

# William Pfaender and the Founding of New Ulm<sup>1</sup>

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THE MINNESOTA RIVER rises in the watershed area of west central Minnesota, winds its way gently south and east from Big Stone Lake some two hundred miles, and then, after making a wide bend at Mankato, flows nearly a hundred miles north and east to join the Mississippi just below Fort Snelling. Thus the stream makes a V-shaped path across the state. Its rich and beautiful valley had been the home of the Sioux or Dakota Indians long before Minnesota, now engaged in celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of its organization as a territory, became a political entity. There were groves along the banks of the Minnesota and the many little streams flowing into it, and the rolling prairie stretched beyond. Small game was ample, and in 1849 buffaloes still grazed in great numbers on the lands to the west. The river itself furnished the best of all roads from the Mississippi to the southwestern section of the territory. Obviously, white men as well as Indians would find the region attractive, and settlers would pour in to replace the red men as soon as the natives consented to the limitation or extinction of their claims. Among those interested in the opening of these fertile western lands to settlement were some of the refugees of the revolutions of 1848 who had recently reached the United States.

When the territory was organized, with the Missouri River as its western boundary, only the delta between the St. Croix and the Mississippi rivers was open to settlement. The territory then had a population of 4,535, exclusive of soldiers. By the treaties of

<sup>1</sup>This paper is one of four on "Some Forty-eighters in America" read on December 28, 1948, in Washington, D.C., before a session of the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Dean Theodore C. Blegen of the University of Minnesota presided, and Dean Carl Wittke of Western Reserve University gave the closing comment and summary. Earlier, on December 11, Mrs. Tyler presented her paper before a meeting of the Folk Arts Foundation of America held on the campus of the University of Minnesota. *Ed.*

Traverse des Sioux and Mendota, negotiated in 1851, the Sioux were to be confined to a reservation extending ten miles on either side of the Minnesota River from Lake Traverse to a line about thirty miles from the bend in the river at Mankato.<sup>2</sup> Two Indian agencies and a military post, Fort Ridgely, were to control relations with the Sioux in the area. White settlers might move on to the lands the Indians vacated—embracing most of the present area of Minnesota west and south of the Mississippi—pre-empt claims, and purchase them when the surveys were completed and a land office opened. In short, the new territory of Minnesota was ready to offer homes and good farm lands to the land-hungry 1848 refugees, as well as to those who had preceded them in the Atlantic migration in search of cheap lands on the frontier.

Among the young Germans who found it wise to leave their native land as a result of the unrest of 1848 was William Pfaender, born in Heilbronn, Wurtemberg, on July 6, 1826. Little is known of his boyhood in Germany except that he had a "common school education," was of liberal and free thought inclination, had been active in the Turner movement, and was sufficiently involved in politics to deem it expedient to leave the country. Being poor, vigorous, and ambitious, he might well have migrated anyway; certainly his part in the preliminaries of the revolution had not been large. He joined the substantial group of Germans in Cincinnati in 1849, and two years later married Catherine Pfau, who was to be the mother of his fifteen children.<sup>3</sup>

Pfaender must have reached the Midwest at about the same time as Friedrich Hecker, an insurrectionist from Baden who inspired the founding in Cincinnati of the first Turnverein in the United States. Already fully conversant with the principles of the Turner movement, Pfaender was one of the first to join the Cincinnati organization. He soon was one of its prominent members, and throughout his life he remained interested in all the activities of the branch of the *Turnerbund* which he later was instrumental in

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the Sioux treaties of 1851 and their relation to Minnesota settlement, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 266-304 (St. Paul, 1921).

<sup>3</sup> A sketch of Pfaender appears in L. A. Fritsche, ed., *History of Brown County, Minnesota, Its People, Industries, and Institutions*, 2: 400-406 (Indianapolis, 1916).

founding on the Minnesota frontier.<sup>4</sup> The Cincinnati Turnverein built the first Turner Hall in the United States in 1850. In October of that year delegates from twenty gymnastic societies met in Philadelphia to form a Turnverein union, which the Cincinnati group promptly joined.

The new national organization soon established a newspaper, *Die Turnzeitung*, which stressed the traditional Turner principle of developing vigorous bodies and independent, unfettered minds, and also guided the members of the organization politically into the advocacy of Free Soil doctrines and opposition to the rising nativistic and prohibition movements. The growth of the movement was rapid, and by 1859 there were in the United States about a hundred and fifty societies with more than ten thousand members. Annual gymnastic festivals were held; pageants, concerts, theatrical performances, and balls furnished social activities; and public addresses, lectures, and open forums provided the members with information on science, history, government, and liberal reform projects. Many of the members were freethinkers; some were socialists; all were anticlerical. Association with them gave young Pfaender ample opportunity to broaden his "common school education."

