

(Personal collection of William Sengler)

The German-Americans in Grand Rapids, Michigan: An Historical Survey *by Wilhelm Seeger*

Though often perceived as an overwhelmingly Dutch region by the rest of the state, Grand Rapids contains a far more diverse set of immigrants than commonly understood. In the present-day these include the Polish, Lithuanians, Bosnians, Vietnamese, Mexicans, and other groups from around the world. Active in the community for decades and the leading scholar of the German-American experience in West Michigan, Wilhelm Seeger leads us through the history of this remarkable group.

*Immanuel Lutheran Church, se corner of E Division
and E Bridge (Michigan Street).*

The City of Grand Rapids, Michigan, later known as the Furniture Capital of the World began as a small trading post on the banks of the Grand River, established by Louis Campau, a Detroiter of French heritage. On March 7, 1834, the township of Kent was organized, and on February 16, 1842, the name of the township was changed to Grand Rapids. It was from this township, and that of Walker, incorporated December 30, 1837, that the village, and later the city of Grand Rapids evolved.¹ The village was incorporated by legislative act on April 5, 1838, and for the next twelve years there was a steady growth in population.² In 1850 a city charter was adopted and the village became a city.³ Ethnically, Grand Rapids today is thought to have a population that is made up of people largely of Netherlandic (Dutch) and Polish extraction, as far as its white population is concerned. The German-American element of the population has been assimilated to such a degree that one rarely thinks of Grand Rapids as having a German-American component. But this was not always the case. Although the German-American population was never as large as the Dutch, it was at one time of significant size and played an important role in the life of the city.

Building a New Community

The majority of the early settlers in and around Grand Rapids came from New England, New York and Ohio. Of the foreign-born inhabitants in those early years there were a few Irish laborers and some Frenchmen, but the larger number of immigrants would arrive later. "Hollanders" – as they were called locally – began arriving in the middle 1840s. Immigration from Ireland, which had been a factor in the area from the beginning, increased as well during the latter 1840s.

German immigrants began arriving in the area before 1840. Some of the earliest German settlers were Roman Catholic farmers from Westphalia, Germany. Arriving in 1836, they established the town of Westphalia in Clinton County.

During the "hard winter" of 1842-43, some of these pioneers moved to the Grand Rapids area, where they settled in and around the city.⁴

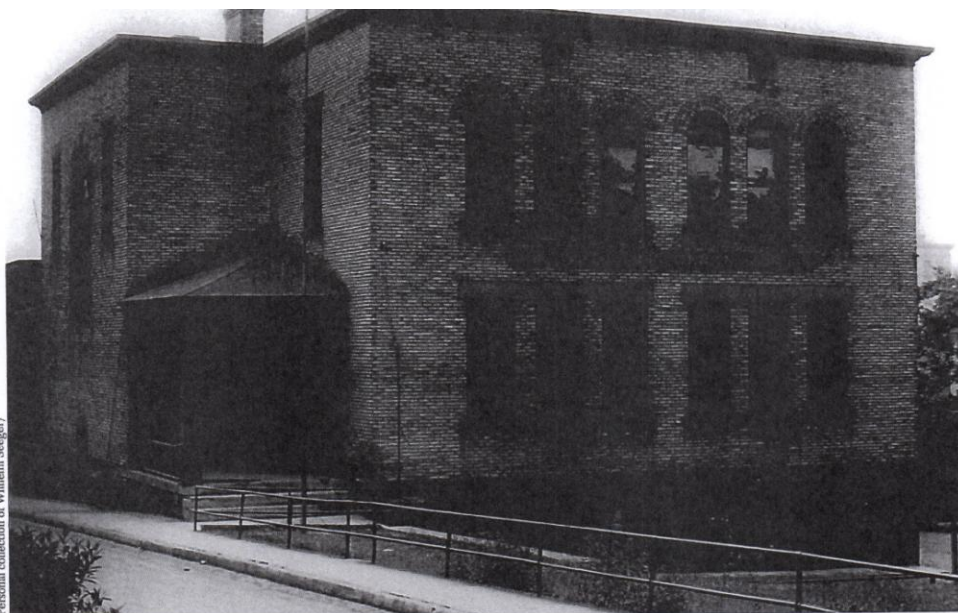
The 1850 census of the city of Grand Rapids lists some 87 citizens of German or Austrian birth. While there is doubt as to the accuracy of the information contained in the census – if the spelling of German names is any indication – it is interesting to note the various occupations of the adult male members of German-American households. Among those listed by the census taker are: seven laborers,

six shoemakers, four blacksmiths, three grocers, and two each of cigar makers, engineers, cabinetmakers, brewers, carpenters, tailors, and moulders. The list also includes a weaver and a doctor of medicine.⁵

The outbreak of hostilities in the War of the Rebellion, as the Civil War was then called, put an end to any large migration of Germans to Kent County or Grand Rapids.⁶ In 1861, the Grand Rapids Rifles, a militia unit, went into the Union Army as Company C of the Third Michigan Infantry Regiment, led by its captain and lieutenant with the unlikely



(Figure 1) Immanuel Lutheran Church – interior, German inscription.



