

The Carver County German Reading Society

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LITERARY SOCIETIES were a common feature of frontier cultural life in Minnesota and elsewhere. In Carver County such societies were established previous to 1885 at Chaska, Waconia, Watertown, Young America, and Carver, where there were both German and Swedish groups; and later they were organized also at Hancock and East Union.¹ The German Reading Society of Carver was said to be the earliest of these organizations, and it took great pride in that distinction. More is known of this organization than of other similar Carver County societies, for both its library and its records have been preserved. They are now in the museum of the Carver County Historical Society at Mayer.²

It was natural that a German society should be organized at an early date in Carver County, where about half of the pioneer settlers were German immigrants. The Germans were represented by active religious groups in a number of communities, with large numbers of Catholics at Chaska and Waconia, churches of several denominations at Benton, a Lutheran church of the Missouri Synod at Young America, and Evangelical Lutheran and Catholic churches at Carver. In addition, the German settlers at Carver included a group of

¹ *Valley Herald* (Chaska), December 21, 1871, May 14, 1885. Some of the material used in the present article was assembled in 1941, when the author made a study of the Germans in Minnesota under a grant-in-aid from the Social Science Research Council.

² The manuscript records of the Carver County Deutscher Leseverein consist of two volumes of minutes, dating from 1869 to 1907; an account book for the period from April, 1866, to 1932; a notebook containing the names of members with the call numbers of books they withdrew, and some clippings, obviously from the *Carver County Journal*, of which no file is available; and a volume in which are listed the names of members from 1921 to 1935. Notices published in contemporary newspapers have been used to supplement the material in the records. Unless otherwise specified, all data presented herein are based upon the society's records. The author is indebted to Mr. O. D. Sell, president of the Carver County Historical Society, for making the records available and for assisting in the compilation of a list of the books in the reading society's library. For a brief note on the organization's library and records, see *anse*, 23:294.

liberal freethinkers, many of whom were members of the local reading society.

There is some question about the date of the organization of the Carver County German Reading Society. A scarlet flag with gold embroidery that served as its emblem, and that is preserved with its records, bears the inscription "Carver County Deutscher Leseverein, founded in 1858, incorporated in 1865." Later the members themselves seemed uncertain whether to date their society back to 1865, when it was incorporated, or to 1866, when a constitution was adopted. The society probably functioned earlier, for its accounts show that it had need for a bookcase as early as 1866 and that in the same year it spent seventy dollars for books. The earliest records, however, are those for 1866.³

The constitution of 1866 was published in booklet form by the *Carver Free Press* in 1890, with a catalogue of the society's library. A committee appointed in 1877 to devise a new constitution was dismissed "because it was unable to report anything." The only change adopted before 1890 reduced the membership fee from forty cents a quarter to a dollar a year, in accordance with a resolution of 1887.

The aim of the Carver County Deutscher Leseverein, as defined in the constitution, was "to promote knowledge, morality, enlightenment and improvement of the mind," for which purpose "a library was procured," and "lectures, debates, and evening entertainments were to be arranged." The officers—a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer, and a librarian—were to be elected annually. The secretary, who was instructed to keep records of meetings and membership lists, to collect fees, and to conduct the society's correspondence, was freed from the payment of dues. The librarian was expected to keep a catalogue and supervise the withdrawal and return of books. The accounts reveal that he received eight dollars annually for his services. He does not seem to have kept regular

³ The society's twenty-fifth anniversary was marked on March 2, 1890, when Hermann Muehlberg, the owner and editor of the *Carver Free Press*, reported that it was formed in 1866. The fortieth anniversary was celebrated in 1906, and the forty-second in 1907. A program for the latter occasion bears the dates "1865-1907." The bookplate used by the society states that it was "Founded on February 24, 1866, incorporated on June 22, 1882."

office hours, and he probably served readers whenever they called and happened to find him at home.

The library was housed successively in the homes of members, in the office of the *Carver Free Press*, and after 1903 in the society's own building. Only members were allowed to borrow books. If they were kept out longer than four weeks, a penalty of not more than twenty-five cents was to be paid. A member who failed to pay dues for more than six months was to be dropped. Each member residing in Carver was required to attend six meetings a year; if he resided elsewhere, the number was four. New members had to be approved by a majority of two-thirds. Women over eighteen years of age could become members and borrow books, but they were not allowed to participate in meetings or business transactions. A meeting was to be held on the first Sunday of each month at 2:00 P.M. The order of business at meetings, as defined in the constitution of 1890, prescribed the following procedure: reading of the minutes and correspondence, reports of committees, examination of bills, decisions on membership, report by the librarian, payment of fees, presentation of financial accounts, consideration of business "zum Allgemeinen Besten," — that is, of a charitable nature — and adjournment.

