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The Dilemma between Americanization and Tradition: The American Turners in the 1990s

In 1998 the first American Turner societies celebrated their 150th anniversary, and in 1999 the 50th national *turnfest* was organized in St. Louis. Today they are about 60 societies with approximately 13,000 members left that belong to the umbrella organization American Turners. For over 150 years the German-American *turnvereine* have been part of the American sports world. The Turners were among the first to introduce physical education to American schools, and they founded the second institution in the United States in which physical education teachers were trained. Currently, the American Turners are members in the American sport federations, USA Gymnastics and USA Volleyball. This paper presents an insight into today's Turner societies, and the final question examined deals with the future of the American Turner societies.

The presentation is based on a study done in 1997/98, and concentrates on the following aspects: structural characteristics of the societies (such as size, age, location, and offers), membership structure (sex, age, education, profession, and reasons for joining

the society), ethnic background of the *turnverein* members and the societies' and members relation to German culture. The information is drawn from the 1997 and 1999 directories and statistical reports of the American Turners which give information on its districts and societies, and interviews with Turners as well as visits to societies. Because there were no other data on the societies or their members available two questionnaires were developed to receive further insight into the associational life.

The empirical study showed that the typical American Turner society does not exist. Each association presents an individual picture, resulting from the wide range of membership numbers and the services they provide. Besides the athletic program the social get-together dominates the associational life. Political discussions and the spread of German culture have lost their significance in most societies. Through the shift of the offers since the nineteenth century and the ethnically mixed membership in many *turnvereins*, a discrepancy between Americanization and tradition can be noticed today. This can be seen, on the one hand, by their bondage to certain traditions and Turner symbols of German heritage and identity. In contrast, these discrepancies are also evident in their adoption of American values and adaptation to the American society.

The heterogeneous ethnic background of their members proves that the former German-American societies have grown into multiethnic societies, with members from different European immigrant groups. Because of this heterogeneity it is not possible to make general statements about these Turner societies that were categorized in ethnic, social, social-athletic or purely athletic societies.