That Pfaender had given much thought to the problem of the foreign-born and to the economic advantages of removal to the frontier was amply evidenced in a letter he sent to *Die Turnzeitung*. It was published on March 29, 1855. Pfaender entitled his letter "Practical Turnerism" and suggested that members of the order who wished to prove that they were in earnest about their desire for reform might well be interested in a sphere of activity not heretofore considered by the organization—the utilization of their "physical and mental forces" in a mass effort to provide for themselves a "secure existence." He appealed especially to workingmen, but

<sup>4</sup> Detailed material on the Turner movement may be found in Heinrich Metzner, ed., *Die Jahrbucher der Deutsch Amerikanischen Turnerei* (New York, 1890-93). See especially accounts of the first *Turnfeste* in Cincinnati, 1:38, and of Pfaender and the founding of New Ulm, 3:45. Additional material on the Turner movement and its connection with the early history of New Ulm is included in an article on "The Birth of New Ulm, Minnesota," in *American Turner Topics* for November, 1948. For general accounts of the movement, see A. B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, 2:389 (Boston, 1909); and Carl F. Wittke, *We Who Built America*, 219 (New York, 1939).

called the attention of others as well to the "prejudices and arrogance of the Native Americans which becomes more and more crass from day to day." His fellow Turners he asked to unite "for the establishment of a settlement, which, aside from the material welfare, would also offer the advantage that the insane, degrading, mortifying attempts of our Anglo-American taskmasters to restrict us could not operate, that, in a word, we would have the opportunity to enjoy unstintedly the rights guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States and to become happy and blessed after our own fashion."<sup>5</sup>

Pfaender's plan called for a joint stock corporation of wide membership, and the purchase of lands in the West for town sites and farms in an amount to accord with the capital obtained from the sale of shares at ten dollars each. Each stockholder would obtain one or more town lots and he might also acquire farming land outside the town limits. Unallotted lands belonging to the society could be sold to establish "mills, factories and other public utility enterprises, which would be operated for the benefit of the whole, and finally would be disposed of for the benefit of the school fund." Pfaender's letter ended with a rosy picture of the future happiness and prosperity of a frontier community thus founded by the cooperative enterprise of the Turner societies.

A month later the Cincinnati Turnverein authorized the appointment of a committee to consider the *Turnzeitung* article and, quite appropriately, Pfaender was made secretary. Taking his letter as its basis for deliberation, the committee met on April 23, 1855, recommended "that no time should be lost in accomplishing the ends suggested," and urged that all members of the Turner society be called upon to participate in the formation of a joint stock company to purchase land and found a town and farming community somewhere on the frontier. The undertaking, the committee stipulated, was to be "without consideration of a political or religious

<sup>5</sup> A translation by Martin L. F. Eyrich of Pfaender's letter is in the files of the Brown County Historical Society at New Ulm. That organization has also the secretary's book and other records of a committee of the Cincinnati Turnverein appointed to formulate plans for a colonization society, and a copy of "A Statement of the Aims and Purposes of the Turner Colonization Society" issued as a circular in August, 1856.

tendency but aimed to assure the existence and independence of each individual and thereby insure the success of the whole." Shares were to be sold at fifteen dollars each and, when four hundred members had been obtained, a constitution would be drawn up and the project formally initiated.

The Cincinnati Turnverein accepted the committee's report and elected an administrative board of which Pfaender was to be the first president. On August 27, 1855, the society approved the provisional constitution, and the Colonization Society of North America was declared ready to provide "means for carrying out a broad and liberal scheme of development, physical and mental, on the wide prairies of the West." Homes were to be founded in the wilderness, free from the trammels of narrow sectarianism. Finally, a committee, composed of Pfaender and two others, was sent to the West in 1856 to choose a site for the Turner settlement.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a German settlement on the frontier was not, of course, peculiar to those interested in the project of the Cincinnati Turners, nor were they perhaps unacquainted with other movements, more Utopian than their own, which had resulted in a socialistic German settlement in Texas and another in Iowa, called Communia. There seems to have been no direct connection between the Cincinnati committee and these projects, nor is there any mention of them in the contemporary material on Pfaender or his Colonization Society. A very close connection, however, was to be made, by the representatives of the Cincinnati Turnverein, with a project already under way that had been initiated by a group of Germans in Chicago.

