

Bowled Over: The Texas Turnvereins Quit Gymnastics

MARY LOU LeCOMPTE

The University of Texas at Austin

German-American turnvereins (gymnastics clubs) were established in Texas as early as 1851, and five were active before the Civil War: Galveston, San Antonio, Houston, New Braunfels, and Comfort. Despite hardships, especially on the frontier, all of these organizations built turnhalls (gymnasiums) and met regularly to practice gymnastics as well as to perform a variety of community services.

Contrary to popular belief, Texas turners (turnverein members) held diverse opinions on the issues of abolition and secession. Many followed the advice of New Braunfels Turnverein founder Ferdinand Lindheimer, and remained neutral. However, most San Antonio turners shared the abolitionist sentiments of their founder, Adolf Douai, while many members of the Comfort Turnverein were among the Unionists slaughtered by Confederate troops at the Battle of the Nueces. Conversely, both the Houston and Galveston turnvereins had withdrawn from the national turnerbund (federation) in protest over its 1855 abolitionist platform, and a majority of Houston turners volunteered for the Confederate Army immediately after Texas seceded.

Following the war, the turner movement in Texas grew rapidly, as many new Germans arrived, mostly from other parts of the United States. Despite this growth, continuing efforts from 1871- 1878 to establish a state turnerbund affiliated with the national bund, and to hold annual state turnfests (gymnastics meets) attended by all Texas turnvereins, failed. Consequently, turnverein gymnastics began to decline in popularity. Without the sport which had given them their name and their original reason d'etre, most Texas turnvereins had ceased to exist by the turn of the century.

While continuing frontier hardships and poor transportation surely contributed to the failure of the bund, and hence of turnverein gymnastics, there were other causes as well. Foremost among these was the continuing animosity which remained from the Civil War differences between the Hill Country clubs and those on the coastal plain. The Freie Presse fur Texas, a San Antonio publication which covered the affairs of the state bund as well as the local turnverein, mentioned several times this reason for the absence of the Houston and Galveston clubs from the state festivals.

Of course, some of the turnvereins did survive the demise of gymnastics, primarily by changing the focus of their athletic programs to another traditionally German sport, bowling. Beginning in the late 1870s, ninepins became a popular attraction at the Austin and San Antonio turnvereins, as well as in most German-Texas organizations in the hill country. In 1894, the Galveston Turnverein Ten Pin Club was organized, and in 1899, bowlers from the Houston Turnverein and several neighboring clubs formed the Texas Stated Cocked Hat League. The state tournament for this unique game in which only three pins are used, was a major social and athletic event for as many as four hundred bowlers annually between 1904 and 1918.

In 1915, tenpin bowlers from the Houston Turnverein, along with representatives from LaGrange and Brenham, organized the Texas Tenpin League. This organization, which now includes the turnvereins of Houston, Boeme, and San Antonio, attracts over seven

thousand bowlers to the annual state tournament. Although tenpins is now the dominant form of bowling throughout the world, the turnvereins of Fredericksburg and San Antonio, along with a dozen or more private bowling clubs in Bexar and surrounding counties, keep tradition alive, maintaining the only ninepin leagues in the United States.

For five of the surviving Texas turnvereins, bowling did succeed where gymnastics failed, leading them to affiliate with state and national organizations and to participate in regional and state events with other clubs. Members of all ages are thus able to maintain their cultural identity and perpetuate their heritage while also participating in recreational activities with the larger society.



Marvin Eyler visiting with Dennis Brailsford and his wife.