th-18th century Germany and connected with the political, social, and economic changes of the time, such as the Enlightenment, French Revolution, and new political order in Europe and technology. During this time the ideology of fighting for the "fatherland" started to appear in Germany. "German Turnen" developed by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn was part of this ideology. The original goal of the Turners was liberation from French occupation that had followed the loss of the Prussian army in the Napoleonic War. The Turners played a large role in the German Nationalist movement in the wars of liberation. Many Turners were actively participating in the war against the occupying French forces. (Hofmann, 2015)

Turnen was introduced by Friedrich Jahn as a term for physical exercise. *Turnen* included exercises on apparatus and volkstümliche Übungen (exercises for the people). Examples of volkstümliche Übungen include running, jumping, lifting, climbing, fencing, swimming, and wrestling. Today some of the apparatus is still used in modern gymnastics and some of the volkstümliche Übungen relates to modern track and field events. The values, intentions, and context of Jahn's Turnen differ fundamentally from modern sport. (Hofmann, 2015)

Berlin was the beginning grounds for the Turnplatz of the Hasenheide in 1811. The movement then spread throughout the German Confederation. The grounds became the meeting place for young men to participate in physical activity and for political discussion. Initially Prussian authorities supported the *Turnen* in hopes for good soldiers in the fight for liberation.

Turnen strengthened the mind on the body. In 1819 during the era of reconstruction after Napoleon's defeat *Turnen* was banned and deemed a threat due to its part in the nationalist movement. Under the Carlsbad Decrees the Turners were classified as forces of opposition. Jahn was arrested in July of 1819 accused of being linked with people suspected of disloyalty. He was incarcerated for five years. "Gymnastics" was still around in a few institutions but 20 years later was its revival. In 1842 the ban on Turnen was lifted and deemed "a necessary and indispensable part of male education" in the curriculum of boys' secondary schools in Prussia. Europe in the 1840's had many liberal ideas in the German states, and the fight for national unity became more important. This was awakening the goals of the Turner and created their revival. During this period clubs and societies created democratic structures with which they became places for political discussions and activities. The *Turnfeste* during this time became a way for the spread of ideas and discussion and plans. In addition to gymnastics, political discussion mostly ended with the demand for "Freedom and equality". (Hofmann, 2015)

Turner clubs increased in 1848 in the revolution of 1848-49. Jahn suggested the mercenary army be replaced by a people's army. Many clubs had a Turner militia and stood for the maintenance of law and order and the republican ideas and constitution of the Reich. This is because many of the Turners were physically fit, mentally devoted and strongly political. Many armed conflicts had weakened the revolution. However, the Reichsverfassung (constitution of the Reich) could not be put into effect without military force. Many of the Turners were involved in the fighting. (Hofmann, 2015)

In Hofmann's book she states:

"The attitudes of the Turners towards the revolution differed profoundly. Some were "mere Turners" others were political activists. Karl Blind, a Turner from Mannheim, for example, emphasized in January of 1848: "Our purpose is revolution. Each Turner is a revolutionary", adding: "Even dagger, blood and poison should not be spared in the decisive moment" (Wieser, 1996, p.37). The Turners in Baden and Wuerttemberg defended the ideals of the revolution: "Freedom, education and prosperity for the people" (Reppmann, 2003)." (Hofmann, 2015)

After the failure of the revolution many Turners were forced to leave their home because of imprisonment or death penalty. These individuals from the 1848 Revolution as a "new type" of German immigrant. In a description of the Forty-Eighters, they were not the typical German

immigrants because they had not just a classical education and a devotion to politics, but also because of their youthfulness and physical fitness gained from the Turners. (Hofmann, 2015)

Turners in America

Some of the first Turner societies in the United States were organized and established in 1848 (Metzner, 1989). However, the political refugees of '48 were not the first persons to introduce *Turnen* to the states. In the 1820's some followers of Jahn had sought refuge in the New England area, and had introduced *Turnen* in education institutions. However these institutions only lasted a few years. (Hofmann, 2015). Until the mid 1850's these societies flourished because of the German immigrants after the revolutionary movement in 1848-1849 was suppressed. Everyone who was supporting the cause of the revolution were forced to flee or face persecution. Due to the political nature of the Turners many political refugees had been members of a *Turnverein*. (Metzner, 1989)

Members of the Know-Nothing party who were narrow minded and opposed to everything foreign fought against the Turners (Metzner, 1989). This party wanted a restriction on the amount of immigrants to the United States, and did not want foreign born citizens to have the right to vote. There were many clashes, often violent, between the members of the party and German immigrants. (Moble, 2017) Even though these men had sacrificed everything for their country and ideas they were turned away on American soil and met with distrust and suspicion. This made it hard to establish *Turnvereins* and keep them afloat. (Metzner, 1989)

