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**Athenaeum Turners**

**Records, 1876-2002**

**Mss 032**

**Athenaeum Turners Records, 1880-2002**  
**Mss 032**  
**13.4 c.f (10 cartons and 6 flat boxes)**

**ABSTRACT**

The Athenaeum Turner organization was founded in 1851 as the Indianapolis Turngemeinde. This athletic and social organization was patterned on German clubs that had supported the 1848 revolutions that attempted to form Liberal republics in several European kingdoms. The men who established the Indianapolis Turngemeinde and the competing Indianapolis Socialistischer Turnverein (merged in 1852 to form the Indianapolis Socialistischer Turnegemeinde) tried to create a community focus for the rapidly expanding immigrant population. The activist political backgrounds of many German immigrants led to a strong emphasis on the Turner idea of developing both a strong mind and strong body in order to better serve society. After the American Civil War, for which many Turners volunteered due to anti-slavery beliefs and a desire to demonstrate loyalty to their adopted nation, the reorganized and renamed Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein became the primary focus for German business and culture in the city. Certainly the German House (das Deutsches Haus), built between 1894 and 1898, was designed to serve as more than just a center for physical training since it contained a restaurant, theaters, and a number of meeting rooms. From the 1890s, the leaders of the Turner organization were also directors or important officers in dozens of prominent businesses and cultural organizations. This led to some overlap in the interaction between public, private, and political affairs in the German community of Indianapolis - and this is reflected in the collection. The outbreak of World War I and the anti-German sentiment which followed led to a renaming of the building (as the Athenaeum) and contributed to a decline in the importance of the Turnverein. The organization, now known as the Athenaeum Turners, experienced a revival during the 1950s and remained active into the 1960s, though its activities gradually became more social and less athletic. By the 1970s American acculturation and suburbanization resulted in a rapid decline in membership and financial stability and the near collapse of the Turner society. It currently exists solely as a German cultural organization.

The records consist of constitutions and by-laws, board and committee minutes, correspondence, officer and committee reports, financial records, membership lists, event advertisements, brochures, newsletters and photographs.

**ACCESS**

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**PREFERRED CITATION**

Cite as: Athenaeum Turners Records, 1880-2001, IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

## ACQUISITION

Presented by the Athenaeum Turners, and individual members of the Athenaeum Turners, October 1978-May 2001.

A78-11, M55, A93-16, A93-58, A93-88, A95-37, A1999/00-015, A2000/01-024

Processed by Erik L. Lindseth and Gregory H. Mobley, November 2000

## HISTORICAL NOTE

The failed attempt to form a unified German republic in 1848 had a profound effect on the city of Indianapolis during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The subsequent repression of all Liberal activism in the various German States sparked a new wave of immigration to the United States that introduced a foreign-born population which was typically well educated, highly skilled, and socially conscious. Foremost in this wave were those who had actually fought in support of the Frankfurt Parliament, including those who had joined militias formed within athletic clubs known as Turnvereins to defend the republican movement. These Turner societies had originally developed as arenas for physical training and nationalist discussions during the Napoleonic Wars, and had been a hotbed for radical ideas for many years. One of the new organizations which marked the arrival of the revolutionary immigrants, referred to as 'the 48ers', in American cities was the creation of new Turnvereins - patterned on the societies they had known in Europe.

The first Turner society in America was established in Cincinnati in November 1848 by veterans of the militias which had tried to defend the Revolution. Two years later in 1851, a member of the Cincinnati Turnverein, August Hoffmeister, traveled to Indianapolis and joined a core group of six men to create an Indianapolis Turngemeinde. The other founders; Jacob Metzger, Alexander Metzger, John Ott, Karl Hill, and Clemens Vonnegut (recently arrived from Germany by way of New York), held their first meetings in John Ott's furniture store and used his yard for gymnastic training.

