

Plays for Pioneers

GERMAN DRAMA in RURAL MINNESOTA

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THE German-speaking immigrants who began to settle in Minnesota in the 1850s frequently banded together into social organizations such as singing societies, Turner associations, and amateur theatrical groups. This was true not only in the Twin Cities and New Ulm, but also in a number of other southern Minnesota communities to which Germans went at relatively early dates.¹

The first German Turnverein in Minnesota was founded at Winona on the Mississippi, where a German orchestra and a German singing society were organized before Minnesota became a state. During the first year of the Civil War, Germans in Winona built a hall with a stage and seemingly gave theatrical performances every two weeks. It was once said that the musical ensemble could compare favorably with that of any German amateur group in the United States.²

Minnesota's early German stages for the most part played light dramatic fare, presenting comedies and farces best suited to

their equipment, personnel, and audiences. The Winona group, however, gave evidence of greater ambitions by producing dramas like Schiller's *Die Räuber*. On the occasion of its first presentation, the *Winona Daily Republican* of September 7, 1868, commented that "Several English-speaking citizens were present, with copies of Schiller, and posted themselves on the play while they enjoyed the music." On a small scale, Winona's situation resembled that of New York City, where at times thirty to forty per cent of the audience in German theaters consisted of persons of non-German origin.

Shortly after the Civil War, when J. Billigheim's traveling ensemble appeared in Winona, it announced plans for presenting two one-act farces up the Mississippi River at Fountain City, Wisconsin. According to the *Winona Banner* of July 21, 1866, the steamboat "Idle Prindle," with ensemble and theater enthusiasts on board, left Winona for Fountain City at five o'clock on a Sunday afternoon and returned at four the next morning. Gentlemen paid one dollar

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¹For a discussion of "The Early German Theater in Minnesota," see the author's article in *Minnesota History*, 32:100-105, 164-173 (June, September, 1951).

²*Minnesota National Demokrat* (St. Paul), February 12, 1859; *Minnesota Staatszeitung* (St. Paul), March 1, 1862, quoting the *LaCrosse Nordstern*; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Winona County*, 2:938 (Chicago, 1913).

for the excursion; ladies with escorts traveled free.

At Red Wing a singing society and a Turnverein were founded shortly after the Civil War. True to the tradition of American Turner societies everywhere, the latter fostered the presentation of German drama. Kotzebue's drama of chivalry, *Johanna von Montfaucon*, was played on the gala occasion of the dedication of a new banner of the society. Members of brother societies in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and St. Anthony were invited to attend. They came, as did George Seibert's renowned Great Western Band, on board the specially chartered steamboat "Damsel." Nine years later a group of Twin Citians again went to Red Wing, this time to attend the dedication of a new Turner hall. But technology had advanced in the interim, and this time the group traveled by railroad, paying two dollars apiece for the round trip instead of the former steamboat fare of five dollars.³

OTHER small Minnesota communities in which German dramatic activity flourished at one time or another were Mankato and Chaska in the Minnesota Valley and Stillwater in the lumber region of the St. Croix. Mankato, founded in 1852, early attracted great numbers of German immigrants. By 1858 there were quite a few Turners in the city, and a singing society had come into existence. According to the *Minnesota Staatszeitung* of June 14, 1862, Romberg's *Die Glocke* was performed before a full house in the Masonic Hall.

But apparently it was Theodor Steidle who successfully transplanted the German drama to Mankato. Late in 1866 he moved there from New Ulm and immediately founded a German theatrical society with the intention of giving performances once a month during the fall and winter. The first performance attracted three hundred people — not exactly a small number for a community that only four years earlier had been endangered by an Indian outbreak. Steidle was not without artistic ambitions,

for he presented dramas which did not often appear on amateur stages. He also gave some plays in English, and the non-German population of Mankato supported his theater, which boasted skilled personnel. Moreover, the theater group's activities stimulated social life in the little community. At one time, Mankato seems to have been considered promising enough to attract guest actors from St. Paul.⁴

More important for the German theatergoers of Mankato, however, was the fact that its indigenous theater group remained active for a goodly number of years. In 1870 the local dramatic society united with the singing society to form a new organization known as the Melo-Dramatic Society (Melodramatischer Verein). This group later became the Harmonia Society. It prospered, building a hall that cost fifteen thousand dollars and contained a stage that measured sixty-two by thirty-five feet. A thousand people are said to have taken part in the dedication of this hall on Christmas Day, 1872.⁵

Chaska, too, owed its temporary prominence in the field of German drama to one enthusiast — John Kerker, teacher, musician, and actor. The first performance given there was offered in connection with the Minnesota *Sängerfest* of 1867, the first such festival to be given in Minnesota outside the Twin Cities. The performance, apparently a sort of operetta, was presented in a hall which the Chaska Concordia society had built expressly for the occasion. It was staged by St. Paul singers who had traveled to the *Sängerfest* on the steamboat "Jeanette Roberts." Because of high water, it took nine hours to make the trip.

³ *Minnesota Volksblatt* (St. Paul), February 18, August 26, December 30, 1865, October 13, 1866; *New Ulm Post*, October 26, 1866; *Minneapolis Freie Presse*, July 24, 1875.

⁴ *Neu Ulm Pionier*, September 23, 1858; *Staatszeitung*, February 14, 1868; *Mankato Record*, December 22, 1866; *Volksblatt*, October 24, 1866.