The constitution was not always followed. Meetings were rare in the summer and fall, and for several years the only meeting was held in March. This general meeting, which usually was followed by a banquet and a ball, became a traditional feature of the society's activities until the organization was dissolved in 1935.

The attendance was even more irregular than the meetings. Twelve members signed the constitution in 1866; a list of May, 1872, names twenty-two; seventeen members were listed as "in good standing" in 1885, which meant that they had paid their dues. In 1904, a year after the society acquired its own building, the membership increased to thirty-two; there were forty-two members in 1927, and forty-seven about 1930. The number of those attending even the general meeting rarely reached ten during the first decades. This figure also increased after 1903; twenty-three members attended the March meeting of 1904. Even the officers sometimes failed to

appear; in December, 1886, only two members convened, and they adjourned after an hour. Members from outside Carver were few; one lived in Chaska and one in Shakopee. The latter was struck from the list in 1870, after he had kept books for many years. Visitors from Hopkins, Chaska, and Dahlgren attended the March meeting in 1918. By 1931, residents of Mankato, Hinckley, and Cologne had joined the society. The rule that every member should attend six meetings a year was never observed.

As irregular as the meetings was the payment of dues. In 1887 half of the members had not paid their fees; two years later one member owed \$6.80, which covered his fees for more than six years. Those attending meetings frequently asked the secretary to send notices to negligent members, reminding them of their obligations and of the next meeting. No serious attempt ever was made to limit readers to the four weeks allotted for a book. Had this been done, the librarian should have noted the dates of withdrawal, a practice that was followed only for a short time in the 1890's. In 1897 he complained that "several members kept their books for many years." Two years later 33 of the 414 volumes in the library were missing and 24 were out and could be traced. Missing books had to be struck from the library's list. The catalogue of 1890 lists 395 titles, but the call numbers run up to 517. No penalty seems to have been exacted at any time. In 1871, however, a member was asked to have six books that he had damaged rebound.

The names of new members always were proposed in accordance with the constitution and ballots were taken. All who were admitted before 1932 paid the entrance fee of \$2.50. Never was a voice raised against a regular or an honorary member. Seven of the latter were elected at various times, and all presented books to the society's library. Certain individuals doubtless were proposed for honorary membership because of the possibility that they would make donations.

Fritz Schütz, one of the reading society's honorary members, is typical of a certain group of German Americans in the later decades of the nineteenth century. He was born in 1833, the son of a Protestant minister in Baden, and he attended a university. Later he joined

the freethinkers' movement in Heidelberg. Because of difficulties with the authorities, he had to give up a position as a schoolteacher in 1866. After serving as speaker of a freethinkers' organization in Thuringia, he accepted a call from the freethinkers' society at Philadelphia in 1871. But Schütz preferred the uncertainty and freedom enjoyed by a traveling lecturer and free-lance writer of semiphilosophical tracts to any circumscribed activity. By 1882 he had given more than eight hundred lectures in a hundred and forty different American towns before some ninety Turner and thirty freethinkers' societies. With a Lutheran minister in Watertown, Wisconsin, he debated publicly on the state of the church; with a rabbi in St. Louis, on the existence of God; with communists in Milwaukee, on the free-soil question; and with a minister in Baltimore, on immortality.⁴

In 1876 the society invited Schütz to give a lecture for which he was paid fifteen dollars. A year later, when he decided "to settle with his family in a simple rural community where life was less disturbed and expensive and from where he could arrange his annual tours," he chose Carver, and there he became the first honorary member of the German Reading Society. It gave Schütz five dollars with which to buy children's books. The only children's party ever mentioned in the society's records was given at Christmas in 1878, and the proceeds went to the young people's library. Children who attended a Sunday school conducted by Schütz were allowed to use the books. In February, 1879, upon Schütz's suggestion, the society ordered twenty-five copies of Carl Dorfflinger's *Six Letters to a Pious Man* and a hundred copies of a booklet entitled *Anti-Syllabus*, antireligious pamphlets that could be purchased in quantities at a low price. It was decided that members should "distribute or possibly resell" them at their discretion. This was the only attempt made by the German Reading Society "to promote knowledge, morality and enlightenment" by distributing literature or teaching. Schütz died in needy circumstances in 1888. The reading society voted to send his widow fifty