Initially founded as two competing Turner clubs in 1851, the Indianapolis Turngemeinde and the Indianapolis Socialistischer Turnverein, founded by Dr. Konradin Homberg and a larger number of established Indianapolis residents, merged in 1852 to form the Indianapolis Socialistischer Turngemeide. The political activism and social element of the Turners in Indianapolis became apparent in the support they provided for several European radical leaders when they visited the city in 1852, notably Carl Schurtz Karl Heinzen, and Louis Kossuth, who is often considered one of the founding fathers of Hungary. This political involvement and the anti-slavery activism of the Turners combined with nativist anti-immigrant feelings as the percentage of the foreign-born local population compared with native-born increased, to forge a nascent German community in the years prior to the American Civil War.

Some of the German exiles almost certainly planned to return to Europe when the struggle to create a German republic revived, thus it is no surprise that the veterans, and athletes of the Indianapolis Turnverein well trained in drills which had a decidedly military character, enlisted almost *en masse* when the call went out for volunteers in 1861. Indeed the German community as

a whole eventually provided enough enlistment to form a German Regiment – the 32<sup>nd</sup> Indiana. As a result of this support for the Union, the Turngemeinde, in effect, ceased to exist until the Civil War ended.

After the American Civil War, the reunification, after a short split into two groups, and revival of the Indianapolis Turners is signified by the adoption of a new name: the Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein. The Indianapolis Social Turners experienced a sort of Golden Age during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, marked by the transfer of the American Turners headquarters to Indianapolis and the 1905 National Turnfest, which coincided with a peak in the activities of the German community as a whole. The construction of Das Deutsches Haus (the German House) in 1894, as a home for the Turners and other German-American organizations, in the center of the area which had long been called “Germantown”, is a monument to the prominent role they played in the city at that time.

Acculturation of the German community was certainly already taking place among the more established residents and the American-born generations long before anti-German feelings emerged during World War I. The renaming of the German House as “the Athenaeum” and the switch to English in organizational records in 1917/18 marks the beginning of the end of a separate German culture in Indianapolis. The cultural erosion was only hastened by the imposition of Prohibition in the 1920s, so that it soon became necessary to reshape the activities of the Athenaeum in order to attract support outside of the German community. Summer garden parties; for example, in what had been a private dining room, were now advertised as events open to the general public rather than as an activity for members of the Turnverein.

The Normal College of the Nord-Amerikanische Turner Bund (North American Gymnastic Union) provides a useful barometer of the changing role of the Athenaeum Turners since the arrival of this athletic teachers school in 1907 emphasizes the dominance of the Indianapolis group at the turn of the century. Indeed the majority of the directors of the national Turner organization between 1898 and 1923 were also members of the Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein. The gradual merger of the Normal College of the American Gymnastic Union with Indiana University in the 1930s (formally merged in 1941) reflects the declining influence of the ethnic German athletic tradition heretofore associated with the American and Athenaeum Turners.

By the 1950s the Athenaeum Turners were mostly older men and women, and the primary activities social in nature. In the 1960s severe financial problems combined with declining membership to threaten the very existence of the Indianapolis Turners. Indeed the merger with the Downtown Turners in the 1970s renewed an athletic element to the Athenaeum that had been missing for sometime. By the 1980s the Athenaeum Turners had developed into an organization interested in preserving some of the last vestiges of German culture in Indianapolis and can now best be described as a cultural organization.

## REFERENCES

Probst, George Theodore. *The Germans in Indianapolis: 1840-1918*. Revised and illustrated edition by Eberhard Reichman. Indianapolis, IN: German-American Center, IUPUI & Indiana German Heritage Society, 1989.

Stempfel, Theodore. *Fünfzig Jahre unermüdlichen deutschen Strebens in Indianapolis = Fifty years of unrelenting German aspirations in Indianapolis*. German/English edition by Giles R. Hoyt, et al. Indianapolis, IN: German-American Center, IUPUI & Indiana German Heritage Society, 1991.

