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Athenaeum Damenverein & Women's Auxiliary

Records, 1876-2007

Mss 39

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ABSTRACT

This women's organization was founded by the Socialer Turnverein (Social Athletic Club) in 1876 as the Indianapolis Turn-Schwestern Verein. It was initially intended to support the activities of the Turnverein, and especially to promote and oversee the girls' athletic classes, and to help enlarge and preserve the Turner library. Within a few years the Turn "Sisters" became known as the Damenverein (Women's Club) des Socialer Turnverein and began to undertake broader responsibilities in the community. As with most German societies, membership declined during World War I and use of the German language was dropped. The organization revived with the merging of several societies during the 1930s and becomes known as the Women's Auxiliary. Membership increased again after World War II as their focus drifted away from a wartime role as a service organization and more towards social activities. The gradual decline of the Athenaeum Turners through the 1970s and 1980s also affected the Women's Auxiliary. In the 1990s the Damenverein name was restored to recognize the earlier German connections, and in recent years the very limited activities of the group have become more closely linked with their German-American cultural identity.

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

ACCESS

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ACQUISITION

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HISTORICAL NOTE

After the merger of the Indianapolis Turner and the Socialer Turner (athletic) groups in 1872, the united Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein developed into the most important organization in the still growing German community. As the Turnverein grew in stature it was proposed to create a subsidiary club for the wives and daughters of the Turners that would support the varied activities of the society. When George T. Probst, in his history of *The Germans in Indianapolis* (1989), cites 1876 as the beginning of “the Hey-Day of German Culture in Indianapolis”, the foundation of the Turn-Schwester Verein of the Indianapolis Socialer Turners in the same year is significant.

According to the first constitution, the Turn-Schwester Verein was initially intended to support the activities of the Turnverein, promote and oversee the girls’ athletic classes, and to help enlarge and preserve the Turner library. However it has been noted that this “Sister” club was one of the first women’s Turner groups established in the United States, and it quickly began to grow beyond its original supporting role. It soon developed a much wider variety of socially proactive activities than the founders envisioned. The contemporary development of the Freidenker Verein (Freethinker Society) is worth mentioning in this context since several of the Turners and Turn-Schwester were active members.

During the 1870s and 1880s the Damenverein (or Women’s Club as it was known for much of the next century) began to play a philanthropic role in society that seems to parallel and even slightly precede the best known local philanthropic group of the era, the Charity Organization Society founded by Oscar McCullough in 1879, and the first settlement houses established in Indianapolis. For example, early in 1878 discussions turned to the reestablishment of the Suppenanstalt (soup kitchen) with the suggestion that a newspaper article be published to invite all German women to meet at the turnhall for that purpose. The minutes for September 1, 1878 then record the decision to found a school for needlework where children, with specific mention of poor children, would be taught knitting, sewing, crochet, and other skills, and that it also be advertised in the German newspapers. It is worth noting that the same entry then goes on to propose that “the rights of women” be discussed at their next meeting, and that a later entry describes the Freethinkers as having “the same spiritual interests”, thus demonstrating the activist sympathies of the society during these years.

In 1880, the Damenverein established a program, with subcommittees responsible for Northern and Southern Indianapolis, that would help care for sick members of the community, and assist women who were unable to cook or otherwise work around the house. This Kranken Komitee also assumed responsibility for sending flowers to funerals and hospitalized members, and even after evolving into a less directly involved Cheer Committee, it continued to provide occasional financial assistance to disadvantaged families well into the next century.

The primary activity of the Women’s Club had always been to provide assistance with the picnics, parties, and various fund raising activities of the Turners and other German-American groups, including one to raise money for the utopian settlement of New Ulm in 1881. The events which eventually come to be most closely associated with the Damenverein, however, are the regular picnics and parties for the children’s classes. Under the direction of the School Committee until

World War I and the Program or Entertainment Committee after that, these parties for children continued in some form into the 1960s.

World War I had a significant impact on the Damenverein, as it did on the rest of the German-American community in Indianapolis. In addition to a notable decline in membership, there was also an awareness that German culture in America was under attack. When the women finally voted in 1918 to use the English language for the remainder of the war it was clearly with the intention of returning to German at some later date. However, the changing of the name of the "Deutches Haus" to the "Athenaeum" in 1917, and a corresponding change for the Damenverein, are also probably indicative of a more general acculturation of the German community. The permanence of this shift is illustrated by the decision in June 1919 to translate the constitution into English.