The *Cincinnati Turngemeinde* is the oldest *Turnverein* still functioning in the United States, and is credited to be the first Turner society in America, founded November 21, 1848. Also in 1848 the *New York Turngemeinde* was organized. The *Philadelphia Turngemeinde* founded in 1848, however after conflicts within the organization some members established the *Socialer Turnverein*. Representatives from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Brooklyn, and Boston met in a convention in Philadelphia in October 1850 and organized the *Vereinigte Turnvereine Nordamerika*. The *Socialistischer Turnverein of New York* urged a close union of all the Turner societies to insure their existence, protect their interests, and to create a basis for cooperation. A plan for this organization was presented by representatives from the New York and Brooklyn societies. Once it was accepted there was a resolution for representatives from all the societies for a convention, which was held at the *Philadelphia Turngemeinde* in October, 1850. At the meeting the differences between the societies arose, especially in the light of

political discussion. A particular party wanted Socialism (“Socialism of today, in which we Turners believe, aims to remove the pernicious antagonism between labor and capital”) to be the main purpose for the organization, whereas most wanted the *Turnvereins*’s purpose to be solely in physical training. Regardless of the differences between the societies, all believed that the *Turnerbund* shall, as Metzner (1989) states, “manifest a tendency toward freethought in the broadest sense.” The values of the Turner societies had also included promoting interaction between the Germans who immigrated to the States and Americans.

As stated in *Der Vorbote* (a Chicago-based socialist journal), 1886:

“The case for our German culture will be better served if we attract Americans to our side...If gymnastics is such a good thing, then it is our civic duty to make it accessible to Americans as well.”

There was a belief that through the “gymnastics field” they could introduce German traditions, customs, and language to others. Since at the time most immigrants lived in their own enclaves without much outside interaction to Americans. (Adams, 1990)

The Turnerbund and Turnfest

One of the beliefs of “*Turnerism*” in America was uniting the “brothers across the ocean to a large union.” Creating a closer bond between societies also allowed easier spread of Turner ideals across the Union. (Hofmann, 2010) In the first year the *Turnerbund* did not play out as planned. The different societies had yet to realize their personal obligations to the central organization. Due to this at the 1851 *Turnfest* held by the *Philadelphia Turngemeinde*, the (*Turnerbund*) executive committee called for a second convention. (Metzner, 1989) It was at this joint *Turnfest* and convention where the representatives in attendance agreed to the name *Socialistische Turnerbund von Nordamerika*. Then in 1853 the Turner Union Vereins divided themselves into five different districts according to geographical location. Although the societies held very similar statues, the individual vereins still managed their own affairs. (Hofmann, 2010)

As a union of Turners the *Turnerbund* established the *Turn-Zeitung* (Turner newspaper) which was being issued from 1851-1861. This became the “official voice” for the Turner Union. As Henry Metzner (1989) states, “The *Turnzeitung* became the official organ of the *Turnerbund*.” The *Turn-Zeitung* originally was published monthly and soon was then published weekly. This newspaper contained updates to the *Turnerbund*, districts and the societies, and also published

articles of health and physical education. However the paper also contained opinions on political topics such as slavery, nativism, and temperance laws. (Hofmann, 2010) At the 1882 Convention and Turnfest a motion was passed for each society to subscribe for as many copies of the newspaper as they had members, this later became an area of disagreement (Metzner, 1989).

Turnfests are Turner festivals and have been described as the “heyday of Turner life”. These festivals were very important in spreading the Turner philosophy and culture. *Turnfests* have been of great significance since the first one was held in Philadelphia 1851 the next *Turnfest* is in New Ulm 2023. *Turnfests* created an incentive for good exercise for the gymnastic competitions. However the festival is not just about gymnastics, it also includes events and contests (in the earlier years) of shooting, fencing, wrestling, track-and-field, swimming, and even running on stilts. Today these events include: mass drill, track-and-field, swimming and diving, volleyball, golf, and pickleball. The festival also strengthened the bond among the different vereins through common events and sought to exchange information and ideas throughout the societies. There are also contests to “test your intellectual prowess”, this includes literature and singing. Today known as the cultural competition the contests are divided into the following categories: arts, arts and crafts, needle art and sewing, and collections, each have their own sub categories. Originally *Turnfests* were held annually, until the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. After this time the festivals were generally held biannually, and then in 1885 in an Olympic fashion are held every four years. (Hofmann, 2010)

As stated in the Principles and Statutes of the American Turners (Revised August 1986) paragraph 127,

“A National Festival shall be held every fourth year unless otherwise decided by National Convention: the time and place to be fixed by the National Council subsequent to its tendering invitations to all Societies and Districts.”

The Know Nothing Party

The 1850's were a time of clashes between Germans and nativists. Nativists were Americans who were of Anglo-Saxon descent and were Protestants. These nativists did not like immigrants because they refused to conform to American society, they also believed that the immigrants would take their jobs, feared the increasing number of Catholics, and disagreed with the immigrants' views on slavery. These nativists supported the Know Nothing Party. (Hofmann, 2010)