## RELATED MATERIALS

American Turners Records, 1855-1998, Mss 030, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Socialer Turnverein Stock Association Records, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Athenaeum Damenverein & Women's Auxiliary Records, 1876-1999, Mss 039, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, IUPUI University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Downtown Turners Records, 1974-1976, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, IUPUI University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Indianapolis Maennerchor Records, 1866-1990, Mss 040, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Indiana University School of Physical Education Records, , UA 36, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Freidenker Verein Minutes, 1870-1884, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of papers, photographs, and publications accumulated by the Athenaeum Turner Society and related organizations. To the greatest degree possible, these materials are now organized according to the generating body within the society, usually at the committee level. Materials dating to before the First World War are mostly in German, often written in handwritten *fraktur* script or printed in German Gothic type. There are numerous gaps in the records, though the activities of the Athenaeum Turners since 1904 are fairly well documented.

The 27 series are: Constitutions and By-laws, Board of Directors, Presidents and senior officer

papers, the Standing Committee, the Athenaeum Turners Investment Club (A.T.T.I.C.), Athletic, Budget, Chorus, Culture, Donnerstagkranz, Finance, General Education, History, House/Building and Grounds, Library, Long Range Goals, Membership, Orchestra, Program, Publicity and Public Relations, School, Solicitation, and Theater Committees, the Turn Zoegling Verein, Publications, Related Organizations, and Photographs. Photographs are listed both in the appropriate series and searchable online.

**Constitutions and Bylaws Records, 1897-1983**, contain printed copies of the constitutions of the society detailing the structure and organization of the Turnverein. Includes several annotated revisions and public record copies.

**Board of Directors Records, 1871-1995**, documents the activities of the main administrative body for the Athenaeum Turners. This series contains includes the record copy of the minutes of the Annual Meeting of this society from 1931 until 1986, with 1934, 1935, 1937, 1946, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1977, and 1982 missing. To supplement this run are minutes from the regular meetings of the Board of Directors from 1894-1904 and 1931-1995. Thus there is a significant gap for the period 1904-1931. There are legal documents from 1871-1902 and 1974-1991, short runs of formal correspondence from 1917-1919 and from 1932-1992, American Turners correspondence from 1941-1990, and mass mailing letters from the board to the membership with information on upcoming events, administrative decisions, and finances for 1950-1995.

**President and Senior Officers' Records, 1910-1993**, contain the papers and correspondence of the Chairmen and Presidents of the Athenaeum Turners, and assorted correspondence relating to various members of the Vonnegut family. Most significant in this series are reports to the membership for Annual Meetings in 1910, 1911, 1917, 1934, 1939-40, 1944-1968, 1974-1992 and varied correspondence and informative letters to the membership 1939-1992.

**Standing Committees Records, 1944-1988**, contain lists of committee members for most of the permanent and a few of the temporary committees answering to the Board of Directors from 1944-1977 and lists of committee member responsibilities from 1969-1971.

**Athenaeum Turners Investment Club (A.T.T.I.C.) Records, 1980-1983**, contain minutes and valuation statements for an investment club formed in 1979. The club limited its membership to people who were members of the Athenaeum Turners. Club members met monthly to discuss the club's investments and to vote on the purchase or sale of individual stocks. Profits and losses were divided among the club's membership based on the amount of money they had invested in the club.

**Athletic Committee Records, 1903-1991**, contain annual reports and monthly reports from the Turnlehrer (athletic instructor) and Turnwarte (athletic director) to the board of directors from 1903-1904 and 1909-1912, and annual reports from the committee in 1910, 1944-1968, 1973, 1975-1976, and 1980-1984. The athletic activities reflected in these reports are distinct from the activities of the American Turners and the Normal College, with some overlap when it comes to classes in physical education.

