

The Story of Turner Hall

Turner Hall, at the corner of Rhode Island and Ninth Streets in Lawrence may symbolize the legacy of German immigration in the Midwest during the nineteenth century. It also represents an enticing challenge as a preservation project. Its attractive facade retains most of its original features, including the prominent sign—in German Gothic script—Turnhalle. Above the doorway 1868 carved into a stone marks the completion of limestone building. In her 1993 thesis about the Germans of Lawrence, Katja Rampelmann summarized its history. She pointed out that, in addition to serving as a community meeting place and library, the hall offered plays, choir and band concerts, gymnastics, and dance classes, club activities for men and women, and special celebrations. Recent discussions initiated by Peter Zacharias have raised the question whether Turner Hall could again serve as a community center and whether, after renovation, it could display the history of the German community in Lawrence. Such discussions are not entirely new; in 1981, while a student at the University of Kansas Law School, Brent Wyatt wrote about Turner Hall. With his permission we printing an excerpt from a paper that he presented in Professor Paul Wilson’s seminar on preservation law.

The *Turnverein* was a men’s gymnastic and social club organized by several of the first German settlers in Lawrence. It was one of many established by German immigrants throughout the United States in the middle and late nineteenth century. The *Turner* movement in Germany was originally political. It was founded in 1811 by a Protestant minister, Friedrich Jahn, who sought to provide a basis for German unity after the Napoleonic partitioning of Germany. The societies were ostensibly created to foster sound German bodies and liberal German minds, but they also served as a cover for those who were united in opposition to the monarchies of geographical Germany that kept the German nation divided. During the revolutions of 1848 in the German states many *Turnverein* members fought against the Prussian and Hanover armies for the overthrow of the monarchies. They were defeated, and at least fifty thousand Germans were forced to leave Germany for America. These and those who followed formed *Turnvereine* in many American cities. By the 1870s the clubs in America were officially depoliticized. The Lawrence *Turnverein* was by all accounts never really a political organization. The first members of the Lawrence *Turnverein* formed the club as an organization for the promotion of good health, fellowship and entertainment in the Lawrence German-American community. One of the prerequisites of membership was that each prospective member apply for American citizenship. The *Verein* was first organized in 1857. The first meeting place was a large wooden hall at the corner of Berkeley (now Tenth) and New York streets. In 1862 all but four members enlisted in the Union Army, and the club was disbanded. After the war, the society was reorganized on January 1, 1866.

The Lawrence *Turnverein* was granted its first state charter on January 7, 1869. During the summer of that year the members built the present stone structure at a cost of \$5,000. The stone portion of the building measures forty by sixty feet. In either 1872 or 1882 a wooden frame twenty-five by fifty feet was added. In 1908 the society acquired a brick house to the south of the hall. A son of one of the members recalls that the beer deliverer and “manager” lived in this house. At around the time of the hall’s construction, the *Turnverein* also acquired an area of eight blocks behind the *Turnhalle* on Delaware Street, and made it into a beer garden. The first floor of the building consisted of a fully equipped gymnasium where gymnastic classes and competitions were held. Originally these were for men only, but later there were classes for girls, as well as for the wives of the members.

The *Turners* had their own system of calisthenics. At the west end of the gymnasium floor a balcony, which held the spectators at the gymnastic competitions still stands. At the east end of the floor is a stage, which was used for dramatic presentations in German. In the basement there was a long bar and a beer cooler. Here the male members drank beer and played cards. Within twenty years of the hall's construction the basement had become a social center for the German community in Lawrence. Most Germans who settled in Lawrence built houses in the eastern portion of town, between Sixth and Eighteenth Streets. One source recalls the congenial atmosphere of the basement of Turner Hall:

A long bar extending on the north wall dispensed beer on tap for adults and soda pop for children. You could also buy sandwiches. No hard liquor was served. Walnut card tables had slots under the tops for beersteins, while you sat in captains chairs and played pinochle or skat or other card games. Two bowling alleys were in use most of the time and children were allowed to use them too. The children set up their own pins. A door near the east end of the bar led out to the beer garden in back. In warm weather this was a popular spot. It was lighted at night and there was a fence that enclosed it from the public. Sometimes a group of youngsters would go to the 'Nickel' picture show in the 700 block of Massachusetts and after the show would walk down to the Hall to join their parents. They would come through the gate of the beer garden and knock on the window for the bartender to let them in . . .