The Turners, being radicalists, and their signature white uniforms made them an easy target for the xenophobic radical. In April of 1855 in Cincinnati members of the Know Nothing party tried to forcefully keep Irish and German Americans from voting. Turner Gustav Tafel described the incidents for the *Turn-Zeitung*. The mayor failed to keep order and chaos then ensued. According to Tafel 1,300 votes were burned during the ambush. Since the Germans owned a cannon, the attacks turned into a siege of the residential area. Due to immigrants living in their own enclaves the Germans were separated from the general population by the Rhine or Miami Canal. The Know Nothings had an estimated 6,000 men ready to “beat the ‘Dutchmen’ to death”. However, there is no account on the amount of armed Freethinker or Turner Germans. After the conflict started the Germans chose to surrender their canon to a neutral party after a few were injured and two were found dead. (Hofmann, 2010)

During a *Turnfest* in Cincinnati the “city rowdies” had found an outlet for their anger. This anger would be unleashed on the “white jackets,” a derogatory term attributed to the turners. This riot seemed to be the opening of a battle and in the end one member of the offensive party was killed, and nineteen turners were charged with assault and intent to kill. After a successful plea from their lawyer for their defense, the men were acquitted. (Metzner, 1989)

The Civil War

Most of the Turners held abolitionist ideals and believed that prejudice against the black minority was prejudice against the immigrants. The Socialist Turner Union view on slavery was that it was “un-American” and quoted the Declaration of Independence in their defense. The Baltimore Turners proved their loyalty to the Union when Maryland seceded and they refused to take down their Union flag. This ended in their Turnerhalle being burned to the ground and they were forced to flee. (Hofmann, 2010)

Abraham Lincoln stated in 1855, “I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes be in favor of degrading white people?” Due to this political stance most immigrants supported Lincoln in his political campaigns, especially the Turners. At a convention in Rochester, New York, delegates passed a decision urging all Turners to vote for the candidate who fought against slavery and nativism the most. Adolf Douai, a radical 48'er, proposed that any Turner who voted for Douglass should be

ejected from the Turners as a whole. Douai believed that it would be a direct violation of the constitution of the *Turnverein*. However, his proposal was defeated 44 to 24. Due to the political radicalization of many of the Turner members of the time and the publishing of their ideals in the *Turn-Zeitung*, the Turners helped to aid Lincoln in his popularity in the election of 1860. (Baron, 2012)

The Turners had a small, but significant role in the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. The 8th Battalion of the Union was an assembly of Turners and was the first military unit of volunteers that assembled January 1st 1861. This unit was part of Abraham Lincoln's Body Guard of Honor. (Hofmann, 2010) The Turner Rifles, as the unit was called, was called upon to protect Lincoln when rumors of a plot to kidnap or assassinate him at his inauguration came to light (Hoisington, n.d.). This unit was then assigned to guard Lincoln's train as it would arrive in Washington, D.C. Then in the first months of the war this battalion was responsible for defending the railroad between Annapolis, Maryland and Washington D.C due to its importance in supplying food. (Hofmann, 2010)

When Lincoln had called for volunteers for the restoration of the Union and control of its enemies, almost every single society had members who fought. Although the exact number of Turners who participated in the war is unknown, according to Hofmann (2010), "Literature cites 10,000 Turners who were in the US in 1861, and, allegedly, between 6,000 and 8,000 fought in Lincoln's army." However there have been several debates over these statistics. (Hofmann, 2010)

Although the Turners typically trained in mass drill, in 1851 *Turnvereins* started to practice military drill along with tactics, gun drills, and fencing in order to better prepare them for nativist attacks. These vereins became better trained and prepared for the battles to come in the Civil War. Turners from larger cities tended to be part of a Turner regiment. A Turner regiment is when a regiment's company was made up solely of Turners. Most of the Turners that are volunteering for the war were 48'ers, so they already had that spirit for fighting for freedom. It became known as their "second fight for freedom". (Hofmann, 2010) Turners from Cincinnati, and all other societies in Ohio were recruited for the 9th Ohio Regiment. This Ohio Turner Regiment was made up of 1,135 men, and was known for being one of the strongest and fittest in the Union army. (Metzner, 1989)

Turners that lived in the South faced this dilemma on the other side. These Turners too wanted to protect their homeland and with rising tensions their choice had to be to join the Confederate Army. In 1861 the Confederacy required all males over the age of fourteen to take an oath of allegiance. For most of these Southern Turners their personal affairs were more important than sticking to the Turnerbund's abolitionist ideals. Now in the states of Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia and Texas there existed various Turner companies protecting the ideals of the South. (Hofmann, 2010)

During the Civil War there were Turners on both sides, both fighting for what they had believed in. It is a very valuable principle of Turnerism to fight for what you believe in. This is a good example because although most Turners fought to preserve the Union there were some who's best interests aligned with that of Southern ideals hence they fought for the Confederacy.