(Figure 2) Immanuel Lutheran Church – school, east side.

names of Adolph Birkenstock and Max von Kraut. The regiment became a part of the Army of the Potomac, where it was involved in many of the major battles of the Civil War.⁷

(Figure 1)

With the end of the war, immigration from Germany resumed. Although no figures are available for the city of Grand Rapids for the year 1870, there is information for the county of Kent, of which the city was the largest population center. Out of a total population of 50,403 for the county, 12,094 are foreign-born, and of these, 1,722 or 3.4 percent of the total population are listed as born in Germany. Ten years later, in 1880, 2,511 of the county's foreign born population, or again 3.4 percent are listed as German-born. In 1890, the German-born population of Grand Rapids numbered 3,140, or 5.2 percent of the total population of 60,278. The Germans now formed the second largest foreign group in the city, with Netherlands being the largest at 13.7 percent.⁸

Cultural and Religious Expansion

The post-Civil War era, especially the period from 1870 to 1914, was the time when the German-American community flourished as never before. Various aspects of German life in Grand Rapids parallel those of hundreds of communities all across the United States. The German-American population of Grand Rapids can be placed largely into two categories: the *Kirchenduetschen* ("church" Germans), and the *Vereinsdeutschen* ("association" Germans). Under the first heading were the three local congregations: Immanuel Lutheran Church, St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church,

and the German Methodist Church, all established before the Civil War.

In 1871, a Reformed Jewish synagogue, Temple Emanuel, was established. Among its founding members were a large number of Germans of the Jewish faith, including Julius Houseman, from Zeckendorf in the

Kingdom of Bavaria, who came to Grand Rapids in 1852 and was later Mayor of the city, State Representative, and a member of Congress from the Fifth Michigan District. Worship at the temple was conducted in Hebrew, German, and English.⁹

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded on Mt. Vernon, near W. Bridge Street in 1880 by a group dissatisfied with the discipline at Immanuel Lutheran Church. As was often the case, the strict rules of the Missouri Synod, of which Immanuel was a member, especially those rules against membership in secret societies and lodges, did not sit well with many German-Americans and their love of belonging to various clubs and societies. Over the years, St. John's became one of the leading German churches in the city.¹⁰

In 1883, the Zion German Evangelical Church, connected with the Evangelical Association of North America, was established in the city at the southeast corner of W. Bridge and Straight Streets. The following year the members erected a brick church building with a seating capacity of 350. This congregation did not experience the same growth in German membership as other German churches, and by 1905, the name had been changed to First Evangelical Church, the designation "German" no longer used.¹¹

Both St. Mary's Catholic Church and Immanuel Lutheran Church established parochial schools in which German was the language of instruction. The two churches also had youth groups, women's auxiliaries, and various musical groups, both vocal and orchestral. (Figure 2)

For the *Vereinsdeutschen*, too, the post-Civil War period was a time of growth for the various German societies. The



(Figure 3) Friedrich Christ, founder of the Turnverein (the gymnastic society).



(Figure 4) Germania Hall, Front St, opposite 1st.

Grand Rapids *Deutscher Turnverein* was re-established in 1870 by Dr. Friedrich Christ, who had left Germany after the revolution of 1848. Increased immigration from Germany during the 1870's as well as the interest of local Germans in gymnastics led to a rapid growth of the organization, and during the winter of 1882-83, a hall was constructed for the society. (Figure 3)

Dr. Christ was also instrumental in founding a benevolent association called the *Arbeiter Unterstützungs-Verein* (Workers Benevolent Association). He called a meeting in August of 1869 to discuss the founding of such an organization, of which there were several in the state. In 1871 a house and property were purchased at Chatham and S. Jefferson (later Lexington). The house, enlarged in 1872, was used as a clubhouse until 1880, when a large brick structure was erected. A *Gaststätte* (pub /restaurant) was added in 1903 and the property, which included a large garden, was the scene of numerous German-American activities throughout the year. The *Germania Unterstützungs-Verein*, which started as the *St. Johannesverein*, was another major German benevolent