A related organization included in this series is the School of Physical Education and the Performing Arts. The School of Physical Education and the Performing Arts (1979-1990) was largely a brainchild of Robert Swan, President of the Athenaeum Turners. It was intended to serve as a community continuing education program tied to the Athenaeum, however it eventually spun off other organizations such as the Lockerbie Players theater group and the Free University, which became quite distinct. The newsletters, minutes, and correspondence generated by these groups also provide important insight into the personalities involved and the broader changes taking place in the Athenaeum community.

There are a few photographs and event advertisements included in this collection, and the Athenaeum Newsletter usually contains information about the activities of this group as well.

**Budget Committee Records, 1945-1993**, contain annual reports with a few proposed budgets from individual committees until 1957. Included in this run is an itemized budget for 1956 and a fourteen-year summary of the theater, gym, chorus, and orchestra budgets done in 1957. There are also a few committee member lists, and proposed budgets for most of the period 1975-1993.

**Chorus Committee Records, 1909-1970s**, contain reports from the Indianapolis Maennerchor, which was affiliated with the Athenaeum Turners from 1938 to 1973. There are also lyrics and some music from Turnfests around 1909, Turner songs from the 1940s, and German cultural sing-along lyric sheets from the 1970s.

**Culture Committee Records, 1895-1993**, contain the 1910 and 1912 annual reports of the Mental Culture Committee, annual reports and meeting minutes of the Culture Committee from the 1980s and 1990s, and records and photographs from cultural and miscellaneous events from 1895-1988.

**Donnerstagkranz Records, 1973-1985**, contain the minutes and programs of a Thursday Luncheon Club lecture series. Originally referred to as the "ad hoc committee" this group provided a forum for lectures on general local interest topics. Includes some member lists.

**Finance Committee Records, 1869-1995**, contain an incomplete run of annual financial reports to the membership and directors from 1904 to 1992, Trustees reports from the 1940s, and annual audits from 1949-1981 (missing 1963, 1972-1978), and profit & loss records from 1869 until after the First World War. Some of the gaps in the formal record are supplemented by an additional run of profit & loss statements starting in September 1938 and ending with December 1965, and for 1975. There are also debt papers from the 1970s when the Athenaeum flirted with bankruptcy, some income tax returns, and correspondence dealing with tax exempt status from the 1940 through the 1970s - a topic which first appeared during the Second World War as part of a government effort to repress societies deemed to be Nazi sympathizers. A few records regarding employee wages and Christmas bonuses during the 1950s and 1960s also include lists of employees names.

**General Education Committee Records, 1922-1999**, contain reports, correspondence, and announcements of activities, including, but not restricted to, the annual Pioneer Banquets for 50-year members of the Athenaeum. This group also assumed responsibility for organizing and

presenting cultural events and formal evening dinners honoring prominent members such as Leo Rappaport (1922), Otto Lieber (1931), Carl B. Spath (1952), Ferdinand Schaefer, the first director of the Indianapolis Symphony (1953), and Chancellor Herman B Wells of Indiana University (1971).

**History Committee Records, 1887-1999**, contain histories of the Turner association and the Athenaeum building, and obituaries and biographies of members. The subscription list for the building of a new turnhall in 1887, and the obituaries of prominent figures in the German and Turner communities such as Carl Lieber, Herman Lieber, and Otto Schissel, provide additional insights for the first 50 years of the Socialer Turnverein.

**House / Building and Grounds Committees Records, 1897-1992**, contain annual reports, committee meeting minutes, and correspondence relating to the Socialer Turnverein involvement in the operations of the Athenaeum building. This committee is distinct from the Socialer Turnverein Stock Association that technically owned the building, but reflects the confusion within the membership about this separation. The oldest records in this series are correspondence related to the hiring of a new house manager, Henry Wawra, in 1897. There are minutes and reports from 1901 to 1912, but this is followed by a substantial gap in the records. This period is documented to some degree by the personal and legal correspondence of Leo Rappaport between 1928 and 1951. The correspondence of the house managers is fragmentary between the 1950s and the 1980s, but does provide some material regarding the period when the Indianapolis Repertory Theater was located in the Athenaeum building. There are also floor plans, some repair receipts, and materials relating to the leasing of the restaurant, 1959-1985.

