

## German Iowa and the Global Midwest Old Capitol Museum Exhibit

### Banner Texts, 1848-1914

#### 1. Coming to Iowa

The story of German immigration to Iowa is closely tied to the formative years of state history. In 1832, when the Sauk, Meskwaki and Ho-Chunk were first forced to cede land west of the Mississippi, the few European Americans in the future state's boundaries were French. But by 1850, four year's after Iowa's statehood, 7,101 immigrant Germans resided in the state, more than any other immigrant group. By 1890, at the peak of immigration, nearly 7% of all Iowans had been born in Germany, and the number of German Iowans continued to grow with successive generations. As recently as 1990, half of Iowans claimed German ancestry.

The journey from Europe to Iowa was arduous, particularly before railroad lines reached the state. Transatlantic shipping lines employed agents in Europe to sell package fares from emigrants' home towns via ports such as Hamburg, Bremen, or Le Havre (France). Relatives or community members might pool resources to pay passage for one of their own. Some left without a clear final destination: after reaching Illinois in 1851, the travel party of Wilhelm Fischer chose Davenport only after advance scouts reported back from exploratory trips to Iowa and Wisconsin. Other settlers, such as Jacob Nauman, grandfather of Iowa historian Margaret Nauman Keyes, first tried their luck in other states before pushing on across the Mississippi. Family members who had already made the journey often sent money back home to allow siblings or parents to join them. This process of chain migration explains why many Iowans still have strong connections to specific regions in present-day Germany, such as Schleswig-Holstein and East Frisia (*Ostfriesland*).

The state of Iowa soon established a state Board of Immigration, which maintained agents in Hamburg, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and London to attract skilled laborers and farmers. The state's efforts to foster immigration are most visible in *Iowa, the Home for Immigrants*. Published in 1870 in five languages, this handbook drew immigrants from Ireland, England, Holland, and Scandinavia as well as German regions.

## 2. One Language, Many Identities

Iowa's German-American community was quite diverse. Most Germans identified according to their region of birth, such as Prussia, Schleswig-Holstein, Swabia, Austria, or German-speaking areas of Switzerland. Regional allegiances and rivalries abounded, even in the U.S. In Burlington, Swabian men formed their own choir, and one of Davenport's most exclusive clubs was for Schleswig-Holstein veterans who had revolted against Danish rule in 1848-50.

Germans were also religiously diverse, often establishing the first houses of worship for their respective faiths in their communities. In 1877, German Jews founded the state's first synagogue, Temple B'nai Israel in Keokuk, followed by Temple B'nai Jeshurun in Des Moines in 1883. The creation of the diocese of Dubuque in 1837 drew Catholics from Germany and Luxemburg to northeast Iowa, but testaments to German-Catholic piety dot the state, such as West Bend's Grotto of the Redemption. Lutherans and other Protestant denominations similarly thrived, with German Mennonites and Pietists founding the state's Amish and Amana communities, respectively. Despite their common language, these denominations generally maintained separate social networks. At the same time, linguistic barriers led German and Swedish Lutherans or Irish and German Catholics to worship on their own.

Many first-generation immigrants never fully mastered English. These German Iowans relied on the state's 60+ German newspapers. Dubuque's "Catholic West" (*Katholischer Westen*), which reached readers across the Midwest, was the state's most widely read German paper. The "East Frisian News" (*Ostfriesische Nachrichten*), likewise with a national readership, was the state's longest running German publication, appearing out of Breda and Wall Lake from 1884 to 1973. Many papers were directly affiliated with a particular political party: During Abraham Lincoln's 1860 presidential campaign, the Republican editor of Des Moines's German-language *Iowa Post* traded jibes with his rivals at the Davenport *Demokrat* and the Dubuque *National-Demokrat*.

### 3. Working for a Living

By some estimates, over one-half of German settlers to the state became farmers. Merchants, tradesmen, and military officers abandoned their earlier professions to take up the plow. Early immigrants reported that Iowa's prairie soil was wondrously fertile and much cheaper to clear than Wisconsin's forests.

Germans also brought skills in a variety of trades. Masons and carpenters helped to create main streets, homes, and barns throughout the state. Bakers, shoemakers, and tailors kept Iowans fed and clothed. Meanwhile, German bankers and pharmacists cared for Iowans' finances and health. There were few German lawyers and physicians, however: most immigrants shied away from professions that required a high proficiency in English.

On occasion, Germans made significant contributions to Iowa's leading industries. Engineers John Froelich and Louis Witry created the world's first gasoline-powered tractor, the Waterloo Boy, later bought by John Deere. Firms such as Witmer & Witmer Insurance (Des Moines) or Rath Meatpacking (Waterloo) figured prominently in the history of insurance and meatpacking in the state. Leopold and Abraham Sheuerman, immigrants from Binau near Heidelberg, established woolen mills in Marengo and Des Moines, eventually becoming the state's largest clothing manufacturers. These industries employed other immigrants in turn, not just from Germany.