(Figure 5) Arbeiter Halle, NW corner Chatham and S Jefferson (Lexington).

association. The *St. Johannesverein*, which had been restricted to Roman Catholic Germans, showed very little growth in membership, and so it was decided in 1886 to change the name to *Germania Unterstützungs-Verein*, with membership open to non-Catholics as well. The organization built a large brick hall on N. Front Street, which was dedicated on October 27, 1886, providing a place for many social events. (Figure 4) A German veterans' organization, the *Deutscher Landwehr Unterstützungs-Verein* (German Veterans' Benevolent Association), which was a statewide organization, established the fourth Company of the Michigan Regiment in Grand Rapids, in September of



(Personal collection of Wilhelm Seeger)

(Figure 6) Immanuel Lutheran Church's West Side school, SE corner of Pettibone and 2nd Street.

1884. In 1901, a large brick hall with crenelated facade, was constructed. This building also provided a home for many German-American gatherings. (Figure 5)

Festivals, Drills, and Pride

Besides the various halls, there was Teutonia Park on Reeds Lake, owned by the *Schwaben-Verein*; a favorite amusement and excursion area for Grand Rapidsians. Here the local Germans enjoyed their picnics and *Schützefeste* (music festivals), and the *Deutscher Landwehr Unterstützungs-Verein* demonstrated its drill skills, as well as staging famous battles of the Franco-Prussian War.

The *Vereins-Kalendar* published in each issue of the weekly German newspaper, *Germania*, lists 22 German-American organizations in 1912.¹² These include the church societies as well as the benevolent and social associations, and run the gamut from the *Rehe-Verein*, for young ladies of Immanuel Lutheran Church, to the *Schiller Zelt* of the Knights of the Macabees, and the *Veteranen Liedertafel* (Veterans' Singing Society).¹³ (Figure 6)

and West Bridge Street. It extended for several blocks north and south of this axis. Religious edifices, social halls, businesses, and residences of the majority of the citizens of German ancestry were located here. A number of German-owned businesses were also in the downtown area, along Monroe and Canal.

Over the years the local German community and its associations sponsored numerous events that drew the attention and respect of all citizens of the city. One of the post-Civil War events was the "Peace Jubilee" in 1871, celebrating the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War. The plans for the "Peace Jubilee" were reported in the *Grand Rapids Eagle* with typical hyperbole:

"The Grand German Jollification...The German Celebration, to take place in this city on Monday next, promises to be a grand affair, weather permitting. The Germans of Grand Rapids have hitherto taken part in many demonstrations of a civic and national character, but in none have their whole energies been so devoted to make a complete success as in the present affair..."¹⁴ The program included a "salute of 13 guns at sunrise,



(Figure 7) Hall constructed for the regional Saengerfest, the singers' convention, in the 1800s.

societies, tradesmen, and carriages, as well as out-of-town delegations led by Christoph Kusterer, local brewer and parade Marshall. The newspaper reporter expected an outstanding event when he stated: "From a well known talent with which the Germans manage celebrations of this nature, a pageant of uncommon brilliancy may be expected." And he was obviously not disappointed, for the day after the event, the paper stated: "One of the grandest displays ever made in this city took place yesterday, on the occasion of the "Peace Jubilee" gotten up by our German fellow citizens." The centennial celebration of American independence in July of 1876 provided another opportunity for the German-American community to show its support for its adoptive nation.

West Bridge Street had been swept by a disastrous fire in 1875. German merchants and property owners, determined to participate in the centennial, rebuilt the burned-out area with new brick buildings in time for the festivities, and West Bridge Street was the site of a grand centennial celebration.

Five years later, in 1881, the city of Grand Rapids was the site of the Fourth Peninsular Sangerfest (Singers Festival). From August 22 to 25, the city was given over to German singing societies from all over the state. The events took place in the large new Sangerfest Hall, a wooden structure built especially for the occasion at a cost of over \$5000.