Despite some interest and concern with the situation in Germany, reflected in its support for the American Relief for German Children program during the 1920s, the Women's Club of the Indianapolis Turners began to become more social and welcoming of non-German members after World War I. Indeed for the majority of entries in the minutes, the monthly card parties and the holiday parties for children organized by the School Committee are the main subjects of discussion. It was during this period though that the Women's Club joined a newly formed national Women's Auxiliary of the American Gymnastics Union (the successor to the Nordamerikanische Turnerbund and predecessor of the American Turners), and attempted to increase their occasional social interaction with the Louisville Ladies Society and South Side Ladies Auxiliary.

Membership returned to prewar numbers during the 1920s and the Women's Club held numerous fund raising events such as card parties, bazaars, and rummage sales to support scholarships for female students to the Normal College and the publication of the newly established *Gym News* newsletter. They also contributed to the Riley Hospital Fund, and other philanthropic endeavors. Despite the apparent strength and stability of the Women's Club however, the 1930s witnessed a general consolidation of the German societies as the Depression began to have an impact. In January 1933, there is a brief mention of the absorption of the Women's Club of the Athenaeum into the Women's Club of the Indianapolis Turners. Notable during this period are the philanthropic activities of the Christmas Basket program of the Cheer Committee, and the Needlework Guild Committee.

In 1936 the Women's Club of the Indianapolis Turners withdrew from the national organization for a few months but then rejoined, at which time the minutes begin referring to the club as the Ladies Auxiliary. This coincides with the inclusion of the Maennerchor under the Athenaeum umbrella and perhaps marks some confusion as to organizational continuity. Towards the end of 1937 there is a reversion to the use of Women's Club or Ladies Club in official records, and in 1939 the use of Women's Auxiliary seems to become the regular form.

World War II served to focus and revitalize the philanthropic aspect of the Auxiliary's activities with substantial effort and resources being devoted to the Red Cross, Service Men's Club, and the Pantry Shelf. Other indications of the war's effects on the Auxiliary are discussions they held on conservation, rationing, and the purchase of War Bonds. Plans for a meeting with the Louisville Turners were cancelled due to the "transportation situation", and the third Sunday card parties were discontinued. There are also interesting discussions concerning how the Auxiliary could attempt to assist women in the service.

After the war and during the 1950s the Women's Auxiliary shifted in another direction and evolved into a women's social club with fashion shows, theme parties, and card parties as the most prominent events. By 1959, the change had become so noticeable that Athenaeum Board of Directors pointed out that "the Auxiliary seems to be a group that functions entirely by itself" with limited association with the club and so far detached that a number of their members were not members of the parent club. The Women's Auxiliary experienced a short revival in the early 1960s, but then begins to lose membership and decrease in activity.

The Athenaeum's financial crisis during the 1980s resulted in an attempt by the women's group to disassociate themselves from possible financial obligations, first by changing the name to the American Turners Auxiliary and then their earlier name of the Damenverein. This group began to focus more on its German origins during the 1990s. In 2007 the members voted to disband the Damenverein as a formal organization and become an informally organized social group.

REFERENCES

Moonen, Alida Joyce. *The Missing Half: The experience of women in the Indianapolis Athenaeum Turnverein Women's Auxiliary, 1876-1919*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1993.

RELATED MATERIALS

Athenaeum Turners Records, 1880-1999, Mss 032, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, IUPUI University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

American Turners Records, 1855-1998, Mss 030, Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, IUPUI 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 and photographs preserved by the Damenverein of the Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein and the Women's Auxiliary of the Atheneum Turners. These materials are organized according to the generating body within the organization, usually at the

committee level. Materials dating before World War I are generally in German, and most minutes and reports are in *fraktur* script, however the early minute books (1876-1888) have been translated. This collection boasts what is perhaps the most complete run of minutes from any German society in Indianapolis and provides insights to early women's groups and German societies which are not available elsewhere.

The records are divided into 14 series: Constitution and Bylaws, Board of Directors and Officers, Budget, Financial, History, Kranken/Sick/Cheer, Membership, Program/Entertainment, Publicity, Drama, School, Needlework, and Ways and Means Committees and Photographs. Photographs are listed both in the appropriate series and searchable online.

Constitutions and By-laws Records, 1876-1987, contain printed copies of the constitutions of the club from 1876 (in German), 1921, ca.1940, 1949, 1954, 1987 detailing the structure and organization of the women's society. There are also typewritten revisions from c.1973 and 1986.

Board of Directors and Officers' Records, 1876-1992, contain the annual reports of the club President from 1908, 1910-1919, 1930-1992, two lists of officers and members of the standing committees ca.1961 and 1971, and complete run of minutes from the foundation of the group in 1876 until 1961 and 1986. Also included are the notes from a 1959 meeting with the Board of Directors of the Athenaeum that discussed the relationship between the two groups at that time and the annual reports of the recording secretary, 1910-1919.

