

## **Turner Hall lost monument to German pride**

More than a century ago, Turner Hall was the cultural hub of Bloomington's large and influential German community.

Located on the 300 block of South Main Street and built in 1883, this three-story hall was home to the local chapter of the Turner Society, or Turnverein, an athletic and social club with the motto, "A sound mind in a sound body."

First organized in the Twin Cities in 1855, the Turnverein (roughly translated as "gymnastic association") restricted membership to German-born Americans and their children. There were plenty of eligible families, though—in 1870, nearly 1 in 10 Bloomington residents were German-born. The city was home to German-organized Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist churches, as well as Moses Montefiore Temple, a synagogue established by German Jews. There were a half-dozen or more German organizations, including Maennerchor, a singing society, Krieger Verein, a group of German army veterans, and even a German Masonic lodge.

By the early 1880s, the Turners had outgrown a series of downtown clubrooms and halls. As such, George H. Miller, then in the employ of architect Henry A. Miner, drew up plans for a \$22,000 stand-alone building (that total would be the equivalent of nearly \$590,000 today, adjusted for inflation). Miller, of course, would go on to establish his own practice and have one of the more prolific architectural careers in Bloomington history.

Turner Hall was much more than a gymnasium, as it accommodated all expressions of German life and culture. The main hall or auditorium (it was sometimes called the ballroom) was a "cozy and elegant opera house" with seating for 1,000 or more. It included a 25-foot-wide stage with scenery and a drop curtain, as well as a gallery or balcony that wrapped around much of the auditorium.

The cloud ceiling frescos came from German-born, Peoria-based scenic painter Frank Dirkson, whose work appeared in internationally known venues, from Covent Garden in London to Theatre Royal in Montreal. "The fresco work is truly artistic," noted the local press of Dirkson's Turner Hall ceiling. "The whole culminates in a mass of fleecy clouds floating in an azure sky." Hanging in the main hall was a "magnificent prismatic chandelier" of solid bronze and nickel festooned with 30 gas jets.

Directly under the auditorium was a 3,100-plus square foot gymnasium with 22-foot-high ceilings. The building also included a barroom, dining room, kitchen, a room for playing chess, a ladies' parlor and a "gentlemen's retiring room."

Turner Hall's formal dedication took place Monday evening, December 10, 1883. The program kicked off with a torchlight procession of some 100 Turners and their supporters marching from downtown to their new home. Most of the dedicatory speeches were in

German. "Believe me," declared Turner president Christian Riebsame, "that while we love to cherish the memories, the habits and customs of our fatherland, and cling with revered fondness to our mother tongue, it is our aim and ambition at all times to be as good citizens of the land of our adoption as it is your pride and glory to be Americans to the manor born."

The new building was used for a wide range of Turner events, including dances, dinners, theatrical productions and holiday parties. Yet gymnastics remained a centerpiece of the organization's philosophy of personal and community betterment. The Christmas ball of 1889, for instance, featured a human pyramid exhibition of 20 Turners dressed as Santa Claus. Adolph Mols, an 1891 graduate of the Turnverein's own Normal College of the American Gymnastic Union of Indianapolis, led classes for local Turner children. Mols then played an instrumental role organizing the physical education curriculum for Bloomington schools.

The Turners were an inclusive bunch, with a membership that included Protestants, Catholics and Jews, as well as those from the working, middle and upper classes. Franz "Frank" E. Peckman, who died in early 1893 while serving his second term as president of the Bloomington Turners, was in his mid-twenties when he came to Bloomington from the fatherland. He was first a cigarmaker, and then worked at the Chicago & Alton Railroad Shops before opening a grocery store on 1100 block of South Main Street.

In 1911-1912, with the immigrant generation dying off, the Turners sold their hall to the Bloomington chapter (or aerie) of the Fraternal Order of Eagles. Though now without a building of their own, the local Turners, led by second-generation German Americans, remained active in the Twin Cities for another three decades.

When the U.S. entered the First World War, anti-German hysteria swept the nation. Local "superpatriots" succeeded in expunging the German language from churches and schools, as well as printed material like the Bloomington Journal, a weekly German newspaper. In April 1918, the Turnverein changed its name to the Columbia Fraternal Society, an "all-American" revision made in "the spirit of the hour." The panic eventually subsided, and after the war the Turners reverted to their Old World name once again.

The local chapter eventually occupied the entire third floor of the Wood Building, 108-110 E. Front St. The society celebrated its eightieth anniversary in April 1935, with Carl Jaeger, Anton Dietrich, Gerhard Ullman and John B. Gummerman serving in leadership posts. "Once an aggressive organization sponsoring physical and cultural well being, the Turnverein is now a purely social organization," remarked The Pantagraph.

At this time, the Turners held picnics near Downs along Kickapoo Creek, or in Randolph south of Bloomington. "There were tables, an ice-filled tub with a keg of beer, another with soft drinks for the kids, and a third tub for rinsing the tin cups used for beer," remembered William Adams, who as a young boy attended Turner gatherings, and then wrote a 1998 history of the local society. The last picnic was probably held in 1947.

In its latter years, the 1883 Turner Hall building was partially obscured by the erection of the Main Street viaduct bridge. Another blow to the building's prestige was its later use as a warehouse for Stern's, a downtown furniture store.

In 1966, Pantagraph reporter Jim Engelhorn visited the abandoned hall. "Inside now the floors are rotting and the plaster is dropping off the walls," he wrote. "Murals in the ballroom are peeling. Broken glass and pigeon droppings make it a ballet dancer's challenge to thread a path to the ballroom."

The grand old building was torn down in 1969, and the site became a surface parking lot.