Turnen In Public Schools - Normal College of The American Gymnastics Union

By 1856 the *Turnerbund* started plans for a *Turnlehrere* training facility. A *Turnlehrere* is a Turner instructor, or an instructor of German gymnastics and physical education. Although the initial project failed, in 1858 a "roving Turnlehrer" was introduced. This was an instructor that was sent to different Vereins to train the gymnastic leaders and introduce more exercises and an introduction to Turner literature. In 1866 a training center was approved by the Union convention for Turnlehrer. As Hofmann (2010) states here the instructors were to have the, "ability, not only to teach physical education in the Turner schools...as well as in schools supported by the state and the communities." (Hofmann, 2010)

During the beginning, *Turnlehrer* training the seminars were held in many different Vereins. This became known as the *Wanderjahre*, or travel years, and took place in New York City, Chicago, Milwaukee, and finally Indianapolis. The training during this time lasted a few months. Indianapolis became the final headquarters of the *Turnlehrerseminar* and is now at Athenaeum. With permanent headquarters and with more significant demand, the seminars became more substantial and the admission requirements became more demanding. Towards the end of the 19th century the demand for physical education instructors was increasing. The number of private schools, colleges, and universities that trained physical education instructors started to increase. This led to adjustments in Turner curriculum in order to compete with the opposing facilities. (Hofmann, 2010)

The Normal College of the American Gymnastics Union, established in 1866, is the oldest American institution in the teaching of educators for physical education. The college offers one, two, and four year courses. These courses were offered to prospective physical education teachers who had previously completed a four year course of high school or passed entrance exams. (Metzner, 1989) Due to the end goal of the courses being an educator, students of the College would student teach boys and girls Turn classes at the *Socialer Turnverein* in Indianapolis. The typical schedule of the Normal School was classes seven days a week that were held early and ended late. There was also a large number of swimming and Turn classes that supposedly lasted seven hours a day. However it is unclear whether or not students were expected/required to be present at all of the classes or the description was of the master schedule. (Hofmann, 2010)

Dr. Edward Mussey Hartwell in report to the United States Commissioner of Education, 1897-1998, on the topic of physical education, specifically gymnastics in public schools, stated, "The promotion of gymnastic teaching in the public schools has ever been one of the cherished aims of the American Turners." Although primarily the turners organized their education toward adults, because of the lack of gymnastic education in public schools schools of gymnastics for children were made obligatory for all societies. This established the goal of the turners to establish sufficient physical training and gymnastics to pupils in public schools. The Turners were eager to cooperate with school boards and teachers in order to see physical education in schools. Many of the teachers and society leaders work free of charge for years in order to help prove the value of school gymnastics. (Metzner, 1989)

An addition to the physical education concept that is credited to the Turners is the concept of play, or referred to as the play movement. This included activities such as games and events now grouped under track and field activities. Apparatus exercise was added to this concept later. Stated by Henry Metzner (1989):

"...boys and girls in Cincinnati enjoyed the giant stride and swings in the large playground or garden...back of the old Turner Hall, and did stunts upon the horizontal bars, jumped and vaulted into jumping pits filled with tanbark, threw the javelin and played ball."

When the modern playground movement swept the nation it was no surprise that the Turners were at the forefront and willing to organize and supervise playgrounds. (Metzner, 1989)

There had been a few instances where school systems were introduced to gymnastics as early as 1860, however it rarely lasted for any length of time. Dr. Hartwell had highlighted in his report that a few schools had maintained a successful gymnastics program for fifteen consecutive years. Today these schools still maintain “free exercises” in their curriculum but have adopted other Turner values of gymnasiums and playground. This proves a successful result of the Turner goal of physical education in schools. Time spent doing gymnastics at schools ranged from fifteen to forty five minutes depending on the grade of the student. Even though gymnastics training became mandatory for elementary grades only about one-third of cities had the training mandatory for four years of high school. The installation of gymnasiums marked the beginnings of physical education in public schools, and almost all new buildings would be furnished with gymnasiums or playgrounds. The next major progressive developments were the installation of swimming pools and indoor playrooms. The recognition that the yard of every school is considered the natural playground is considered to be the greatest step forward. With this recognition schoolyards became larger and started to become equipped with gymnastic equipment and play apparatus. (Metzner, 1989)

An Evaluation of the Significance of the American Turners

Although the Turners today are not radical and do not keep political affiliations, there is still the common goal of keeping a “sound mind in a sound body”. The Turners today achieve a sound body through not only gymnastics but a variety of other sports such as softball, volleyball, dance, bowling, golf, and more. In order to achieve a sound mind thorough social activities, whether its operating restaurants/bars are events held through ladies auxiliaries.

The American Turners helped to unite German immigrants in the United States. The Turners created outlets for people to practice their traditions and culture without facing prejudice from the outside world. The Turners along with other immigrant groups stood up to and even lost their lives to combat the xenophobia. The Turners were victims of hatred and many attacks however they proved their worth and gave them a purpose to continue their practice of physical exercise.

Due to the hatred toward immigrants during the middle to late 19th century the Turners made a new goal to vote into office a candidate that would protect their needs. The political nature of the Turners made most of them strong abolitionists who wanted to see change in the States. When Abraham Lincoln was a candidate for the 1860 Presidential election the Turners

endorsed him. This is due to Lincoln's values on slavery and on immigration. The Turners held a lot of control of the German-Americans and with the Turners backing Lincoln on the ticket, he practically won almost all of the German immigrant support toward the election.