Correspondence includes a letter from the director of the Athenaeum regarding the use of German by German-American societies during World War I, correspondence relating to a relief program for children in Germany in the early 1920s, and exchanges of letters with the Women's Auxiliary of the Louisville Turners, the Indianapolis Maennerchor Ladies' Society, and the Indianapolis South Side Turners Ladies' Auxiliary during the 1930s. Notable are unusual copper-sheet postcards and other letters from Else Danke in Arizona that attempt to maintain a connection with the Women's Club in Indianapolis. The series has correspondence between the Damenverein and the Women's Auxiliary of the American Turners from the 1930s and 1950s that document the relationship between the two groups and that help explain and the withdrawal of the Damenverein from the Women's Auxiliary of the American Turners in 1954.

Budget Committee Records, 1959-1986, contain a short sample of proposed budgets from 1960 to 1986. The Financial Committee Records are an important supplement to this series.

Financial Committee Records, 1909-1987, contain annual reports of the Financial Secretary and the Treasurer, records of receipts and disbursements, and references to a number of philanthropic contributions. Also included is a notecard recording the 1933 transfer of the Athenaeum Women's Club treasury to the Socialer Turner Women's Club.

History Committee Records, 1926-1976, contain a description of the responsibilities of the club historian, histories of the group composed circa 1929, 1946, and 1950, and speeches and correspondence relating to the annual Founder's Day celebrations in 1946, 1955, 1960-1961.

Also included are programs from the 50th (1926), 60th (1936), 75th (1951), Centennial, and 125th (1976) celebrations.

Kranken / Sick / Cheer Committee Records, 1911-1960, contain committee reports from 1911-1913, and 1958, and several files of acknowledgments for flowers and financial assistance to bereaved, ill, or poor members of the Indianapolis Turner community.

Membership Committee Records, 1876-1986, contain membership rolls and dues records, and yearbooks with directories listing members names and addresses. There are also letters of resignation and membership transfer, membership cards, lists of 25 and 50-year members, and some committee correspondence and reports.

Program / Entertainment Committee Records, 1912-2002, contain a few annual reports from the 1930s and 1940s, advertisements for events, and statements of expenses for parties organized by the Damenverein in 1912-1916. See the Athenaeum Turners Collection for newsletters and mailings which also include the activities of the Women's Auxiliary.

Publicity Committee Records, 1921-1971, contain press releases sent to the local media by the chair of the Publicity Committee and newspaper articles about members of and events sponsored by the Damenverein.

Drama Committee Annual Reports, 1916-1919, contain annual reports from the Dramatic section in 1916, 1917, 1918, and 1919. Reflecting the general situation of the Turnverein and other German-American groups, these reports reflect the transition from German to English in 1918 and a decline in activity.

School Committee Reports, 1911-1939, contain annual reports on the activities of the group responsible for organizing picnics and parties for students from the Turner classes. Initially there were four regular events; an annual picnic at Turner Park, a Christmas Party, a costume party or masque ball, and an Easter Party, though by 1939 this is reduced to three and note made that these are to be open to all children of Atheneaum members.

Needlework Committee Records, 1933-1946, contain correspondence from this committee, founded in 1932, which organized the sewing and collection of garments for the Needlework Guild. Also included are correspondence related to similar projects for Red Cross sewing programs during the 1940s.

Ways and Means Committee Records, 1910-1975, contain annual and monthly reports on the main social activity of the group. Developing from a craze for card games which swept the country around the turn of the century, these documents discuss regular Pivot, Bunco, Progressive, Eucre, and Monte Carlo poker nights. Typically nine "sections" were appointed to be responsible for organizing the card parties - each for a particular month during the year, and the receipts used to supplement the regular income from membership dues.. A new committee was formed in March 1924 to formally "draft definite rules for the card parties" and organized the sections. The

committee seems to become responsible for fund raising in general during the Depression Years when this seems to be one of the few things making a profit. The fund raising characteristic of the card parties establishes a connection to the later Ways and Means Committee which had some tie to the ongoing card parties, but also sponsored an "L Shop" at the Atheneum in the 1970s which contributes some inventory lists to the collection.

Photographs, 1884-1992, contain photographs of groups of Damenverein members, scenes from the German children's homes that the Damenverein helped support in the 1920s, photographs relating to the Damenverein's activities at the 1992 American Turners convention, events sponsored by the Program/Entertainment Committees, and the "L" Shop.

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