⁴ Information on Schütz's career is to be found in the prefaces to his books — two volumes of *Das Heil der Völker* (Milwaukee, 1879, 1880), and *Unsterblichkeit* (Carver, Minnesota, 1882). These small and inexpensive volumes can be found in many a Turner library; the first two thousand copies of *Unsterblichkeit* ("Immortality") were sold in less than three months.

dollars, but a cautious member proposed the reconsideration of this generous decision, and it was not until fifteen months later that Mrs. Schütz was given twenty-five dollars.

Two other charitable acts are recorded in the society's history. In 1877, twelve dollars were collected for a sick member who does not seem to have been in need of the money, for it was returned to the treasury. At the death of another honorary member, Louis Sülter, a watchmaker, twenty dollars were contributed to the funeral expenses.

Among other radical freethinkers besides Schütz who spoke before the reading society was Michael Biron of Milwaukee. Theodor Hielscher, who spoke in 1871 on "Primitive German History before the Migration of Nations," had participated in the German revolution of 1848 and was a former editor of the radical Indianapolis *Freie Presse*, and of the *Freie Presse* of Minneapolis. In 1883 Franz Klepper lectured on "Gallilaea and Contemporaries." The usual stipend was ten dollars for a lecture. An attempt failed to sell enough tickets at fifty cents each to raise thirty dollars with which to pay a Chinese lecturer.

In its early years the society was interested in debating, and its members adopted a resolution to devote a special meeting on the second Sunday of every month to discussion. Such meetings, however, were never held. Among the topics for discussion proposed in 1875 were: "What is stronger, money or love?" "Is the Christian religion the mother of all human education and improvement?" and "Should a man sitting in a boat with his wife and mother throw the mother overboard if it should become necessary to dispose of one passenger?" Other literary associations in Carver County discussed, for example, the abolition of capital punishment and of prize-fighting, and the question whether the warrior or the statesman had done more for the United States.⁵ These themes were more closely related to American life than those selected by the German group. After the 1870's the interest in debate faded.

The men who joined the society in its first decades left Germany in the 1850's.⁶ They were craftsmen and merchants with literary

⁵ *Valley Herald*, December 21, 1871, February 12, 1891, March 1, 1894.

⁶ The names of eighteen of the twenty-six individuals who were members of the

tastes strongly influenced by the "Young Germany" group, of which Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne were the most famous representatives. These writers preferred to express themselves in the political essay. After the revolution of 1848 failed, many a lesser disciple of the group went into exile. On foreign soil they carried on by writing and lecturing their struggle for freedom, republicanism, and the rule of reason. These writers and their readers began as idealists and finished as foot-loose intellectuals. The high ambition to reform and to create a system of ethics not based on specific dogmas degenerated into controversies over politics and debates on ridiculous topics, examples of which are cited above. The books in the library of the German Reading Society show that these German immigrants remained faithful to the literary leaders of the Young Germany group, but that they nevertheless shared the popular taste of the public in the fatherland for the worthless fiction of the period.

The Carver County Reading Society's library might be divided into four sections. The first consists of the classics like Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe. Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos* was donated by a friend in Chicago with the biting, yet illuminating, inscription: "To the Carver County Deutscher Leseverein in the hope that light will be shed by this society into the priest-ridden darkness which rules mightily in Carver County." Complete editions of Heine, Börne, the radical and influential freethinker Ludwig Feuerbach, the works of the materialistic philosopher Ludwig Büchner, a German translation of Darwin, and the poems of Ferdinand Freiligrath, the German bard of freedom, constitute what might be called the left wing of this section of great and influential literature. The selection speaks for itself. The great romanticists, including poets like Joseph von Eichendorff, Eduard Mörike, Ludwig Uhland, Friedrich Rückert, and Franz Grillparzer, are absent. They are the same writers

reading society in 1869 and 1872 are to be found in the manuscript census schedules of 1870 and 1875. They were born in Prussia, Baden, Württemberg, Hessen, and Bavaria. Their ages and birthplaces and the ages of their children give an approximate idea of the dates when they left Germany. Their occupations include that of blacksmith, plasterer, brewer, potter, clerk, saloon and boardinghouse keeper, merchant, and watchmaker. Only one farmer is listed among them. Population schedules of the federal census of 1870 and of the state census of 1875 are in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.