Once the Civil War had broken out many Turners did not hesitate to fight for their beliefs. Many Turner Regiments had been formed and saw action at numerous battles. Secret servicemen to President Abe Lincoln were made up of Turners. The Turners served in hundreds of Union Regiments and a few Southern Regiments. There were even solely German-American Regiments such as the 9th Ohio Regiment, which was made up of mostly Turners. To name a few of the battles that the Turners of the Union took part of of Rowlett Station, Shiloh, Stone River, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, and the march to Atlanta along with many others (Metzner, 1989). Without these extremely fit warhorses the Union army would have been down an estimated 8,000 men.

The American Turners are the reason we have physical education in our school systems today. The Normal College set up by the National American Turnerbund established the start of a permanent education of physical training. The College trained educators in Turnen and these educators went on to work for the Vereins, public and private schools, and colleges and universities. These educators taught the importance of gymnastics and physical education and proved its importance over time. The Turners helped to encourage the developments of gymnasiums and playgrounds into everyday society. Today the amount of institutions requiring physical education is innumerable. In the later years the Turners started to adopt other sports and athletics which is also reflected in the current day gym program.

American Turners-Toledo

During the middle to late 1800s there were many German immigrants inhabiting the Toledo area. Due to this there were many different Vereins and different Clubs in the area. In 1852 the first *Turnverein* was founded in Toledo. In 1872 this organization became a member of the *Cincinnati Turngemeinde* and in 1875 the *Lake Erie Turnbezirk* (District). In the 1880's membership declined to eight people and despite efforts to regain membership it was met without much success. In 1884 a gymnasium was built for the Turners and was dedicated on March 3, 1895, however, unfortunately the organization did not survive. (McGee, 2014)

Thirty two young Germans founded the 'Toledo Turn und Sportverein in 1926 and joined the American Turnerbund. The society was established under the laws of the State of Ohio in

1926. The name of the society was changed in 1954 to American Turners-Toledo by an amendment to the society's constitution. The Toledo Turners originally met at a restaurant at 316 Summit street which they had called 'Deutsches Heim' (German Home). (McGee, 2014)

During the depression many of the society struggled and some of the members ran a soup kitchen out of the back room. During the prohibition some of the Turners used malt to make their own beer. However they were able to avoid authorities due to police getting samples of the brew. (Greifelt, 2001) The Swiss organization allowed the Turners to practice gymnastic exercises at their Swiss Hall, 735 S. St. Clair Street. In 1934 these Turners purchased for \$25,000 the Presbyterian Church building, at 3304 Collingwood Boulevard. At this time there were only 242 members of the Toledo Turn und Sportverein and they only had \$1,600 in their treasury. The Collingwood building had a hall with a stage and bar upstairs, with a gymnasium downstairs. By 1943, through many large donations and contributions the members paid the mortgage off. (McGee, 2014)

The purpose of the American Turners-Toledo is to promote and provide the education of its members through physical and health education, along with cultural education classes and room for social development for all members and their families. The American Turners- Toledo is also a member of the G.A.F. Society which has seven German-American societies: American Turners-Toledo, Bavarian Sports Club, United Swiss-Toledo, Toledo Schwaebischer Unterstuetzungs Vereinnn, Greater Beneficial Union of Toledo, Bayerischer Unterstuetzungs Verein Society of Toledo and Teutonia Maennerchor of Toledo. The G.A.F Society holds the German-American Festival and owns the property of Oak Shade Grove on Seaman Rd, Oregon, Ohio. (McGee, 2014)

The cultural education at one time included painting, sewing, needlework and other craft classes that were typically put on by the Ladies Auxiliary. There was also a ladies' chorus, youth orchestra, youth and adult theatre groups, along with baton tap and ballet lessons. German language classes were also held. Today the Deutsche Volktanz Gruppe, the folk dance group, still performs. The physical education had at a time included Badminton, tennis basketball, volleyball, golf, and soccer. Today the gymnastics and bowling sectors are still active. The Turners held many grand social functions at the Turnerhalle. Some of these functions include dinner dances like the Proclamation Ball, Mardi Gra, and Christmas dinner dances. The theatre productions would also gather a large Turner crowd. Sadly today these functions no longer exist,

and if they would be put on it would take place at the G.A.F. Society property of Oak Shade Grove. (McGee, 2014)

Unfortunately in 1988 there was a decline in memberships. This led to members struggling to maintain the property on Collingwood. This inevitably led to the property being sold in 1991. At this time the Turners would rent the gym floor at the Rossford Recreation Center because they still had a growing gymnastics program. During this time the coaches and members would have to set up the equipment before practices and tear it down afterwards. The gymnastics program was then moved to a leased building on Glenwood Road in Perrysburg where it resides today. It is at this building where gymnastics practices and meetings are held. The Deutsche Volktanz Gruppe practices at the Bavarian Sports Club in Toledo and Oak Shade Grove in Oregon, the bowling sector bowls at Interstate Lanes in Rossford, and the Trail Riders Group rides at the Maumee State Forest in Swanton.

