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### **The Public Image of Germans in Louisville and in Jefferson County, Kentucky, 1840-72**

The general public has entertained at times widely differing views of the character of Germans and German-Americans. As we know, this ethnic group has sometimes been praised and sometimes vilified. Such gyrations in public esteem have been especially pronounced in the case of Germans living in Louisville and in Jefferson County, Kentucky. An investigation of the public perception of Germans during the period 1840 to 1872 will illustrate, in particularly dramatic fashion, the fickle nature of public approval accorded this ethnic group.

Although this essay will concentrate on the time frame 1840 to 1872, a brief look at an earlier period will place the period under consideration in a larger context. Germans or individuals of German extraction came to Louisville from the days of its founding. The first tax list of Jefferson County was issued in 1789. On this list are Michael, George, and Leonard Bruner and John Rose. The Bruner family had emigrated from Mannheim, Germany, in 1726 and became landowners in Maryland.<sup>1</sup> John Rose was a member of a German family who had previously settled in New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> Another early German-American family in Louisville was the Hite (Hayd) family. They were originally part of a group of Palatine Germans who had come to New York early in the eighteenth century. These families seem to have been readily accepted in Jefferson County, for in 1788 Abraham Hite represented Jefferson County at a pre-statehood convention and from 1800 to 1803 he served in the senate of the Kentucky General Assembly.<sup>3</sup>

There are no records of direct immigration from Germany to Louisville and Jefferson County in these early days, but rather we see a pattern of families coming from Germany to the East Coast of the United States and slowly moving on to the frontier. These families had in common with the more numerous Anglo-Saxon early settlers the fact that

they were forced to adapt to the rough-and-ready life required by the frontier.

Also, there seems to be no record of conflict based on Anglo-Saxon versus German ethnicity in Jefferson County in the first part of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, Karl Bernhard, the younger son of Karl August of Weimar visited Louisville in 1826 and was received into the leading homes of the community. Bernhard gives a favorable account of his visits with the postmaster Gray, at whose home he attended a wedding party. Bernhard was taken on a tour of the local hospital by the prominent physician, Dr. Ferguson, and he was a guest of the Croghans at Locust Grove.<sup>4</sup>

In the years 1840 to 1850 the population of Louisville more than doubled, from 21,000 to 43,217.<sup>5</sup> This rapid growth was in part due to the introduction of the steamboat. The steamboat first appeared in Louisville in 1811 on its way to New Orleans from Cincinnati, but regular steamboat traffic between Louisville and New Orleans was almost a decade in coming. After approximately 1820, however, direct immigration from Germany became easier. One could leave from a German port, land in New Orleans, and go by steamer directly to Louisville.

Still, the number of German immigrants increased only slowly. It was not until 1836 that there were enough German Catholics for a German-speaking parish to be established.<sup>6</sup> Further evidence of the slow growth of the German population may be seen in the failure of Louisville's first brewery, the Spring Brewery, established in 1840 by Georg W. Barth. Ludwig Stierlin, Louisville's German historian, attributes this failure to the small number of Germans in Louisville and to the American preference for whisky.<sup>7</sup>

After 1848, however, a substantial number of Germans arrived in Louisville. These were in some cases refugees from the failed 1848 Revolution. Since the Germans in the late 1840s and early 1850s often came by boat load, the immigration was sometimes in a dramatic fashion. In the spring of 1849, for example, the steamer *Winfield Scott* landed with more than 400 Germans on board.<sup>8</sup> Stierlin himself was one of the forty-eighters. He had eluded the Prussian police and escaped to Belgium and later settled in Louisville.<sup>9</sup> He was in Louisville in June 1851 and described the arrival of the steamer *Midas*, loaded with Germans, in this way:

Der Dampfer hatte die armen Auswanderer wie die Häringe im Verdeck zusammengepackt. 40 waren unterwegs gestorben und Viele starben noch kurz vor der Landung vor New-Albany. Die hiesigen Deutschen thaten für die Armen, was in ihren Kräften stand.<sup>10</sup>

Public opinion began to be divided on the benefits of the addition of such large numbers of Germans. Ben Casseday, the author of *The History of Louisville*, published in 1852, was well-disposed towards the local Germans. He says that in 1852 there were 18,000 Germans among a population of 51,726.<sup>11</sup> Of those Germans he wrote that they were a "careful, painstaking, and industrious people, of quiet unobtrusive and inoffensive manners; and in the majority of instances men of some education and ability" and were "one of the best classes of our population."<sup>12</sup> But not everyone was of that opinion. Walter N. Haldeman, the editor of the *Louisville Daily Courier* took a nativist stance beginning around 1845 and was not at all friendly to the Germans.<sup>13</sup>