whose works were neglected by the wide reading public in Germany after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The second and largest section in the Carver County library is made up of fiction. There are complete German editions of Eugène Sue, the French radical author of such enormously successful novels as *The Wandering Jew* and *The Mysteries of Paris*, and of Alexander Dumas, the elder. Represented by some of their works are Friedrich Spielhagen, whose novels are liberalistic and slightly sensational, although not so drastic as those of Sue; Karl van der Velde, whose historical novels often were compared with Scott's works by contemporaries; Heinrich Zschokke, whose stories were widely read in Germany and were rather entertaining and skillful; and Karl Spindler, who was the author of more than a hundred novels. Equally well represented are German writers of the lowest class of historical fiction. They presented as the essence of history court gossip and glamorous heroism sweetened by unlikely romances. Among them were quill drivers like Luise Mühlbach, who wrote more than two hundred volumes, Franz Carion, Friedrich Friedrich, and Julius Mühlfeld. Germany's most popular woman author, who was first adored by ladies and housemaids alike, and was later ridiculed, was also very popular with readers in Carver. This was Eugenie John, who wrote under the pseudonym of Marlitt. Occasionally a prosaist of better standing, like Paul Heyse, Julius Stinde, and Paul Höcker, is represented by one or two volumes. But on the whole the list is rather depressing. Members of the Carver County society evidently ordered and preferred to read books that were best sellers in the home country. Voluminous and sensational novels were most frequently withdrawn; next in demand was historical fiction. Occasionally a volume of Feuerbach or Heine was taken out; Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and Humboldt rested on the shelves.

The popularity of certain books was periodical; members probably recommended to each other books that they found interesting, and newly acquired books sometimes enjoyed a short popularity.⁷

⁷ The call numbers that accompany titles in the manuscript volume listing withdrawals cannot always be deciphered because they were crossed out when a book was returned. Such as can be read, however, give the distinct impression of uniform preference for certain types of books.

It would be futile to blame the members of the reading society for wide and uncritical reading, and for a weakness for insignificant fiction that is characteristic of reading publics in general. Like other readers of their time, they were attracted by fiction of a particularly low type—fiction that did not even have the advantage of cheapness, like the dime novels of the present. Their only antidote for this literary diet was the reading of political essays published by liberals and radicals in the United States. Prose literature that lasted, like that of Gottfried Keller, Theodor Storm, and Joseph Anzengruber, was at least available, if not widely read in Germany; but the readers in Carver probably did not even know of these writers.

A third section consists of the literary productions of German Americans. These somewhat incongruous works were not read as frequently as was fiction imported from Germany. Among the authors represented are Samuel Ludvigh, a radical atheist who for more than a quarter of a century was the editor of a periodical known as *Die Fackel*; Friedrich Schünemann-Pott, editor of the *Freisinnige religiöse Blätter*; Biron; and Schütz.⁸ A complete set of eleven volumes of Alexander Schem's *German-American Dictionary* is included. There are novels by German-American prosaists, such as Otto Ruppis and Max Arlberg, whose style became progressively worse with the length of their absence from the fatherland. These works are interesting today for their criticism of the American environment. The German immigrant usually is depicted struggling to preserve his language, his social tastes, and his civic virtues. Small books of poetry by Casper Butz, Gottfried Kinkel, and other German Americans, and a file of the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Monatshefte*, a short-lived but exceedingly interesting journal of high quality published in Chicago in the 1860's, also are found in this collection. Among other works by German Americans are Rudolf Cronau's book on America, which was purchased for eight dollars, and Gustav Struve's *World History*, which probably was chosen because the author was a leading revolutionist of 1848. A predilection for historical

⁸ Ludvigh and his publication draw the attention of Albert Post in his recently published volume on *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850*, 73, 74 (New York, 1943).

themes is noticeable throughout the collection, but wherever possible history as rendered by politicians, radical theorists, or sensation-minded scribes was preferred.⁹ Very light fiction was made available by adding series of novels published in the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Familienblätter*.