(Figure 7)

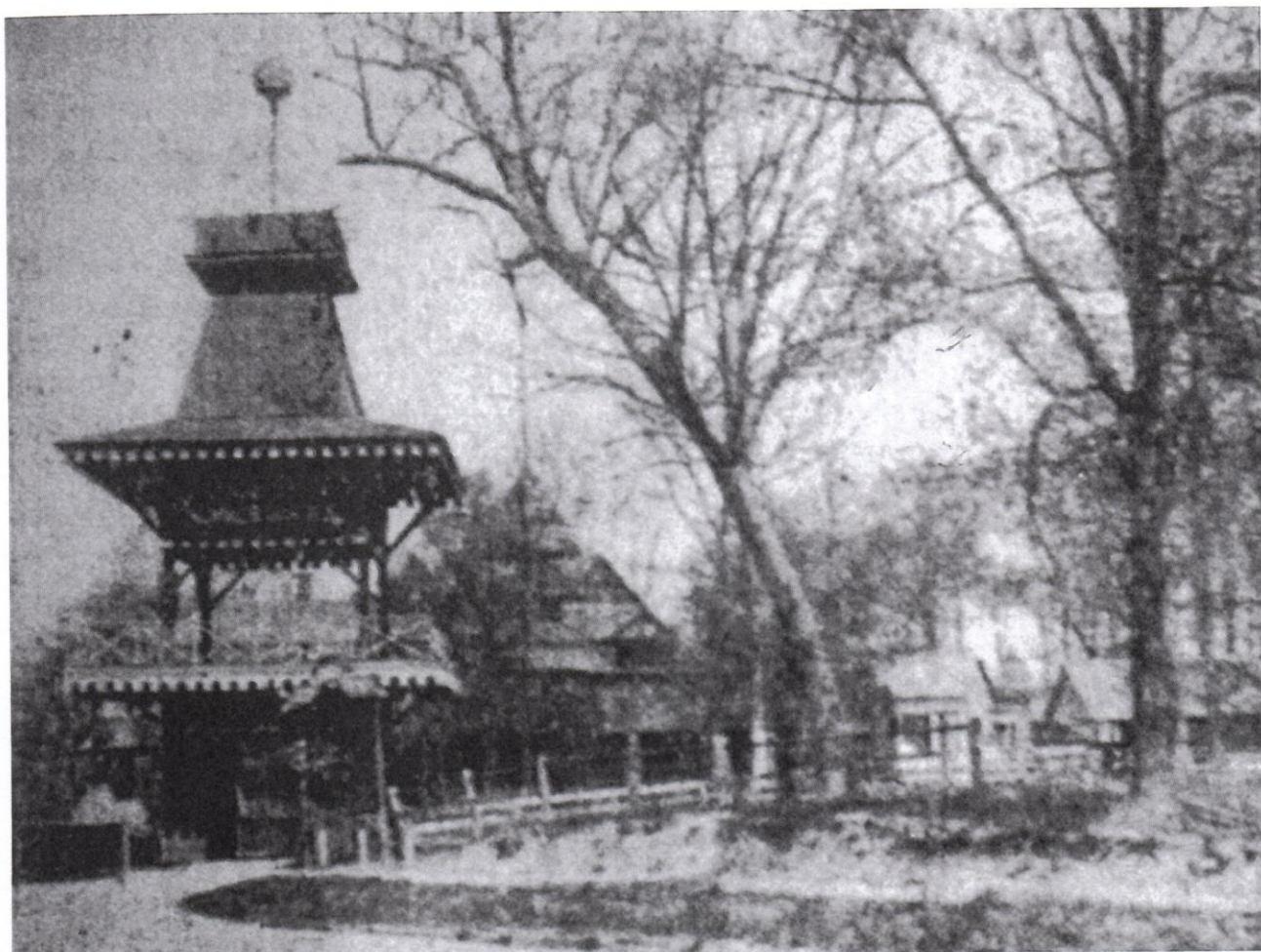
The next large German celebration occurred two years later. Albert Baxter, in his *History of the City of Grand Rapids*, described it as follows:

"October 6, 1883, the Germans by nativity and descent of this city held a bicentennial celebration of German immigration to this country – of the landing at Germantown, now a part of Philadelphia, October 6, 1683, of their first colony, of thirteen Quaker families. It was a notable occasion among enthusiastic anniversary jubilees in Grand Rapids. A procession over two miles long paraded the streets, in which city officers, policemen, bands, military companies, and Grand Army posts joined, and the local German societies were out in full numbers. There were large delegations from abroad – Kalamazoo German societies came in uniform. The Michigan *Staats-Zeitung* and the *Sonntagsblatt*. of this city were in line with displays, the former representing a wilderness in Pennsylvania, with William Penn and two Indians in consultation, the latter a modern printing office. The *Grand Rapids Turn Verein* represented the first German immigrants in costume. There was also a very large trades display-workmen dressed according to their avocations, butchers, brewers with big casks, maltsters with big shovels, coopers, bakers, a Vienna bakery turning out old bread and new, and almost every variety of store and shop. Prominent native as well as German tradesmen and merchants joined in the jubilee."¹⁵ (Figure 8)