Most businesses were family-owned and -operated. Wives often tended shop rooms and kept accounts, while children helped where they could. Prior to industrialization, unmarried women often served as domestic servants or worked in textile manufacturing. Later, many were employed as shop workers or as unskilled labor in factories that placed a premium on manual dexterity, such as Muscatine's pearl button industry, founded by Hamburg native John Boepple, or Davenport's cigar rolling shops.

German Iowans joined other workers in demanding a safe working environment and basic social provisions from their employers. Factory workers and meatpackers from Ireland, Scandinavia, and Germany were at the forefront of unionization efforts throughout the state. Like their counterparts in Milwaukee and elsewhere, laborers in towns like Muscatine supported union activists and voted socialist, much to the chagrin of German-Iowan factory owners such as John Boepple.

#### 4. Community Life

German immigrants placed a premium on education. Many religious congregations supported parochial schools, but public schools also provided German-language instruction in multiple subjects. To correspond with relatives across the Atlantic, children had to master not only German grammar, but also German penmanship, which differed substantially from English.

Immigrants further fostered community through social institutions. Many towns could boast a *Turnverein* (gymnastics society). The Turners embraced the motto of “a sound mind in a sound body” and promoted a regular physical regimen among members, which in later years included women alongside men. Their large halls often doubled as community centers for concerts, lectures, and political organizing. Marksmanship clubs (*Schützenvereine*) were also popular. Davenport’s Schützenpark, complete with zoo, roller coaster, and beer garden, was the German community’s favorite venue for Sunday recreations.

Music played a major role in German-American culture. Amateur choral societies (*Sängervereine*) flourished throughout the state. At the turn of the twentieth century, Dubuque, Davenport, and Burlington took turns hosting the bi-annual Singing Festival of the Northwestern Singers’ Union (*Sängerbund*), which spanned the Midwest. Professional singers trained in the classical German repertoire traveled to Iowa from Chicago, Milwaukee, or other urban centers. With time, German musical traditions merged with more American forms. In 1898, when Davenport hosted its *Sängerbund* festival, Carl Beiderbecke served as honorary president. Two generations later, this musical family produced famed jazz trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke.

Community halls provided a stage for amateur theater groups in Dubuque, Davenport, Templeton, and elsewhere. Their repertoire initially consisted of contemporary works by popular German and Austrian playwrights, but later included plays written for German-American audiences by East Coast immigrant authors. The vaudeville circuit also brought “Dutch” (*Deutsch*) performers such as Gus Williams, born Gustave Wilhelm Leweck, Jr., who performed skits and songs in a comedic German accent.

## 5. **Brewing, Prohibition, Politics**

The state's ethnic German population was known for beer, both its manufacture and its consumption. However, many Iowans supported the temperance movement, which sought to outlaw alcohol as a source of immoral behavior, and which considered German and Irish drinking customs uncivilized. The Iowa legislature passed consecutive temperance laws from 1855 to 1894, and Republican support for these measures meant that German Iowans often leaned Democratic, more so than in states that lacked such laws.

As an agricultural state, Iowa was perfectly suited to support a brewing economy. By 1878, over 130 breweries thrived statewide. Brewers paid top dollar for grain, making hops and barley, not corn and soybeans, the cash crops for many farmers. The brewing industry generated jobs, leading the legislature in 1856 to modify the state's first prohibition law to permit the manufacture of beer, wine, and cider made from Iowa-grown fruit and grain.

For German Iowans, beer was part of family outings and public concerts, not saloon culture. They fought the state's temperance laws at every opportunity. A prohibition amendment to the state constitution passed in 1882, but was struck down on a technicality. When a new prohibition law went into effect in 1884, German Iowans rioted in Iowa City and Marshalltown, and the law was openly flouted in majority German communities. The legislature eventually approved a compromise, the Mulct Act of 1894, which taxed saloon owners via fines for the sale of alcohol.

Many German Iowans voted Republican, but felt abandoned by party leaders over prohibition. Some historians attribute Abraham Lincoln's election to German-American votes in the Midwest: support for abolition was strong among liberals who had fled Germany during the conservative crackdown that followed the failed democratic uprisings of 1848, and a disproportionately high number of German Americans enlisted in the Union Army. Still, in 1860, a vote for Lincoln's Republican Party was also a vote for temperance. Ethnic Germans in reliably Democratic towns throughout the state were often more willing to countenance slavery than support prohibition. Anti-temperance sentiment continued to influence the German-Iowan vote through 1916, when male voters in predominantly German counties rejected a referendum on extending the vote to women, fearing that women would support renewed prohibition efforts.