Early in 1853 a half dozen young German workmen in that rapidly growing city were meeting several evenings a week to learn the English language. The leader of the class was Frederick Beinhorn, who had come to the United States from Germany in 1852 and who seems to have been from that time determined to found a German town on the frontier. These young men agreed to join him in organizing a society the object of which was to found a model town and farming community on land to be ob-

<sup>6</sup> Fritsche, *Brown County*, 1:135.

tained from the government—they were anxious to avoid the wiles of land speculators—on the banks of some navigable stream.<sup>7</sup>

By November, 1853, sixty men had joined Beinhorn's society, and they appointed one William Tach as their agent and assessed themselves ten cents per month to further their enterprise. In November, also, they published a call in the Illinois *Staatszeitung* for members for a German land association whose purpose it would be to establish homes for German workingmen. Lawyers and clergy were to be excluded. Their efforts met with success. In February, 1854, they sponsored a ball which netted three hundred dollars. They also issued a prospectus stating that new members must pay a fee of three dollars which would be increased to five if it was not paid within eight days of the candidate's admission to membership.

In the summer of 1854 the association appears to have had about eight hundred members—almost all workingmen. The agent who had been traveling in search of a site offered them first a sandy shore in northern Michigan and then an Iowa location, both of which were rejected. Two new agents were directed to the Minnesota Valley to examine lands recently secured by the Sioux treaties. They chose a site near the village of Le Sueur and reported to the Chicago society, which sent out an advance group of twenty, via Galena and the Mississippi River, to obtain lands and prepare for the coming of settlers.

These men did not approve the Le Sueur site and they followed the river south to its bend at Mankato and then northwestward to a stream called the Cottonwood, where they found what seemed to them an ideal site. It had a navigable river, the Minnesota, a

<sup>7</sup> The review of the Chicago society's activities presented in the following pages is based in large part upon clippings and manuscripts in the collections of the Brown County Historical Society. The fullest account is given in a manuscript history of the founding of New Ulm by the late Fred Johnson, long identified with the community as a newspaper editor, hotel owner, and president of the local historical society. Contemporary manuscripts about the Chicago group do not seem to have been preserved. Among the scanty secondary materials are reminiscent speeches and articles by pioneer settlers which were published in New Ulm newspapers to mark various occasions. See, for example, an account of the founding of the local Turnverein and Pfaender's obituary in the *New Ulm Review* for June 30, 1901, and August 16, 1905; and an account of the Chicago society in the *Brown County Journal* of November 6, 1931. Edward D. Neill, in his *History of the Minnesota Valley, 704-707* (Minneapolis, 1882), gives an account of the founding of New Ulm that is evidently based upon material obtained from pioneers still living in the early 1880's.

high bank terraced back from the river on which they could locate their village, ample wood for building purposes, and a well-watered prairie extending westward for farmlands. Building must wait until spring, however, for it was then October and winter would soon be upon them.

Small parties in search of winter quarters were sent out, and members of one group, befriended by Joseph Laframboise, a trader at Little Rock, about eleven miles up the river from the site selected, found temporary housing in a deserted Indian village. With their one wagon and four oxen, and with little food for themselves or their animals, the German would-be pioneers endeavored to make themselves comfortable in a log cabin which they built for a more secure shelter than that afforded by Indian tepees. The Indians, who seem to have left their village because of a death from small-pox, returned and tried to evict their unwelcome tenants, but were placated and turned away by Laframboise. The housing problem was solved but temporarily, however, for in February the log house burned and the settlers were forced to spend the rest of the winter — fortunately a mild one, for Minnesota — in the Indians' tepees.

In the spring the newcomers built a crude sawmill — hence the name Milford for the settlement — and awaited the arrival of recruits, money, and supplies from Chicago. In May, 1855, Beinhorn, president of the society, its treasurer, and a surveyor arrived with about thirty settlers, including a few women and children. A part of the original group preferred the Milford site and remained there; the rest moved with Beinhorn and the recent arrivals to the site at the junction with the Cottonwood chosen the year before. To it one of their number, Jacob Haeberle, gave the name of New Ulm in memory of his German home.

