

Their Destiny Dictated: German-American Turnvereins and Socio- Politico-Economic Realities in the Deep South During the Antebellum and Civil War Periods - A Case Study of New Orleans, Louisiana Turners

ROBERT KNIGHT BARNEY

The University of Western Ontario

During the Antebellum Period German Turners and Turnvereins in the United States were confronted with the dilemmas and issues that eventually gave rise to the American Civil War. Conventional wisdom was held that German-American Turner moral and political thought and action were universally in accord with Northern principles; namely: (1) the abolition of slavery, and (2) preservation of the Union of the United States of America. Further, conventional wisdom has held that German-American Turners: (1) gave universal support to the Republican Party and its presidential candidate in the 1860 election, Abraham Lincoln, and (2) unanimously extended turnverein gymnastics training to military service in the Union Army during the Civil War campaigns. The conventional wisdom noted above evolved partly from studies by historians of Turners and Turnvereins in the Northern United States during the Antebellum and Civil War Periods, and partly because German historians themselves, wished to present and preserve an historical legacy of uniform purpose and solidarity relative to Turnverein thought and deed in American politics and education. In effect, what was held to be fact for the North, was purported to be true, as well, for Turners and Turnvereins everywhere in America, including the South. A study of Turners and Turnvereins in the American South, especially in the Deep South, during the Antebellum and Civil War Periods provides evidence for a direct challenge to be made to the "conventional wisdom theory."

This study brought to light the fact that the Deep South in the Antebellum and Civil War Periods was clearly not a region in which the counsels of moderation and tolerance prevailed. And, this was decidedly true in the case of German Turners and Turnvereins on the issues of slavery, presidential politics, and military service. Despite the fact that the National Turnerbund called for Turner solidarity on such issues, irrespective of regional circumstance, and, as well, that history has reported that such solidarity was indeed manifested among Turners and Turnvereins, the hard fact of the matter is that the socio-politico-economic atmosphere of the Deep South allowed for no difference of opinion

nor action not in accord with Southern principle. Thus, Turners and Turnvereins in the Deep South moved towards compromise with the existing environment. Personal and family social and economic security were weighed against retention of basic Turner creed and espousal of National Turner dictum. As is evident, the former prevailed. Turners in the Deep South separated themselves from a so-called "national spirit" and pursued a different course, one which was averse to that of their northern brethren. Turnereine in the Deep South seceded from the National Bund by 1858. Turners did not support Abraham Lincoln at Southern voting polls. Turners formed entire Turner Companies, or joined other German military units in the Army of the Confederacy and fought for the Southern cause in the Civil War. And, with distinction, it might be added.

Germans and Turners in New Orleans and the Deep South had positive reason to adopt the stance they did. Home and businesses had been established. New roots planted firmly. Children born and raised with an awareness of their "Southern Americanism." In effect, a future exacted. These were all tangibles worth sacrifice, indeed, even bearing arms to defend. The record demonstrates that most Germans in the South, including New Orleans Turners, did just that - sacrificed and defended. That fact will probably give offense to some. Surprises often do not give joy if they disturb long held and cherished conceptions.