The complaints against the Germans were the usual ones: they did not respect the sabbath, they all voted for one party, there were too many Catholics among them, and some of the others were infidels. On the subject of the sabbath, Haldeman was especially irritated and, it seems, touched with more than a little secret envy. He wrote in the *Daily Courier* that there are those who make no concealment of their

detestations of the old-fashioned, hum-drum, puritan method of opening the first day of the week. These make each Sunday a Saturnalia, and with all their might are attempting to Europeanize our population. Americans are ever fond of novelties, especially if brought from across the water, and it is amusing to see how perfectly they adapt themselves to enjoying German music and Lager beer, and Hockenheimer and Bremen cigars, in a pleasant retreat like the Woodland.<sup>14</sup>

It sounds almost as if he himself would have liked a beer and a good cigar on Sunday.

These objections should have been harmless enough, for they were often heard about German-Americans elsewhere. The Louisville situation was, however, different in two respects. First, nativists became particularly strong in Kentucky in the mid-1850s. These individuals and groups, sometimes called Know-Nothings, favored native-born citizens over immigrants and distrusted people of unfamiliar habits, speech and religion, especially Roman Catholics. On the national level the nativist American party was enjoying some success by 1854, and by 1856 was strong enough to nominate former President Millard Fillmore as its presidential candidate.

In Louisville and in Kentucky in the 1850s the nativist or Know-Nothing party gained supporters even as the Whigs were losing them. By 1855 the Know-Nothings had elected a governor, controlled both houses of the state legislature and elected a Know Nothing city administration in Louisville.

Secondly, not only did the period after 1848 bring large numbers of Germans to Louisville, but Louisville became for a time the home of the most radical element of the forty-eighters. Karl Heinzen, Wilhelm Weitling<sup>15</sup> and others called Louisville home for a while and during that period were active in organizing for radical causes at the local and national level. Heinzen came to Louisville in 1853 to edit the *Herold des Westens*. The forty-eighters formed in Louisville several radical organizations such as the *Bund freier Männer* and the *Bund freier Frauen*, as well as labor organizations. In 1854 Heinzen along with Bürgeler, Stein, L. Wittig, and B. Domschke published the "Louisville Platform." It called for, among other things, such "radical" measures as granting full civil rights to freed slaves and to women, a minimum wage and a maximum number of working hours, a stricter separation of church and state, and the abolition of the death penalty.

As one may imagine, this platform gained much attention among the local German and non-German population. Stierlin, who was in agreement with and close to the platform drafters, wrote:

Diese 'berühmte Louisviller Platform' brachte eine der beabsichtigten geradezu entgegengesetzte Wirkung hervor und trug, statt die erhoffte große Stimmenmacht im Jahre 1856 zu erzielen, nur dazu bei, die Ausbrüche des Knownothingismus zu beschleunigen.<sup>16</sup>

Stierlin's description was correct. Nativist sentiments, as we have seen, became ever stronger after 1854. One manifestation of the increased influence of the Know-Nothings was that the influential Louisville *Daily Journal* took up the Know-Nothing line. The *Daily Journal's* editor, the eloquent George D. Prentice, assumed a virulent anti-German, anti-foreigner stance in his editorials in 1855. He wrote, for example, of "the overweening and most pestilent influence of the foreign swarms. . ."<sup>17</sup> These editorials contributed to the atmosphere in which an anti-German, anti-Irish riot occurred on election day, 6 August 1855. The riot resulted in the death of at least fourteen and perhaps as many as two hundred people.

This "Bloody Monday Riot" was the nineteenth-century nadir of the German image in Louisville, and the luxuriant blossoming of German intellectual and cultural life in Louisville in the early 1850s was stunted by the events of a day or two. A good number of Germans left the city and some German-owned businesses closed. The editor of the Louisville *Anzeiger* wrote that if this was the way life in Louisville was to be, he was prepared to leave:

Die Gesammtheit der Bevölkerung soll entscheiden, ob Louisville sich noch zu den *gesitteten* und *civilisirten* Städten der Welt zählen dürfe; Jeder erwäge diese Frage und wenn wir eine Majorität gegen uns haben, so verzichten wir auf jeden Anspruch noch ferner Bürger dieses Dorfes zu sein.<sup>18</sup>

Louisville's Germans were so discouraged about the local situation that on 14 August 1855 around two hundred persons, mostly Germans, met and formed a society for leaving Louisville, the "Amerikanischer Auswanderungs-Verein in Louisville."<sup>19</sup> The group even sent a delegation to Kansas to look for a suitable place to found a new town, although little came of the idea.