A fourth group of books in the Carver County library is made up of works written in English. Only three English titles are found in the catalogue of 1890. Eight years later a member proposed the purchase of an English edition of Fridtjof Nansen's "Northpole Beschreibung." The mixed wording of this proposal indicates that the member was experiencing a mental transition from German to English. In 1904 thirty-two volumes of *The Makers of History* were purchased, and new labels printed in English were ordered. At the same time non-German names begin to appear on the membership lists.

The number of books in circulation dwindled more and more. In 1886 two hundred books, the largest number ever mentioned, were withdrawn. In 1904 the librarian reported sixty-one withdrawals; in 1905, forty-one. Between 1910 and 1912 thirty-two call numbers are listed beside six names; two of the individuals noted had taken out eleven volumes each. The old group of eager readers was slowly dying off. On one occasion a member borrowed and returned after three weeks the six volumes of Sue's *Wandering Jew*, and then he withdrew the *Mysteries of Paris* and the *Count of Monte Christo*. Another borrowed five volumes of Heine in January, 1896, three days after he withdrew the first book in the set. Within the next two months the same member read a three-volume novel about the Emperor Joseph, the four volumes of Sue's novel entitled *The Mysteries of the People*, a four-volume novel about Napoleon, and a book about Franz Sforza. Incidentally, this arduous reader was the poorest speller who ever served the society as secretary. Even the mediocre literature with which he attempted "to improve his mind" cannot excuse the incredible orthography of his minutes.

⁹ The writer's belief that the Carver County library was typical of German-American libraries is confirmed by Jacob Lucas in an interesting article on "Die Vereinsbibliotheken," appearing in the *Amerikanischer Turnerkalender*, 1892, p. 78-92. Lucas expressed regret because the German classics in the libraries of German societies were neglected. While the membership of the Turner societies doubled and great halls were built, idealism and education were neglected.

While the literary interest of the members faded, the society flourished socially and financially. Evening entertainments in which the women participated had long been purely social in character, with six o'clock dinners or midnight suppers, accompanied by beer, music, and dancing. Picnics and Fourth of July celebrations staged by the society doubtless were sometimes noisy, for the expense accounts include fifty dollars for a band from Shakopee and three and a half dollars for the repair of a cannon. In 1881 the society began to make loans of fifty dollars at eight per cent. By 1900 its capital had increased to over four hundred dollars. After its lot and building were purchased and beautified, the society was in debt to the extent of five hundred dollars, according to a newspaper clipping of March 3, 1912. A funeral fund was created in 1900; from it twenty-five dollars could be paid to the family of a deceased member. In 1918 the *Carver County Journal* published a notice with a headline that has a familiar ring to modern ears: "German Society to Buy Bonds." The paper reported that "all available cash was used to purchase liberty bonds," but the society's accounts show that the sum of fifty dollars was spent for a bond, and that about forty-seven dollars remained in the treasury.

A year later the society resolved to transact all its business in English. At about the same time its officers became careless in keeping its accounts; notes representing its capital were overdue, and most of them were never redeemed. Business meetings were held less frequently than in earlier years, and they were shorter. If a librarian was named, his services were seldom available to members. The old members were passing away and their children were not interested in German literature. Many non-Germans joined what now was a club staging banquets, fish fries, and picnics. Although on paper the membership was larger in 1931 than ever before, the society was almost disintegrated. It dissolved in 1935.¹⁰

The German Reading Society had run its course. Its efforts, made by a generation of high-minded and conscientious men, were honest and persistent through many years. Those who look back upon the

¹⁰ For some helpful information about the society's last years, the writer is indebted to Mr. M. J. Aretz of St. Paul, a former member.

history of this pioneer organization may wish that its members had displayed better literary taste, or at least that they had selected books reflecting more than one school of thought. It must be remembered, however, that the members of the Carver County German Reading Society were not anxious to assemble a varied or representative German library, but to build one that was best fitted to "promote knowledge, morality, and improvement of the mind" as they understood these terms. Public spirited as they were, they also were nonconformists. They tended to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage while passing through the process of Americanization. The history of the German Reading Society at Carver reflects the mental processes that the members of one group of German immigrants experienced before they or their children could adjust to new cultural surroundings.



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