

The Missing Half: The Experience of German-American Women in the Indianapolis Athenaeum Turnverein, 1870-1920

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During the past decade, historians have devoted increasing attention to the sport experience of women. The recent scholarship has begun to map out the development of women's sporting practices and attitudes and to explicate their meanings. The field of women's sport history has been limited in part by its narrow focus on the upper and middle-class native-born population. There is a need to redress this imbalance to include, for example, working class women, women of color, and immigrant women. Clearly, such an expansive approach will make possible a more comprehensive picture and facilitate more accurate generalizations relevant to women, sport and history.

This study takes an initial step toward the development of a broader base of understanding about women and sport in a historical context. It examines the nature and meanings of the sport experience that German-American turnverein women shared in Indianapolis. This study indicates that their sport involvement provided them with an important means through which they defined and established themselves within their immigrant community. In explicating this thesis, the research explores how Turner women integrated their German heritage with the culture of their new home; how they reconciled their liberating behaviors as women's club members with the patriarchal values of the environment in which they lived; and, how their role as sportswomen coalesced with their involvement in health and educational reform, women's suffrage advocacy and charitable work.

Although the Turners played a central role in the German-American community, early literature reveals a largely descriptive and monolithic approach to the subject, highlighting the role of the exceptional male members in the political events of the period. More recent scholarship has established a revitalized and revisionist body of work on the Turners, which indicates that these groups each created a unique cultural ambience. The newer works debunk the universality thesis of the American Turners, and indicate that the experience of each turnverein depended to a great extent on the political, economic, and social peculiarities of the region in which each is located.

Despite this innovative research, no one has looked at the women involved in the German-American turnvereine. Analysis of the literature reveals a tantalizing scarcity of virtually any mention of women in these groups; what mention there is refers to them obliquely, implying that women were only peripherally involved in the turnvereine. However, the experiences of the women of the Indianapolis Athenaeum Turnverein Women's Auxiliary show that they concerned themselves with significant social, political, economic, and most dramatically, educational issues beginning as early as 1851, and continue to do so almost a century and a half later.