The Significance of the American Turners-Toledo

In 1953, all of Toledo was focused on soccer. More specifically the Liverpool Football Club that was in town with the Toledo Turner All-Stars at the Glass Bowl stadium. Although the two seemed to be an odd match up they brought a lot of publicity to Toledo. The Turner soccer program was established in 1925 as another outlet of physical activity. The Turners soon made themselves a national name by winning in national cup competitions. The Liverpool Football Club was a professional soccer club of the English First Division. When the Liverpool Club arrived they were made guests of honor in Toledo. They were invited to the Toledo-Indianapolis baseball game as special guests. Later they were brought back to the Turerhalle on Collingwood for dinner and dance. At the game The Toledo Turners had planned many pre-game activities. This included a junior soccer match, a parade with the U.S. Marines, Boy Scouts and local athletes, and Mayor Lloyd Roulet officially welcoming The Liverpool Club to Toledo. Playing for the Turners in the match were top athletes from Detroit and Ontario. The Liverpool Football Club had just lost most of their 1952-1953 season and were almost demoted to the Second Division. However in the states the Liverpool team had breezed through most of their matches. In the match versus the Turners, Liverpool dominated the first and second half. However Turner's performance did improve in the later half ending the score to 10 - 3. The Turners were not ashamed of the loss, but instead were proud of keeping neck in neck with a professional team. (Carpenter, 2011)

The Turners had attended and even hosted the booths at the International Festival in Toledo. At this event they had the Deutsche Trachtengruppe (folk dancers) performing traditional folk dances and had traditional German music played by the members. As part of the German American Festival societies the Turners helped to run the event. This includes the labor used to run the event at Raceway Park and opening at Oak Shade Grove. The Turners helped to establish the theme of “Gemuetlichkeit” within the societies and the promotion of the Festival. Dancers and gymnasts would give exhibitions and performances at these events. Along with the Teutonia Mannerchor and the Damenchor performing concerts for the public. The purpose of these events were to spread awareness of German culture, especially that which was in our own community. (Seike, 1986)

The significance of the American Turners Toledo is best told by their loyal long standing members. Unfortunately these “true” Turner members are starting to become harder to find within the verein. Many of the active members of the American Turners Toledo have unfortunately passed on or have disappeared into society after the closing of the Turnerhalle on Collingwood. However, several of these well established members are as active as possible in the organization today. I had the opportunity to interview several of these members on their experiences with the American Turners Toledo.

Marita Deitering Perking, 80, born in Germany 1942, immigrated to the United States and first joined the American Turners Toledo in 1975. First hearing of the organization from a friend she hasn't left since. Marita enjoyed being able to speak in her native language at their clubhouse on Collingwood, and it created a sense of home that was not met by the outside community. When asked if she felt her German heritage was preserved through the Turners she responded, “Yes; but with an American influence. I cringe at the [German] portrayal by the American people. There are not many of us left to keep a true influence.” In her response to the question of the largest impact the Turners had on her she answered, “The effort to keep it alive and adjust to the new generation.” Since joining the Turners in 1975 Marita had been active in the volleyball and gymnastics sectors and is still active in the folk dance group and choir. The sports, dance, and comradeship are the reasons that the Turners are important to her. Marita is currently 80 years old and is still an active dancer of the Deutsche Volktanz Gruppe, her passion for dance and the Turners is never ending. She has been published as a Turner dancer in the paper many times and is the “matrion” of the dance group.

Regina Wandscher, 85, was born in Germany and immigrated to the United States later in life. Regina was a member of the Glueck auf Osternburg Turnverein in Osternburg, Germany since she was 8 years old. She had also attended the 1953 National Turnfeste in Hamburg, Germany. In 1966 she joined the American Turners Toledo with her husband, Hans Wandscher, after attending that year's Mardi Gras. Her father in law had introduced them to the Toledo Turners in 1964. During this time women were not allowed to be members, due to this Regina was an avid member of the Women's Auxiliary, until 1978 when she had her own membership. In addition to the Women's Auxiliary Regina was involved in practically all the athletics offered, theatre, photography, music, running the dinners and themed nights (Mardi Gras, Hawaiian, Western, etc.). When asked what the biggest impact the Turners had on her Regina said, "Comradery, togetherness, fun, and activities." Regina has attended many Turnfests, Conventions, and activities through the Turners. Some of her favorite memories are from Mardi Gras and the Turnfests. Regina recalls at the Turnfeste in St. Louis, Missouri, teaching the freestyle demonstration exercises to the Jr. and Sr. Ladies groups. One of the members looked around and noted the other groups doing the exercise differently. Regina stated she told the girl, "Do the routine as I have taught it to you, and do not worry about the other groups." and they won first place in their demonstration. Due to Regina having experience of both German and American Turner Clubs, I asked if there was much of a difference, she replied that the Halls were different and gymnastics was taught differently, but, "Turnerism is Turnerism". Regina believes that this German heritage of being a Turner has been preserved through the American Turners. She has had her family always active in the society and has loved all of her experiences. She commented that even after the building on Collingwood was sold she has still been as active as possible.