The Sioux disputed the German colonists' right to establish land claims on this site and persistently pulled up their stakes, asserting that the land was a part of the Sioux reservation. A survey proved that the reservation ended nine miles up river, and eventually claims were staked out and shelters built. All these preparations were made in accord with the provisions of the pre-emption act before a federal land office was opened at Winona in 1856. It was known, of course,

that when the office should open, it would be necessary to pay a dollar and a quarter an acre for the town site lands and for additional farm lands to be taken out in the names of individual settlers and turned into a common pool to be divided later.

In order that the colonists might take group action, a branch of the Chicago association, called the German Land Association of Minnesota, was formed, and letters were sent to Chicago asking for additional funds. The parent society decided to tax each member thirty dollars for the purchase of land — a decision which caused the withdrawal of all who did not themselves intend to migrate and resulted in the collection of about seven thousand dollars from those willing to pay. President Beinhorn, who had returned to Chicago for the winter, went back to Minnesota in May, 1856, with funds to pay for the land and with a plan for division on the basis of twelve town lots and nine acres outside the village for each settler. This was later changed to six lots and four acres. Obviously, more money and more land would be needed to make any farming enterprise successful.

At this juncture there appeared upon the scene Pfaender, who with his fellow agents had been searching in Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa for a site for their settlement. They had heard in St. Paul of the new German town in the valley and went down to investigate and, perhaps, to choose a near-by site for themselves. At New Ulm the two associations decided to join forces, procure more land, and draw on the broader Turner influence for funds and for a larger number of settlers. In July, 1856, in Chicago the transfer was made. The Cincinnati organization bought out the interest of the Chicago group and agreed to procure additional lands, to erect mills and warehouses, and to respect the claims of the original settlers to the town lots and farm lands assigned them. Pfaender then used the Cincinnati group's funds to buy new lands from the government.

In 1857 the combined interest was incorporated by the Minnesota territorial legislature under the name of the German Land Association, with Pfaender as its first president. The new organization was authorized to establish all appropriate industries. The town of New Ulm also was incorporated, and Pfaender was president of



the town council. Allotments were made to members of the association, and other lots were sold to nonmembers for fifty dollars each. Early in the spring of 1857 nearly seventy settlers arrived from Cincinnati in a steamer chartered to take them all the way to New Ulm. The settlement could be said to have gone through its preliminary, but perhaps not its most precarious, stage. When the merger of the two associations was made, the village consisted of twenty-three log houses scattered over a three-mile area, and one store, the entire stock of which consisted of thirty pounds of coffee, fifty pounds of sugar, three bolts of cotton goods, and a half barrel of whisky! Many of the thirteen hundred Cincinnati members migrated, however, and by 1860 the population of the township was 653, almost all Germans and their American-born children.

These German pioneers founded no Utopia, nor had they ever planned to do so. There was little that could be called socialistic or communitarian about their enterprise, even in the early days when co-operation was essential. The first sawmill was provided with machinery by association funds and was run as a community enterprise to facilitate building, but when, in 1858, fire destroyed the first mill, the socialistic phase ended and the new mill was under private ownership. In the same way, the first store was a communal affair with goods sold to the townspeople at cost, but within a year or two that was given up and all mercantile enterprises in the town were of the usual capitalistic type. Flour milling and brewing, which have always been major industries in the town, were from the beginning in private hands.

The objectives of the founders of New Ulm, as expressed in a circular used by the German Land Association in 1856, were of such a nature that they might be fulfilled under the conditions of life on the Minnesota frontier. The inflationary character of American economic conditions in the middle 1850's was recognized by the author of the circular when he stated that "many workers are unable to find suitable employment and a secure livelihood. For years, food has become disproportionately expensive, and crises like those of the years 1854 and 1855, as well as the corruption appearing ever more openly and shamelessly in all branches of the public

administration, permit no expectation of improvement—rather the opposite. To these . . . prospects for the future have been added recently the intense animosity of many native Americans toward the immigrant citizens, as well as the exertions of the temperance people . . . and the attempts to revive the Puritanical Sunday laws, and so it is about time to think of looking for a home where one can remain aloof from such disadvantages. . . . It is the organization's purpose to offer its members aside from the basis for a secure existence, the benefits of a comprehensive, splendid youth education, and . . . to concern itself with the promotion of trade and industry . . . and at the same time to foster German good fellowship.”<sup>8</sup>

