

# Sport, Ethnicity And Collective Experience In The San Francisco Bay Area: 1850-1900

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In recent years scholars from several disciplines have turned their attention to the study of the collective experiences of various national, social, and ethnic groups in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Agnew, Mercer and Sopher (**The City in Cultural Context, 1984**), for example, reject the notion that urbanization proceeded uniformly and call for more attention to the cultural contexts in which local events occurred. Rader ("The Quest for Subcommunities and the Rise of American Sport," 1977) observed that historians should devote more attention to the ways in which recreative and sporting activities facilitated the establishment and identification of various "sub"-communities in 19th century America, identifying two types: **status** and **ethnic**. Fortunately, not all historical investigations have ignored American fraternal, associative, social, and sporting organizations. As early as 1959 Handlin remarked upon the roles which were performed by various benevolent societies, militia companies, fraternal organizations, and groups like the **Turnverein** and Caledonian Clubs. And more recently, authors have noted the various leisure-time activities of the San Francisco Irish from 1848 to 1880 (Burchell, 1980) and discussed the sports of various ethnic groups in the Boston area from 1865 to 1915 (Hardy, 1982).

The present paper, which is part of a larger investigation of the recreative and sporting pursuits of the inhabitants of California, focuses upon the German-speaking population of the greater San Francisco Bay Area in the period from 1850 to 1900. German-speaking immigrants began to arrive in San Francisco in substantial numbers shortly after the discovery of gold in 1848. While many came from eastern and mid-eastern cities and towns, a very large percentage arrived directly from Europe. By the 1890s the German population was third only to native-born Americans and the large Irish population: And in the number and diversity of social, fraternal, cultural, and sporting associations, the Germans were first of all of the city's multitude of ethnic groups. In 1901, 79 German social, literary, singing, shooting, and gymnastics societies existed. The San Francisco Turnverein was founded on August 14, 1852 almost a year and a half before the founding of the Allgemeine Beutsche Unterstuzungs-Gesellschaft (German Benevolent Society). German entrepreneurs provided San Franciscans with some of the area's major places of diversion and recreation, such as saloons which featured billiard tournaments, local resorts which offered food, beer, dancing, bowling, target shooting, and gymnastic exhibitions, and frequent excursions to Schutzenfests (which also routinely included convivial drinking, eating, and dancing). The San Francisco Schutzenverein (the oldest of the city's several German shooting clubs) was founded in 1859. By the 1890s several other Turnverein had been established, and there were Tumschwemvereine (ladies gymnastic societies) in San Francisco and Oakland. Arthur and Charles Nahl were instrumental in the founding of the San Francisco Olympic Club, and in 1863 they dedicated **Instructions in Gymnastics**, illustrated with 53 plates, to the Club.

As did others of the Bay Area's ethnic groups, the German population used both its own celebrations (e.g. Maifests) and national holidays like the 4th of July to demonstrate to the

broader society both its cultural uniqueness and its dedication to the goals of the national union. Many non-German contemporaries spoke with approbation of the various German events and festivals which they often attended, and it is argued that these sporting and recreative activities did much to help the German-speaking population become assimilated into the broader society at the same time as they helped it maintain some sense of cultural uniqueness in the half century between 1850 and 1900.