Sabine Croley, 63, born in Germany to Regina and Hans Wandscher. Sabine has grown up with the Turners her entire life. Sabine got her own membership to the American Turners Toledo when she was 18 years old. The Turnerhalle on Collingwood was her second home as she was there five days a week. The cultural activities have always been a part of Sabine's life as a child she participated in choir, theatre, orchestra, arts and crafts, ballet, baton, tap, and folk dancing. Sabine is now Cultural Chairman of the society. In addition to cultural activities she also participated in gymnastics, volleyball, and bowling. Through these activities Sabine was able to keep practicing parts of her German culture. The biggest impact of the Turners for

Sabine was being able to follow in her parents footsteps and help “keep alive what my parts were doing”. Sabine’s fondest memory of the Turners was folk dancing. She was an original member of the group and was in it’s first performance through the active ladies gym class.

Edward McGee, 70, was born here in the United States. Ed first joined the Turners in 1989 when his daughter started gaining interest in gymnastics. Ed had first learned about the Turners from his grandparents. His grandfather joined the American Turners Toledo in 1937 and was President of the society from 1950-51. His grandfather took gym classes, bowled, golfed, and played soccer through the Turners. Although this Turnerism skipped Ed’s generation he has still been an active member in his adulthood. The Turners created a sense of community for Ed he stated, “ [it] was such a positive life experience we stuck with it. It’s all about family.” The Turners are important to him because of the friendships he made and watching his children grow up through gymnastics and being involved in the Turner community. When asked if he felt that German heritage has been preserved through the organization he replied, “In the beginning yes; it is starting to slip away.” This “slipping away” is due to the way the gymnastics program is run currently. It is now open to everyone and most are not required to hold Turner memberships. However, Ed still feels it is important to keep in touch with his German heritage as a 2nd - 4th generation American. The Turners have had a huge impact on Ed. He has been President of the society for the past 15 years. Ed recalls, “They [the Turners] have made me the President for so long...they have really put their faith in me.” Being President has pushed him out of his comfort zone with some of his duties particularly at the German American Festival, but it has allowed him to learn a lot and meet many new people. The greatest part of the Turners for Ed has been parties, Turnfests, conventions, and learning new things. Some of his greatest memories have been being able to watch kids grow up through the Turner program and seeing them grow into adulthood.

Lucille Hurm is the oldest living member of the American Turners Toledo at 93 years old. Her parents joined the Turners in 1936 and participated in gym classes. Lucille became a member of the Ladies Auxiliary in 1947. Originally she did not like going to the Turners because she was bashful and did not know many other kids. However, through gym class, volleyball, tennis, basketball, and dances along with many other activities she has made lifelong friends that share the same interests. Lucille recalls learning marching while a pianist plays music, “...[In class we would learn] marching, skipping, running. One big step, two small steps

bringing the other foot to the front.” Dances were a huge part of the culture at the Turners being held every two weeks. Lucille recalls once they were older being upstairs at the dance and knowing the steps to dances due to their gym class. These gym classes were the precursor to learning mass drill and also taught the steps to waltzes and the foxtrot. At this time the leaders of the gym classes were full time paid instructors that had been sent to the Normal College. Lucille made note that the Turners were a family affair and that helped bring her out of her shell. When asked if she felt her German heritage had been preserved in the Turners she stated, “Yes, because at the time we started most members were immigrants. They did things differently...They put fruit in their cakes.” At the time when Lucille was growing up in the organization most of the members spoke German and were immigrants. She also noted that being part of the GAF Society helped teach her about German culture. Lucille’s fondest memories were when the Turners would annually travel to another society in the Lake Erie District for a volleyball tournament. She notes that the first day they would have a meal together and a dance, and the next day would be a gym class followed by the tournaments. When asked if her volleyball team had ever won, Lucille chuckled and replied no, except for beating the Akron Turners. After reminiscing about Turners as they were in the past, Lucille gave some comments on the state of the organization today. Lucille stated, “I dislike that it is only for children now. It does not involve the family.” Since the loss of the building on Collingwood and the loss of the immigrant members, the Turners have started to stray from its original intentions. Lucille said that it started with television, “The men would come home from work, and just entertain themselves by watching television programs. It [television] distracted them from the Turners. However, they still kept their memberships due to the socialization and friendships.” To Lucille the bonds between the parents and members is what kept the Turners alive.

After interviewing these five passionate members certain qualities of the Turners started to become evident across the interviews. Words such as comradery, togetherness, and family were used by all the members to describe the importance of the Turners. The American Turners Toledo created a sense of community that was lacking outside of the organization. This community allowed for immigrants to speak in their native language and surround themselves with people from the same background. This community also allowed for those born stateside to keep in touch with their heritage along with creating lifelong friendships with people that they wouldn’t have met otherwise.

Many of the current members of the American Turners Toledo are following in their parents footsteps. This is because they believe in the organization and the values that it stands for. Every long lasting Toledo Turner will say that this organization revolves around family. The Turners were a large family that made valuable memories and contributions to the community through physical and cultural education. Through the bonds that they had with each other the Turners were able to make an impact on society.

