

German Oshkosh & the Turners

By Thomas J. Rowland

A German gymnastic movement, spawned by Napoleon's occupation of most of the German States in the early 19th century, the Turners (Turnverein) made their arrival in America in the wake of the failed liberal revolutions of 1848. This underscores the reality that the Turner movement was rooted in as much political, social, cultural and philosophical underpinnings as it was in its physical expression. To borrow the somewhat hackneyed phrase, the Turners vowed the holistic approach of a "sound mind in a sound body."

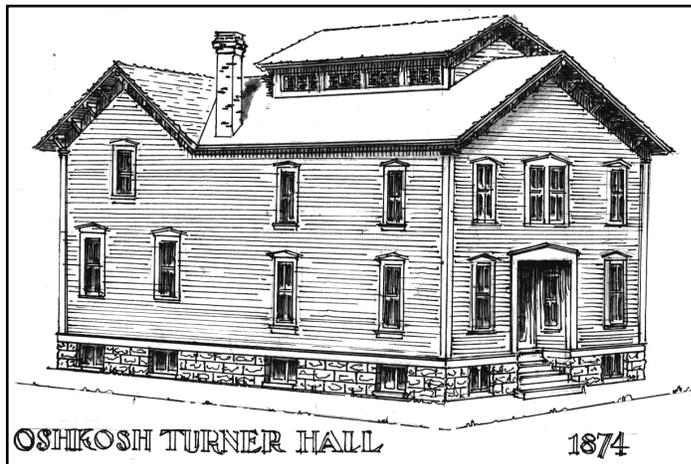
Some of the earliest Turners to arrive in Wisconsin were liberal refugees from the failed revolutions in Prussia. Labeled the "Forty-Eighters" by other Germans, they sunk roots primarily in the city of Milwaukee and along a due westerly route out to Watertown, the place in which one of the most famous émigrés of 1848, Carl Schurz, called home. The lack of radical credentials did not preclude other German immigrants from gravitating to the Turner movement.

The iconic symbol of the Turnverein was its creation of Turner Halls, sprinkled throughout Wisconsin and a handful of other states (Indiana, Missouri, Iowa and Pennsylvania to name but a few). In order to attend to its holistic mission the halls served as gymnasiums, lecture centers, theaters, music halls, and as a source of political mobilization. In the late 19th century the Turners played a conspicuous role in American public education and the nascent labor movements. Second generation Turners in Wisconsin would figure prominently in the ranks of both the progressive and socialist movements of the early 20th century.

Winnebago County in the mid-19th century was populated primarily by the so-called "Yankees" who had migrated into the state from points along the eastern coast in the decades leading up to 1850. They would soon be joined by numerous German immigrants from that point onward. By the close of the 19th century Winnebago County was overwhelmingly German in both ethnicity and character.

One of the earliest expressions of German solidarity occurred in Menasha. There in 1856 Germans created the Concordia Society which would eventually merge with the Menasha Turner Society in 1888. Turner activities were conducted in an edifice named Germania

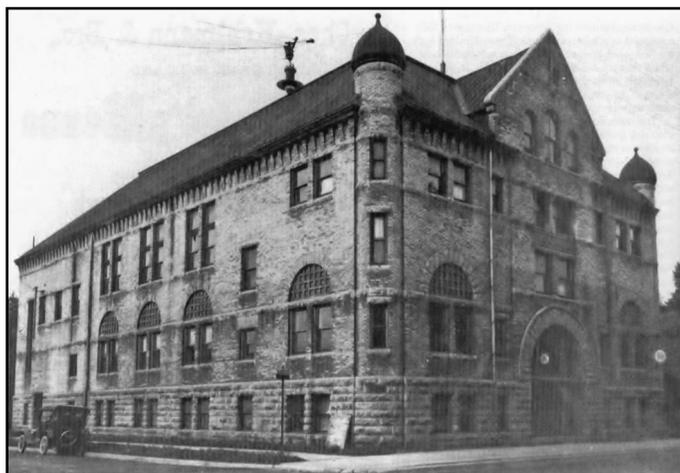
Hall built sometime during the 1860s on 320 Chute Street. In 1927 the organization adopted its final name, the German Benevolent Society. With its fundamental purpose no longer relevant, the hall was razed in 1963. A banquet facility, named Germania Hall, was built upon the same spot, serving the local population for nearly three decades until it ceased operation.