**Library Committee Records, 1904-1987**, contain a handwritten document apparently submitted as a report at the 1904 annual meeting and the minutes from a 1987 meeting.

**Long Range Goals Committee Records, 1985-1991**, contain a 1985 committee report and a 1991 letter to the Athenaeum members from President Hugh Enyart, announcing the reactivation of the committee.

**Membership Committee Records, 1876-1990**, contain an irregular run of annual reports between 1944 and 1985, weekly reports from 1960-1989, membership lists for various years from the 1870s through 1990, directories, minutes from 1968-87, membership applications and records from 1912-1990s, correspondence and membership literature. There are also summary reports of membership totals during the 1950s and 1960s that help document the substantial decline of the Athenaeum Turners.

**Orchestra Committee Records, 1883-1995**, contain an incomplete run of annual reports from 1943 to 1970, advertisements of performances, informative correspondence sent to members, and photographs of the orchestra.

**Program Committees Records, 1886-2001**, contain reports, a small set of correspondence, and advertisements for events associated with the Athenaeum in general. The regular annual events are arranged chronologically through the year, beginning with the January Mask Ball of 1903 and



concluding with New Years Eve/ Sylvester parties on Dec. 31. Each regular event is also divided into folders reflecting the pre- First World War period, 1920-1950, and the period since 1950. In this way it is possible to compare events from the more German pre-war period, the years of acculturation and decline, and the period of somewhat romantic revival by second and third generation German-Americans (Oktoberfest, for example, was never celebrated by the native Germans in Indianapolis, but is now the most widely recognized German festival.)

**Publicity Committee Records, 1944-1987**, contain annual reports from 1944, 1967-1969, and 1972, minutes, news releases from the 1970s and 1980s, and slides used for a 1981 lecture.

**School Committee Report, 1911**, is a single handwritten document apparently submitted as a report at the annual meeting.

**Solicitation Committee Records, 1969-1976**, contain minutes, correspondence, organization plans, and reports from the period when the Athenaeum society was under greatest financial and membership pressure. In an effort to save and preserve ownership of the building and increase membership, calling teams were formed to contact all members and former members for support.

**Theater Committee Records, 1940-1987**, contain 1949 constitution and by-laws for the theater group, annual reports and membership lists for the dramatic club, and correspondence, advertisements, newsletters, and programs for a series of theater groups associated with the Athenaeum Turners (the IRT is not included since it only leased space in the building and had almost no direct connection to the Turner society.) Of special note are the Dramatic Club newsletters from 1942-1944, and the Athenaeum Players Spotlight and Newsletter from 1971 and 1981-1982.

**Turn Zoegling Verein Records, 1872-1886**, contain meeting minutes, membership lists, financial records, and records for cultural meetings of the Turn Zoegling Verein. This youth organization for teenagers was started on September 4, 1870.

**Publications, 1919-1993**, include newsletters published by the Athenaeum Turners for their members. While there are gaps in the runs of these newsletters, the holdings of the *Athenaeum Gym News* (1919-1922), *Athenaeum News* (1958-1985), and *Turner Nachrichten* (1986-1993) are substantial enough to provide a good overview of the society's activities during these years.

**Related Organization, 1981-2001**, contain records from organizations with which the Athenaeum Turners have been actively associated. Most notable of these is the Athenaeum Foundation, the not-for-profit organization established in 1991 that purchased the Athenaeum from the Socialer Turnverein Stock Association and now manages the building and raises funds to restore and maintain it.

**Photographs, ca. 1880-2000**, contain photographs of individual members, groups, activities of the organization, and views of the exterior and interior of the Athenaeum.

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