The discouragement of the Germans who stayed in Louisville lasted only a few years, however. The slavery question in America became ever more pressing, and in the violent resolution of the slavery question through the Civil War, Kentucky's Germans received a new respect and acceptance. Even though Kentucky was a border state, the direction which the Louisville Germans would take at the beginning of the Civil War was clearly indicated by their participation in a pro-Union rally of thirty thousand persons comprised of Germans and non-Germans which took place on 22 February 1861 in front of the Louisville courthouse. Stierlin says that Germans participated as organized groups: "Alle deutschen Vereine waren mit ausgerückt."<sup>20</sup>

When at the end of June 1861, with Kentucky still observing a policy of neutrality towards the war, Lovell H. Rousseau began to form two Union regiments at Camp Holt on the Indiana side of the Ohio, the Louisville Germans were ready to volunteer. On 3 July, a Louisville machinist by the name of Schweitzer formed a company together with John B. Emig. The first lieutenant's name was Wehrle and the second lieutenant was Karl Gütig.<sup>21</sup> On 16 July a second German company arrived under the leadership of Haupthoff.<sup>22</sup> Stierlin's account of large numbers of volunteers for the Union cause among German-Americans from Kentucky is corroborated by Eugene Miller in his article "The Contribution of German Immigrants to the Union Cause in Kentucky".<sup>23</sup> He demonstrates in detail the major role that Germans from Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky played in the early battles of Mill Springs and Munfordville.

Vigorous defense of the Union by Kentucky's Germans was not lost on the inhabitants of Louisville. Through their readiness to support and to volunteer for the Union cause, German-Americans in Kentucky showed that they were loyal Americans who were willing to risk their lives if that was required to defend their adopted country. The Know-Nothings who were pro-Union recognized this, since they saw that the Germans supported maintaining the Union.<sup>24</sup> Stierlin writes,

Wir selbst hörten einen entschiedenen Know-Nothing sich äußern: Jetzt sehe er, wie unrecht er den Deutschen gethan, und daß dieselben bessere Amerikaner seien als die Eingeborenen, welche die Union zu zerreißen suchten.<sup>25</sup>

Even the inflammatory Georg D. Prentice was won over by the loyalty to the Union exhibited by the Louisville Germans. Stierlin writes,

Das "Journal," bisher das entschiedenste Organ der Know Nothings, ward unter Allen hiesigen anglo-amerikanischen Blättern das entschiedenste Organ der Unionspartei und lobte nunmehr die Deutschen eben so sehr, wie es die selben bisher gelästert hatte.<sup>26</sup>

By 1862, the new perception of Germans was beginning to pay political dividends. In the election on 4 August, Phillip Tommpert was chosen as clerk of the city court even though two "American" candidates were running for the same office.<sup>27</sup> In April 1865 this same Tommpert was elected mayor of Louisville. What a difference a decade made. In addition, a German by the name of Rammers was elected tax collector for the entire city and several other Germans were elected to offices.<sup>28</sup> After 1865 Germans were able to establish themselves in prominent Louisville businesses. Before the war, Louisville had had a considerable trade with the South. With the collapse of the slave-based southern economy, a number of businesses in Louisville experienced sharp declines in revenues. The local Germans saw here an opportunity. Stierlin writes:

Dies kam den sparsamen und thätigeren Deutschen sehr zu Statten; sie brachten ein Geschäft nach dem andern an sich, so daß ganze Geschäftstheile der Stadt, in denen vor 20 Jahren entweder gar keine oder nur hie und da eine vereinzelt deutsche Firma anzutreffen war, bereits überwiegend deutsch sind.<sup>29</sup>

Matters continued to go well for the Louisville Germans. By 1870 they felt confident enough to host the very first national convention of German teachers. This took place on 1 September 1870 and was followed by the publication of a newspaper, the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Schulzeitung*, edited by Professor William Hailmann and printed by the Knoefel Verlag in Louisville. This Louisville firm was also prominent in publication of German school texts.<sup>30</sup>

By the time of the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the public image of Germans had risen so much that there was a celebration on 1 May in Louisville in which many "Americans" took part.