My Experience and Conclusion

My family first joined the American Turners Toledo in 2008 when I first started gymnastics. My parents had seen the Toledo Turners doing a gymnastics exhibition at the German American Festival and made the decision to enroll me in gymnastics class at their gym. My father, Guy Schultz, shortly thereafter became a Trustee for the German American Festival on behalf of the Turners. A few years after this he became the Vice President of the American Turners Toledo. Since this time my family has attended 2 National Conventions, 3 National Festivals (including New Ulm this July), and various National competitions. I did gymnastics through the Turners for eleven years. I also have participated in the bowling tournaments, camps, and clinics held by Toledo. In addition to bowling and gymnastics I am also a member of their trail riders group that rides ATVs, 4-wheelers, and dirtbikes at the Maumee State Forest in Swanton. I have become a dancer in the Deutsche Volktanz Gruppe, which my father helped revive in 2014. I am also the current Bowling Chairman for the organization. Aside from my participation in the many sectors of the Turners, I have also volunteered at gymnastics meets hosted by our gym and photograph for the folk dance group. We have also volunteered through the Turners for the German American Festival Societies events. This includes feeding volunteers at Oak Shade Grove, painting the new Maibaum dedicated in 2015, and performing at the events through gymnastics and dance.

Being involved in many activities through the Turners made me very passionate about the organization. Some of my favorite memories through the Turners were at the National Festival in 2019. Due to an injury I was unable to compete in any physical event, so I competed in four different cultural activities. One of these activities was the Miss American Turner Pageant. Through this event I was able to meet other girls my age who had the same inspirations in the Turners and played the same sports as me. It was a very valuable experience. At the time of the Festival I was 14 years old, going through the process of the competition I was complimented on

my knowledge of the American Turners and on my interviewing skills. However, after the contest some of the judges had told me that if it weren't for my age I would have been chosen for the title, along with several other Turners complimenting me after the competition on my answer to the question, "How would you explain the American Turners to a Non-Turner". These comments have stuck with me for the past four years, and furthered my passion for exploring the legacy of this important organization.

Attending National Festivals and National Conventions has allowed me to speak to many amazing people with unique stories about their experiences through the Turner Clubs. Listening to their stories of working together to put on social events or learning mass drills and the fun that is accompanied with it is astonishing. Hearing these stories creates a longing for that sense of community in my Turner Club. I attended the American Turners Toledo Honorees Banquet in 2018 at the Black Forest Cafe. At this event I listened to Turner after Turner walk up to the microphone and tell tales of what the organization once was. Watching these members starting to tear up thinking about the past of the club made me realize that something needs to change. After this event I had a burning passion for trying to restore the American Turners Toledo to their former glory.

However, it turns out that this is wishful thinking and this goal is easier said than done. Throughout my studies of the organization I have realized that in today's society there is simply not the need for these social organizations. One of the admirable qualities of organizations like the Turners was that people could socialize with each other and learn about what events were happening in the community. Today, social media is used to keep up with friends and news. Currently the American Turners Toledo thrives off of its gymnastics program. "In the "old days" parents would take their children to practice and go spend time together at the bar and socialize" said Ed McGee. Today most parents will drop their kids off at practice and keep to their own life. This creates a difficulty to form relationships with one another to keep the organization going. In the dance and trail riding sectors of the American Turners Toledo the participants are either both children and adults or just adults. In these sectors there seems to be a closer bond between the members because the family is involved.

In the current world people seem to be too busy with their own lives to want to participate in events that the Turners would have today. For example the active ladies gym class used to be a very popular activity in the Turners, but today does not exist at all in the club due to

lack of interest. Many adults today are preoccupied in their life to want to participate in these activities. However, I believe there is also the lack of knowledge of the possibilities of the organization to blame for this. Productive people in their spare time participate in their hobbies. What the Turners did was provide a space for many people sharing those hobbies to participate in them together. For instance the beginning of the trail riders group started with a few members who found out they had a shared love for motorsports. These members then started the group and would meet at the Maumee State Forest and whoever showed up would be there for the ride. I believe that if people knew that they could join a club of people with the same interests as them they would. The issue lies that we do not know what interests prospective members, or members themselves to make them more involved in the Turners.

In order for the American Turners Toledo to adapt to the change in society; society needs to know about the American Turners Toledo. The American Turners had survived for so long because they were united. In the early years they were united by their homeland in Germany and the fight against conforming to American society. In the late of the 19th century the Turners were united by the goal of instituting physical education in schools. In the beginning of the 20th century when many Germans immigrated to the United States, the Turners were once again united due to the similarities in the struggle and experience of being an immigrant. In the mid to late 20th century these Turners had created a bond so great that Turnerism kept being passed down in generations. Today what unifies each Turner Club varies. For some clubs it is still the bonds between members, for others it is physical activities, and for some it is running a restaurant and venue. As of now what unifies the American Turners Toledo most is children's gymnastics. Many of these members do not know that other opportunities for involvement can exist. The members that do know of other possibilities do not seem to be interested in creating a new group. It is easier for people to join a group that already exists and has a following, rather than one that is not as well established. This makes it difficult to create an organization where the entire family is involved. In Toledo there are a handful of members who are doing everything they can trying to build up the organization and keep it alive. Without educated members the growth and unification of the organization is extremely difficult. The need for an educated populace of the Turners is needed in order for these organizations to survive.

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