In 1896, the Arbeiter Bund of Michigan held its first Bundesfest in Grand Rapids under the auspices of the local *Arbeiter-Unterstutzungs-Verein*. The *Evening Press* described the events beneath the headline:

"To the Bundesfest...Concert, Banquet, Ball and a Monster Picnic at Reed's Lake Are to Be the Features. The Jolly Germans are Coming.

Thousands of them will pour into Grand Rapids July 25 and 26 for one of those festive outings such as only the Germans really know how to plan and carry out. To being with, it will be the first Bundesfest in the history of the Arbeiter Bund of Michigan...In all, it is expected that from 10,000 to 12,000 visitors will come to town.



(Figure 8) Ad for Huber's Sommergarten (summer garden), a park at Reed's Lake.

There are seventy-three societies belonging to the organization in the state and 32 of these have already notified the committee of arrangements that they will come in a body."¹⁶

The *Deutscher Turn-Verein*, which had joined the Chicago *Turnbezirk* after the dissolution of the Michigan *Turnbezirk*, played host to a large *Turnfest* under the auspices of the Chicago *Bezirk* in July of 1898.¹⁷ The *Evening Post* took note of the festivities in military terms that would have been impossible twenty years later:

"Tomorrow morning this city will be surrendered to the Germans, and they will own everything in sight. The attack has already been made followed by a prompt capitulation, and tomorrow the great army of invasion will move inside the city gates.

And it will be welcomed. They will come in crowds, but they cannot outnumber the many features of the hospitality which *has* been arranged for them. The thousands of local Germans will open their homes and their hearts, and every other citizen is expected to extend his most cordial hand to the visitors.

...It is expected that there will be at least 30,000 visitors to the city during the fest. Eight hundred Delegates from Chicago will come by special train tomorrow morning. They will be taken to the Arbeiter hall on Jefferson Street for breakfast. This hall will be the official headquarters during the festivities, but all the other West Side halls will be opened wide for the reception and entertainment of the guests."¹⁸

In June 1902, the city of Grand Rapids was once again the scene of a state convention of the Arbeiter Bund, the 34th such gathering. About 350 delegates and spouses attended. They were welcomed to the city by President Gustav Appelt, a local saloon owner, and by Mayor Palmer. The mayor spoke of "the strength of German character and the stability of the German-American as a citizen."

These examples will serve to demonstrate the very active role played by the German-American citizens in the life of the city as well as on the state level. In 1900, Grand Rapids had a total population of 87,565, of whom 66 percent were of foreign parentage and 27.3 percent foreign born. 3.7 percent of 3,253 of the total were German born."¹⁹

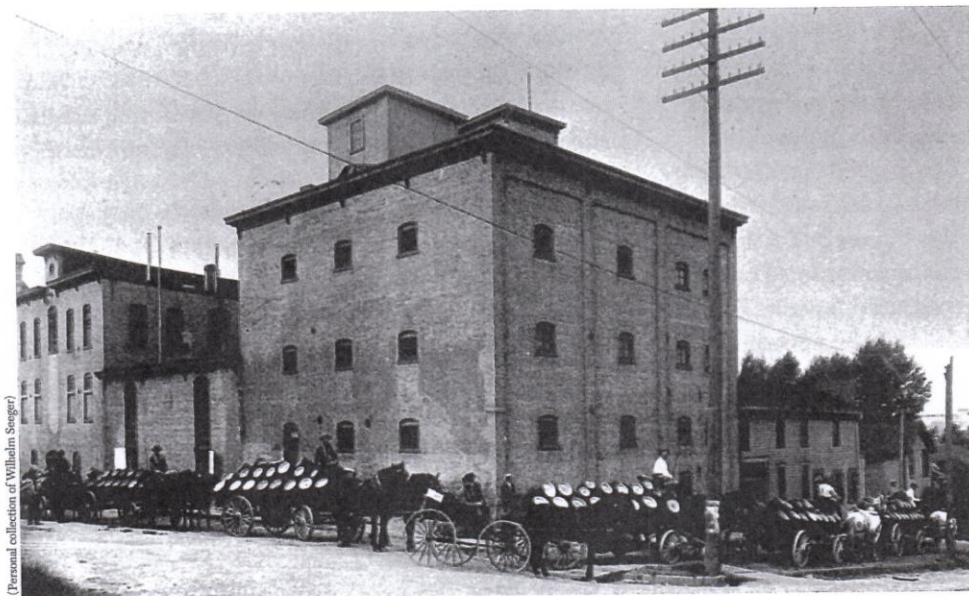
A Literate Community in a Commercial Role