The mayor declared a holiday, closed all public offices and schools, and rode along with other city officials in a five-mile-long parade featuring 688 floats which wound its way through the streets.<sup>31</sup> Stierlin wrote an account of the day for the *Volksblatt*, a Louisville German newspaper, in which he says that day deserves to be entered with eternal letters into the history of the city and of the state as a day of honor for the Germans. It was a day which offered them "die glänzendste Genugtuung für alle bisher erduldeten Unehren und Unbilden. . ."<sup>32</sup> It was a day which surpassed his wildest expectations. He wrote in the *Volksblatt* article:

Wer ihnen vor sechzehn Jahren, wo sie lediglich wegen ihrer Abstammung gleich beutefreiem Wild durch die Straßen dieser Stadt gehetzt wurden, vorausgesagt hätte, daß schon nach so wenigen Jahren die hiesigen Amerikaner es zur Ehre anrechnen würden, mit ihnen zusammen ein Fest zu feiern, das nicht nur in seinem Character, sondern speziell in seiner Tendenz ein vorzugsweise deutsches sei, wäre als unverbesserlicher Phantast ausgelacht worden.<sup>33</sup>

The glory of the moment was not to be a temporary phenomenon; rather it ushered in the heyday of German-American life in Louisville. German-Americans assumed positions of leadership in all areas of Louisville life and began to make their presence felt even at the state level. In the same year as the victory celebration, Heinrich Krippenstapel, the editor of the *Volksblatt*, was put forward by the state Republican convention as its candidate for state auditor<sup>34</sup>.

We conclude our account with the year 1872, a year in which the main occurrences of German-American life in Louisville were the premiere concerts by the Louisville Philharmonic Society and the national meeting in Louisville of the North American "Turnerbund." These two events, representing two important aspects of nineteenth-century German-American life, music and gymnastics, symbolize the flourishing of German-American life in Louisville in the last twenty-five years of the century. To be German or of German ancestry was once again respectable, something of which one could be proud.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Jobson, "German-American Settlers of Early Jefferson County, Kentucky," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 53 (1979): 346.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 348.
- <sup>4</sup> Karl Bernhard, *Reise Sr. Hoheit des Herzogs Bernhard zu Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach durch Nord-Amerika in den Jahren 1825-1826* (Weimar: Wilhelm Hoffmann, 1828), 162-67
- <sup>5</sup> Benjamin Casseday, *The History of Louisville* (Louisville: Hull and Brother, 1852), 247.
- <sup>6</sup> George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio: A History of Louisville and Jefferson County* (Louisville: Heritage Corporation, 1979), 62.
- <sup>7</sup> L[u]d[wig] Stierlin, *Der Staat und die Stadt Louisville unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des deutschen Elementes* (Louisville: Louisville Anzeiger, 1873), 84.
- <sup>8</sup> Carl F. Wittke, *The German Language Press in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 87.
- <sup>9</sup> Yater, 62.
- <sup>10</sup> Stierlin, 141.
- <sup>11</sup> Casseday, 247.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 248.
- <sup>13</sup> Yater, 66.
- <sup>14</sup> *Louisville Daily Courier*, 12 June 1855, quoted in Yater, *Two Hundred Years*, 68.
- <sup>15</sup> See Wittke, *Against the Current: The Life of Karl Heinzen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945) and *The Utopian Communist: A Biography of Wilhelm Weitling, Nineteenth Century Reformer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950).
- <sup>16</sup> Stierlin, 161-62.
- <sup>17</sup> *Daily Journal*, 2 August 1855.
- <sup>18</sup> *Anzeiger*, 11 August 1855.
- <sup>19</sup> Stierlin, 173.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 195.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 197.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 197.
- <sup>23</sup> C. Eugene Miller, "The Contribution of German Immigrants to the Union Cause in Kentucky," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 64 (1990): 462-78.
- <sup>24</sup> Stierlin, 193.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 193.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 193.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 202.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 212-13.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 62.
- <sup>30</sup> Leonard Koester, "German Newspapers Published In Louisville," *The American-Kentucky Review* (June-July 1954): 27.
- <sup>31</sup> *Courier-Journal*, 2 May 1871 (cited in Gwinn p. 287)
- <sup>32</sup> Stierlin, 228.
- <sup>33</sup> No issues of the *Volksblatt* are extant. Stierlin quotes his own article in *Louisville*, 228.
- <sup>34</sup> Stierlin, 229. Further evidence of the positive image and influence of Germans in the state comes from the Kentucky Commissioner of Immigration, Robert Procter, and his secretary, the native German E. A. Fellmer. In 1880, they hired Emil Lindberg to represent Kentucky to immigrants debarking at Ellis Island, and in 1885 they commissioned Heinrich Lembke of Brunswick to visit Kentucky and write a report of his impressions for his compatriots. See John Weissert, "Lembke Visits Kentucky's German Colonies in 1885," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 75 (1977): 222-23. In 1900 Kentucky elected as Governor William Goebel, both of whose parents were German immigrants.