⁵ *Staatszeitung*, February 22, August 25, 1870, December 31, 1872; *Minneapolis Freie Presse*, January 4, 1873.



PIONEER Hall, Young America, with members of the local singing society

Under Kerker's direction, other theatrical offerings were performed at Chaska throughout the winter and during the following fall. When the Carver County Fair attracted many German farmers to the community in 1868, the Concordia scheduled a concert and a performance. Comedies and farces constituted the offerings in Chaska, where plays continued to be shown for many years.⁶

Stillwater was another community that early attracted German immigrants. In 1857, a year before Minnesota became a state, the Stillwater Germans founded "an independent political society built upon strict principles of freedom," but there is no evidence that they indulged in theatrical activity until after the Civil War. On May 26, 1866, the weekly *Minnesota Volksblatt*, published at St. Paul, announced that Billig-

heim's traveling ensemble was going to Stillwater to give "comedies, musical comedies, parodies, burlesques, duets, and solos." Five years later the Stillwater German society established a theater section which planned to give biweekly performances. Gustav Amberg, the impresario of the German Athenäum in St. Paul who later developed into one of the outstanding personalities of the American stage, had enough confidence in the Stillwater Germans and their love of the arts to present Madame Maria Methuascheller and Emil Lasswitz in that community. A few years later, the Stillwater ensemble accepted an invitation to present Johann Schenk's opera, *Der Dorfbarbier*, in St. Paul, where the Athenäum was completely filled for the occasion. Interest in the German theater continued for many years in Stillwater, and members of the second generation later played important parts there.⁷

⁶ *Volksblatt*, December 30, 1866, October 23, 1867; *Staatszeitung*, July 6, 1867.

⁷ *Minnesota Deutsche Zeitung* (St. Paul) August 15, 1857; *Minneapolis Freie Presse*, August 26, 1876; *Volkszeitung* (St. Paul), January 24, 1881.

SOMEWHAT isolated geographically from other German stages in Minnesota was Du-

luth, where a German singing society was founded as early as 1873. It was followed a short time later by the establishment of a Turnverein. By 1880 a theatrical section, which began to produce plays regularly, had been added. The Dworschak family, later the founders of a German weekly newspaper in Duluth, was especially active on the German stage there, for J. Dworschak was stage director and Miss Therese Dworschak received particular praise for her acting. The stage of the Turner Hall seems to have enjoyed quite a reputation in the city, for in the summer of 1886 at least three English-language companies gave performances there. When the building burned in the winter of 1887-88, it was immediately replaced by a new one in which German plays continued to be given.⁸

THE STAGING of German plays was not limited, however, to the larger Minnesota settlements. German dramas were presented in Osseo, in New Rome, a tiny village in Sibley County that no longer appears on most maps, and in Young America, where the Pionier Männerchor was organized in 1861 under the direction of Charles W. Bachmann. A carpenter and builder by vocation, Bachmann's obituary characterizes him as a man whose heart was full of enthusiasm for everything noble and beautiful. The members of the Young America society, who often had to travel for hours from their isolated farms to attend rehearsals, built a hall and began to give plays a few years after the Civil War. On one occasion, Kotzebue's five-act comedy, *Wirrwarr*, was performed. In 1872 thirty-eight singers from St. Paul, eighteen from Minneapolis, and others from Chaska and Carver went to Young America to participate in a celebration arranged to mark the society's eleventh anniversary. The St. Paulites, who staged an operetta, traveled with their families in a special train consisting of four cars. They were accompanied by Seibert's Great Western Band, and all were said to have performed in grand style. According to the

Minneapolis Freie Presse of September 14, 1872, the members of the Pionier Männerchor proved themselves splendid hosts "by taking ten, twenty, even thirty guests home with them."

Anniversary celebrations in Young America regularly seem to have included plays, and there is evidence of additional theatrical activity. An agent of a St. Paul German newspaper, the weekly *Minnesota Volksblatt*, reported in the issue of April 12, 1877, that when he passed through Young America he was "pleasantly surprised" to see a performance of a comedy in which Bachmann and his wife took part.

For a time Bachmann also seems to have served as conductor of the singing society of Waconia in Carver County. This group too was interested in stage performances, for in 1869 it included a play in a program of singing and dancing. Although this rather isolated group was not very active, its interest in drama continued. In July, 1888, the Minneapolis Harmonia gave an outdoor performance of Angely's *Das Fest der Handwerker* on an island in Clearwater Lake near Waconia. Perhaps never before had the Harmonia theater section played to such an audience. People from Minneapolis, St. Paul, Chaska, Carver, Young America, Glencoe, Waconia, and other communities attended. The *Minneapolis Freie Presse* of July 28, 1888, reported that innumerable Chinese lanterns illuminated the island, and that the applause was great.

Other Minnesota towns and villages in which German plays were performed before the turn of the century were Carver, Faribault, Hastings, Jordan, Owatonna, Perham, Red Wing, Rochester, St. Peter, Shakopee, Wabasha, and Waseca. Although today the German stage in Minnesota is only a memory, the German theater played its role in making one group of pioneering immigrants feel at home in a new environment.

⁸ *Minneapolis Freie Presse*, March 29, 1873, January 24, 1880, April 29, 1882, July 19, August 4, 1886, March 24, 1888; *Volkszeitung*, July 13, 1888.



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