The year 1871 marks the first attempt to establish a German language newspaper in Grand Rapids. *Der Pionier*, a weekly, lasted but two months. In 1874, the *Michigan Staatszeitung*, also a weekly, began publication, continuing until 1886.²⁰ It also produced the Grand Rapids *Sonntagsblatt*, the first Sunday paper in West Michigan. *Die Post*, begun in 1892, started as a weekly, became a biweekly, and finally a daily, but lasted only until 1895. (Figure 9)

It was the *Germania*, founded in September of 1882, that proved to be the longest lasting German newspaper in Western Michigan. Aply edited and published by Louis Martin and Clemens A. Wurzburg, the *Germania* began as a weekly. It found readers not only in Grand Rapids, but throughout the Western part of the state. In 1887 the editors of the *Germania* added a Sunday paper, *Der Sonntagsbote*.²¹ The *Germania* appeared daily in 1895 and 1896, but there were not enough subscribers to support it on this basis, and it resumed its weekly format.



(Figure 9) A page from the newspaper, *Germania*, published from 1882 to 1916.



(Figure 10) Kusterer Brewery.

Politically, the *Germania* assumed a neutral stance and its tone, but on the whole was conservative. It did not exhibit the crusading spirit or engage in the sort of polemics typical of the Detroit German press. In format, the *Germania* was very much like other German language newspapers of its day. The front page was devoted to national news, followed by three or four pages of boilerplate (pre-printed material); a local page containing an editorial, local

news and news of the clubs and societies; a page with a serialized novel or story; and a final page with news from around the state.²² The year 1907 marked the silver anniversary of the founding of the *Germania*, and the paper celebrated the event with the publication in September of a special anniversary issue. In it, the editors expressed the wish that the *Germania* would be granted another twenty-five years of publication, but it was not to be.

German-Americans were also very active in the commercial life of the city. Christoph Kusterer, pioneer brewer and one of the founders of the German Lutheran Church, was very active in German affairs until his tragic death aboard the steamer, *Alpena*, which sank in 1880. The names Herkner, Voigt, Herpolsheimer, Wurzburg, Leitelt, Houseman, Jackoboice, Friedrich, and Preusser, although some of their business ventures are no longer active, are remembered to the present time. (Figure 10)

A consolidation of six German-American breweries, which took place in 1893, led to the Grand Rapids Brewing Company, the largest and most modern beer producer in the Western part of the state. The huge brewing complex,