Another source remembers that the bartender, "Fritz", kept the chips for playing pinochle behind the bar. They could be purchased for five cents. Chips could be redeemed only in chips. No gambling was allowed. At one point during this period it was reported that Carry Nation was planning a bar-smashing visit to Lawrence. The members of the *Turnverein* planned to have the bartender drench her with the full force of a garden hose attached near the bar. When Nation actually came to Lawrence, she did not visit Turner Hall. In 1880 a prohibition amendment to the state constitution was introduced in Kansas. In spite of this new law, the *Turnverein* maintained its beer bar throughout the period of its greatest popularity which lasted until the First World War. Membership peaked around 1880. Turner Hall was recognized by the entire Lawrence community as a desirable gathering place for fellowship and entertainment. Dances and even weddings were held in the hall. Local artisans provided the scenery for theatrical presentations. Buch's Orchestra, a local group formed by a German who taught at Haskell, played for many of the dances. Before he formed the orchestra, Buch had organized Buch's Military Band in 1878. The group originally consisted of ten members, all of whom were Germans and some of whom were *Turnverein* members. A contemporary recalls that elaborate costumes were made by the local dressmakers for the masquerade balls. The most festive celebrations were held at the *Turnverein* hall during the Christmas season:

The annual Christmas tree party stands out. Tickets were sold for twenty-five cents for a present from the tree. The gifts were donated by the merchants. Your ticket bore a number to be matched with one on the tree. A tree reaching to near the top of the ceiling was on the floor close to the stage. While "Tannenbaum" was being sung, Santa would appear in an opening in the ceiling above the stage and come down hand over hand on a rope to dispense more gifts from the tree. It was no chore for Santa to come down in that fashion. All the men were experienced gymnasts.

There were also *Sylvesterabend* celebrations on New Year's Eve, as was traditional in parts of Germany. The night reporter for the Republican Daily Journal was invited to these festivities in 1880 and 1881. In November of 1880 the daughter of a non-German Lawrence merchant was married in Turner Hall at what was reported to be the "most numerous attended wedding that ever occurred in this city." Wedding anniversaries were also celebrated at the hall. Turner Hall was more than a mere entertainment center. With the arrival of German immigrants, the hall became an employment center, as well: "Every Saturday, one would find many newcomers from the Fatherland on the steps of the Hall waiting for people to come and offer them jobs. 1921 Many of the *Turnverein* members

were prosperous merchants well equipped to help the immigrants find their first jobs in the community.

The *Turnverein* charged a membership fee of four dollars and an entrance fee, as well. These fees guaranteed that if a member became ill, three dollars would be paid to the family per week for the duration of the illness. The fees also helped to maintain a small German library in the basement. Turner Hall was not the only building with German character in the neighborhood. In 1872 a German Episcopal Methodist church was built of brick and stone on the site of the first meeting place of the *Turnverein* at the corner of Berkeley and New York streets. The congregation had been meeting in Lawrence since 1858. Several members were apparently members of the *Turnverein*, as well. Services were first conducted in German and then in German and English from around 1900 until the First World War. The church apparently provided the money to buy the wooden hall where the *Turnverein* first met. The *Frauen-verein* (women's club) organized in 1895 in this church, was affiliated with the *Turnverein* and probably held meetings and functions in Turner Hall. Significantly, in 1918 the German Methodist Episcopal Church stopped meeting in Lawrence and sold its building. The local German language newspaper, *Die Germania*, which had been printed in Lawrence since at least 1877, ceased to be printed in 1918. Anti-German sentiment was prevalent in Lawrence during the First World War. When a prominent Lawrence German-American, William Weidemann, owner of the popular Weidemann's candy and ice cream store, committed suicide, the members of the *Turnverein* decided that these anti-German pressures had become so great that the organization would disband. Gymnastics classes, which had once been mandatory for members between the ages of eighteen and thirty were no longer held because most of the young men were away in the war. The building was closed. After the war the organization began to function again, but from 1918 no new members were accepted. Turner Hall's day as an integral part of a distinct German community in Lawrence was over.

Some of the *Turnverein*'s gymnastic equipment was donated to the local junior high school in the 1930s. The rest of the equipment was given to what had been St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, which met at Thirteenth and New Hampshire streets and which was the only other German language church in Lawrence. In 1936 the *Turnverein* leased Turner Hall to the Rumsey Vehicle Company and retained only a small meeting room in the basement. In April 1938 A. W. Perger, secretary of the *Turnverein*, announced that the society was selling the building to Philip Ernst, who owned a local hardware store. The Rumsey Vehicle Company manufactured toys in the building until the fall of 1938. In September 1938 it was announced that the board of county commissioners had rented the building from Ernst for thirty- five dollars per month beginning October 1. Turner Hall became the center of distribution by Douglas County of federal surplus commodities to relief clients. County WPA and NYA projects were also administered from Turner Hall. The first floor was used as a warehouse and distribution center for the food and clothing commodities, The basement was used as the headquarters for WPA recreational projects. The next tenant to occupy Turner Hall was the State of Kansas. The state used the hall as a national guard armory until the new armory was built. From this time until 1965 the Salvation Army maintained an outlet store in Turner Hall. In 1965, Audio House, a local recording company, rented the hall.