



Many conference attendees hiked the Grand Canyon

## The German-American Turnfest: America's Oldest Sport Festival

Robert Knight Barney

The University of Western Ontario

Few people in contemporary times would argue contrary to the point that the so-called sport festival has become an indelible cultural value in the modern world. Well known are such modern international sport festivals as the Olympic Games, European Spartakiads, the World Cup, and so on. Both grand and enduring, the models for their origins can be traced to celebrations unique to specific cultural sporting interests noted in many of the world's individual nations. Thus, investigations of national-type sport festivals are relevant in trying to understand the nature and consequence of modern international sport extravaganzas.

With respect to American sport history, baseball's world series and football's bowl game festivals date scarcely to the early years of the present century. Of older vintage are the horseracing spectacles composing the Triple Crown, none of which evolved before the late 1860s. Extending further into the more antiquated recesses of American sport, one can note the origin and evolution of festivals unique to specific immigrant groups. An example of this nature is the Scottish-American Caledonian Games Festival, the first national-type event of which occurred in the early 1860s.

It will come of surprise to many that the oldest surviving national-type sport festival in the United States is one that has featured for almost a century and a half the athletic exercises of German-Americans, specifically, German-American Turners. The historic inaugural of national turnfest tradition occurred in 1851 in Philadelphia. Since that date the legacy of national turnfest celebration has continued uninterrupted, originally on an annual basis, later in biannual fashion and since 1881, in quadrennial circumstance. National Turnfests, attended by thousands of participants and spectators, were and are expressions of German cultural ethnicity focussing on several distinct dimensions-celebration of ritual, commemoration of the past, reinforcement of ideals, generation of social intercourse and, of course, display of physical exercise and athletic sport excellence.

This work substantiates the origin and evolution of the national German-American turnfests based on a study of primary sources (minutes of the National Turnverein, 1850). Further, the work attempts to analyze the factors underlying the significant rise of the festival in the 19th century, as well as to identify those factors related to the great festival's gradual decline here in the 20th century.