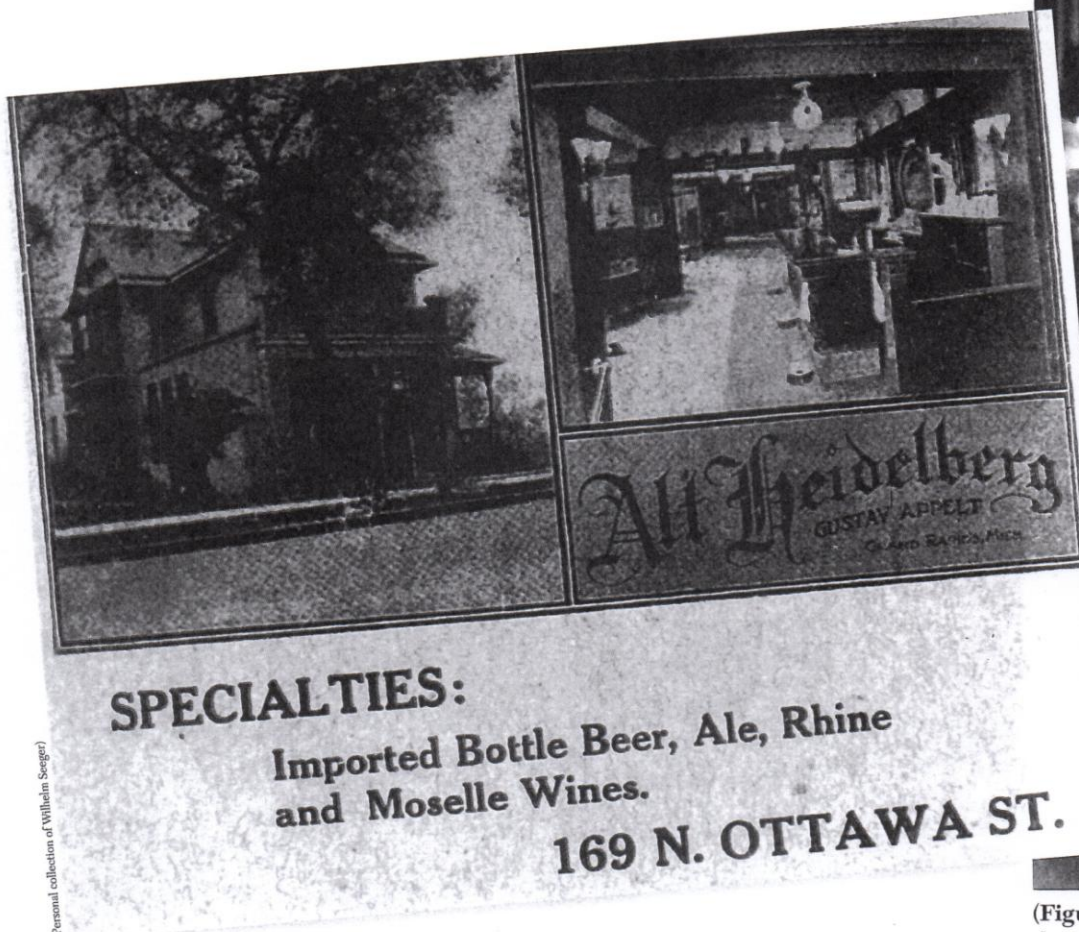
(Figure 11) *Deutsches Gast Haus*, German guesthouse.



(Figure 12) Veit and Rathman brewery crew.

built in 1895 and expanded over the years until the First World War, dominated the city's East Side skyline until it was torn down in the 1960s. (Figure 11 and Figure 12)

Many of the city's saloons were also owned by German-Americans, providing a place for relaxation and entertainment for the Germans, and a thorn in the side



(Personal collection of Wilhelm Seeger)

(Figure 13) Ad for the Alt Heidelberg (Old Heidelberg).



(Figure 14) Typical bar on the West side of Grand Rapids.

of the more puritanical elements of the population. Albert Baxter's description of German saloons in Grand Rapids is favorable indeed:

"At a number of these places kept by Germans, to see the lines of stalwart laboring Men, a proportion of them carrying dinner pails or baskets, stop and get an appetizer on the way home to supper, is a study for a painter. They say it refreshes them wonderfully, when tired from a hard day's work. At the place of Julius Kleinwaechter, opposite the Bridge Street House, such a scene at the close of working hours is a familiar sight. With neighborly greetings and animated discussion of all topics – news, work, politics, morals and religion – some five minutes are spent while they sip a glass of beer (for the German seldom pours it down in the Yankee fashion), taking also a small piece of rye bread and cheese, and then they move on

to the home and the family. And thus it is at many other similar houses."²³

In general, then, the German-American population in the first decade of the twentieth century was, as was also true nationally, an admired and respected segment of the population. Germans were seen very much as Albert Baxter described them in his *History of the City of Grand Rapids*:

"As a class, the German immigrants are a stalwart people; intelligent and enterprising, and withal eminently social and musical. In point of numbers they form a large and influential class of those who have come across the seas. Among the skilled mechanics and expert workmen in our factories are many of German nativity or descent. From the refugees of 1848 to the latest free comers they are alike fervid and enthusiastic in their love for the country of their adoption."²⁴



(Personal collection of Wilhelm Seeger)

World War I and Americanization

The outbreak of hostilities in August of 1914, the start of the First World War, and the years that followed would affect for all time the former positive image of the German-American community, both nationally and locally. In that regard Grand Rapids was no different from any other city in the United States with a sizeable German-American population. (Figure 13)

The *Germania*, was an enthusiastic supporter of the German and Austrian cause. Whereas other German papers in the state exercised caution, the *Germania* was not at all timid about which side it was on.

