

Turners in Iowa: Promoters of Fitness and Shapers of Culture

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The German emigres who settled in Iowa in the 1840s and 1850s included several who had been leaders in the Turnverein in Schleswig-Holstein region of Germany. They were only slightly less eager to re-establish their gymnastics society than they were to build a home or start a business. The presence, at one time or another, of at least twenty-eight Turnvereins in Iowa testifies to the importance of that movement from 1852 to 1890.

Most of the males had left their fatherland because of disagreement with political leaders. Thus, from the founding of the first turner group in Davenport in 1852 there was a close association between the practice of gymnastics and involvement in the political and cultural community activities.

Initially, along the Mississippi and later in the interior of the state as the societies were founded they sponsored "turning" classes for males, regional turnfests, singing groups, lectures, and debates. They were outspoken proponents of the end of slavery and quickly responded to the call to arms in the Civil War.

Females became regular participants in the turner groups in the 1870s. Many of the turner debates focused on the status of women - particularly the right to vote. The concerted effort of the German turners was directed toward enhancing the physical and intellectual capacity of all individuals. Toward that end they were instrumental in the introduction of physical education in the schools in 1886 and the first and later teachers were German turners.