Both education and good fellowship were to be realized through the New Ulm Turnverein, the early history of which is practically inseparable from that of the town. Soon after the first Cincinnati contingent reached Minnesota on November 11, 1856, fourteen men met out-of-doors near Adolph Seiter's log cabin and organized as a Turner group. Pfaender was its first secretary. In 1861 the Turnverein was incorporated under a law of the new state of Minnesota which provided for the organization of schools, hospitals, and other institutions. The first Turner Hall in New Ulm was built in 1857 as a genuine community enterprise, for the work was done on Sundays and the logs were felled and floated downstream to the sawmill “borrowed” for the occasion. The building was the largest in town, forty by seventy feet, with a small tower at each end. It was used for all Turner activities, for a school until one could be built, and for all varieties of public meetings. The first of many theatrical performances was held there in 1858. The building was burned during the Sioux War of 1862, but a new and larger building was erected in 1865. This two-story brick structure contained a gymnasium, a stage, a bar, and schoolrooms. A wing added in 1872 was used to house the town academy or high school. Even today a twentieth-century structure dominates a town of about ten thousand in the same way as the log structure of the early days did the frontier village, and Turner activities are still of importance in a community that is even yet predominantly German.

<sup>8</sup> A copy of the circular is owned by the Brown County Historical Society.

The relations between the German Turners and the missionaries and churches of the frontier have been a matter of dispute. New Ulm Germans have always maintained that any animosity is—and was—pure myth. Certainly the rapid establishment of churches indicates no disfavor. The first church service in New Ulm was a Catholic mass held in 1856; German Methodist and Lutheran ministers arrived before 1860; and churches of these and other denominations were built in the first decade of the community's existence. But most of the Turners were freethinkers, and if tolerant, they were still determined to prevent any obstacle to free-thinking for themselves or their children. When the German Land Association had fulfilled its purpose, its members made legal arrangements for winding up its affairs in 1862. After various city lots were given for hospital and park sites, four thousand dollars were assigned to the Turnverein to enlarge its hall for school purposes. All other assets of the association were then put in trust for the use of its school under the joint care of the Turnverein and the school trustees. The use to which funds could be put, however, was restricted by a resolution designating "that the donors of this legacy, once and for all time, make the condition that in the schools, which are to receive the benefits therefrom, neither religious instructions shall be given nor religious books, such as the Bible, be used as text books."<sup>9</sup>

In a public address during a *Turnfeste* in 1868, Pfaender made a statement regarding the Turner attitude toward religion to which, doubtless, most of his fellow townsmen and many of their descendants would have subscribed. "No Turner is questioned as to his religious views, but it is self-evident, that after a thorough research, he will gradually emancipate himself from the errors which today hold millions of people in spiritual slavery. . . . The Turner is tolerant and honors the religious convictions of every person and expects the same consideration. . . . This struggle of reason against darkness, of sound reasoning against religious blindness will end with victory for free thought even though it may take hundreds of years."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Johnson's manuscript history of the founding of New Ulm.

<sup>10</sup> *New Ulm Post*, September 4, 1868.

Although the little German village achieved its cultural and political freedom, it was not free from the disasters that beset frontier communities. Nonspeculative and well-organized as they were, the panic of 1857 did little harm to the New Ulm settlers. A prairie fire destroyed their first wheat crop in 1856, and blackbirds in great flocks consumed their corn and were in turn killed by poison and shot when a bounty of forty cents a hundred was offered for those destroyed. Grasshoppers came in 1857 and again in the late 1860's to plague the settlers, and a cyclone destroyed part of the town and many farm buildings in 1881. But the great disaster was the attack by the Sioux in the Indian war of 1862, when much of the town was wiped out. The story of that event is far too long and too interesting to be more than mentioned here. It occurred in the midst of the Civil War at a time when many of the young men of New Ulm were away serving in the Union army. Lieutenant Pfaender, for instance, returned to Minnesota after the battle of Shiloh to become a lieutenant colonel in the Minnesota regiment that guarded the frontier after the massacre.

Through the years that follow, Pfaender's name appears constantly in the list of town leaders. As justice of the peace, he performed the first marriage ceremony in the town. He was postmaster, county register of deeds, a member of the electoral college in 1860, the first representative from his district in the state legislature, and later a state senator. He was director of the board of school trustees, mayor of New Ulm in 1873, state treasurer from 1876 to 1880, and later a member of the city council. For sixteen years he was commander of his post of the Grand Army of the Republic. He died in 1905—full of years and honors—in the town which he had been instrumental in founding and with which his life had been so closely entwined. A German liberal in his youth, he remained throughout his life devoted to the principles of 1848. He was an immigrant with ideals and ideas which he was willing to put to the hard test of frontier living. He fought in defense of his adopted country and devoted much of his life to the service of his community.



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