Grand Rapidsians of German birth or descent, never dreaming that their adopted country would go to war with the old fatherland, on the whole hoped for a German victory. A German-Austrian support association (*Deutsch-österreichischer HilfsVerein*) was formed, and many local Germans contributed money during the years of U.S.

neutrality. The group received the official thanks of the Imperial German Ambassador to the United States, Count von Bernstorff, for its contribution of \$1,000 to the families of German and Austrian servicemen. (Figure 14)

But the virulent anti-Germanism that swept the nation during the latter years of the Great War also made itself felt in Grand Rapids. The American Protective League kept a watchful eye out for any signs of sedition among the German-American population. The study of German was dropped from the local high schools. The local Ryerson Library proudly reported that "literature in the German language in the reading rooms...has been reduced to a single periodical..."

The German language newspaper, the *Germania*, ceased publication on March 29, 1916, blaming the loss of advertising for its demise, but with the hope that a rapid victory of German arms would bring peace to the old fatherland and renewed respect to the German-Americans.



(Figure 15) Concordia Orchestra.

A number of prominent citizens of German birth or German descent were arrested for making seditious statements. Others had their houses or businesses daubed with yellow paint by patriotic local vigilantes. The spirit of the times can best be illustrated by an article that appeared in the *Grand Rapids News* on April 22, 1918:

"Catholic Central High School pupils, aroused by portraits of two German poets, Goethe and Schiller, hanging on the school walls, took them down, opened the frames and destroyed the pictures. Permission was first secured from the principal, Sister Mary Alphonsus. The pictures were placed in the classroom last year, when it was used for a German recitation room. French is now being taught there, and the pictures have been replaced by those of General Pershing and Generalissimo Foch.²⁵

The end of hostilities in Europe also signaled the end of the German ethnic community in Grand Rapids. The German press had ceased to exist. The various clubs and societies, with few exceptions, did not survive the 1920s. Although there was renewed immigration from Germany during the 1920s, the visibility of the once active German-American element in the life of the city was gone. It had

become, as most of its citizens believe today, a city of Hollanders and Poles as the prominent ethnic groups.

(Figure 15)

Today, only a few vestiges remain of the once vital German community. The *Arbeiter Halle* was demolished in 1934, its property, after being sold to the city, turned into a playground. The *Germania Hall*, though still standing, is being used for storage, its fate uncertain. The *Landwehr Halle*, shorn of its second story, serves as a private club; The Taxpayers Association. The *Turn Halle*, renamed the Lexicon Club, burned to the ground on December 15, 2012.

Urban renewal and the building of freeways in the 1960s, brought with them the destruction of numerous buildings once used by local German-Americans, including churches, schools, and commercial structures, so that even these reminders vanished from the scene, like the memories of the old German community itself.

Wilhelm Seeger, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of Modern Languages & Literatures at Grand Valley State University, a member of the Grand Rapids Historical Society's Board of Trustees, and the author of multiple works of German-American history and culture.

Notes

- ¹ Albert Baxter, *History of the City of Grand Rapids* (New York and Grand Rapids: Munsell & Co., 1891), 84. Hereafter referred to as Baxter.
- ² Baxter, 89.
- ³ Baxter, 97.
- ⁴ Baxter, 192.
- ⁵ U.S. Population Census Manuscripts.
- ⁶ U.S. Population Census Manuscripts.
- ⁷ Baxter, 572.
- ⁸ U.S. Census Manuscripts.
- ⁹ Baxter, 301.
- ¹⁰ Baxter, 204.
- ¹¹ Dwight Goss, *History of Grand Rapids and Its Industries*, 2 vol. Chicago, 1906, 1188-1189.
- ¹² *Vereins-Kalendar* or "Club Calendar."
- ¹³ Grand Rapids *Germania*, February, 1912. *Rehe-Verein* or "The 'Does' Club"; *Schiller Zelt* for the author, the "Schiller Tent"; *Veteranen Liedertafel* or "Veterans' Singing Society."
- ¹⁴ Grand Rapids *Eagle*, 1871, Scrapbook, Grand Rapids Public Library.
- ¹⁵ Baxter, 193.
- ¹⁶ Grand Rapids *Evening Press*, July 15, 1896.
- ¹⁷ *Turnbezirk* or "Gymnastic District"; *Turnfest* or "Gymnastic Festival."
- ¹⁸ Grand Rapids *Evening Press*, July 1, 1898.
- ¹⁹ U.S. Census Manuscripts.
- ²⁰ *Staatszeitung* or "State Newspaper."
- ²¹ *Der Sonntagsblatt* or "The Sunday Messenger."
- ²² Mark O. Kistler, "The German Language Press in Michigan," *Michigan History*, September 1960.
- ²³ Baxter, 204.
- ²⁴ Baxter, 192-193.
- ²⁵ Grand Rapids *News*, April 22, 1918.