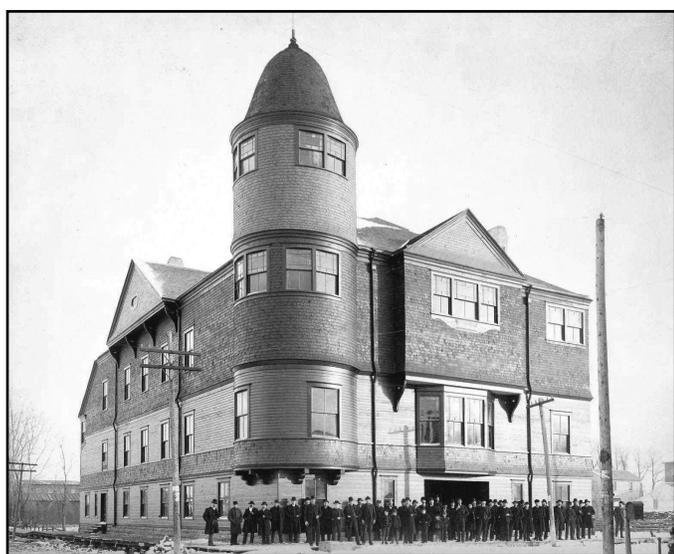
Sketch of Early Oshkosh Turner Hall
(Drawing courtesy of Richard Nebel)

Oshkosh became the home of not just one but two Turner Halls, one on the North Side and the other on the South Side. Recent research has revealed that a commodious wooden structure was built by the Turners in the downtown section (North Side) of Oshkosh in 1874. The best recreation of the hall reveals that it was not particularly ornate but very utilitarian in character, resembling a common warehouse in many ways. An attempt to turn it into an opera house in 1883 proved less than successful and in 1890 the Turners turned to William Waters to design an imposing brick structure at the old site on the northeastern corner of Merritt Avenue and Jefferson Street. Much larger than the 1874 structure the new hall was capable of providing the full range of Turner activities much like the hall in downtown Milwaukee. With the general "de-Germanization" of so much in Wisconsin following the Great War the Turners were able to sell the building with its crenellated facade to the Wisconsin National Guard as its Company B armory. It served that purpose until the mid-1960s when the building was razed to make way for an auto repair shop. Today Jackson's Glass Shop occupies the site.

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North Side Turner Hall - Jefferson St. & Merritt St.
(Photo Courtesy of Dan Radig)



South Side Turner Hall - South Main St. and 10th Ave
(Photo Courtesy of Dan Radig)

Four years before he submitted the blueprints for the North Side Turner Hall, William Waters had drafted plans for another hall on the South Side of town. Located on the southeast corner of South Main Street and Tenth Avenue, it was an immense and grandiose wooden structure in the then popular Queen Anne style, sporting a soaring corner tower. It is said that an organization known as the Badger Club assumed ownership of the building in 1902 but before long the edifice was transformed into a warehouse for storing paper products. A fire destroyed it in 1920.

Visit the Wisconsin Historical Society online to learn more about the Turnverein movement around the state of Wisconsin.

OPL Genealogy Club

Are you passionate about exploring your family history and would enjoy connecting with other genealogists? The Oshkosh Public Library is looking for any local genealogists interested in getting involved in a Genealogy Club that is being planned for this fall. The group would meet on a monthly basis and feature an educational topic and discussion between members to share tips and ideas for both amateur and experienced genealogists. If you or someone you know is interested, contact Sandra Toland at the Oshkosh Public Library for more details.

Email- toland@oshkoshpubliclibrary.org

Volunteers Wanted

Get involved with the WCHAS today and serve on one of several committees that organize events, preserve local history, and maintain the historic Morgan House. No matter what you enjoy, we have projects to suit your interests. The Collections Committee has hundreds of historical artifacts that need to be cataloged, identified, and appraised. A goal has been set to make our entire archival collection available to the public in physical and electronic format. Many of these documents and photos need to be cataloged and scanned. The Revenue Development Committee is looking for great fundraising events to plan and searching for grant opportunities. You can help create and plan a great program, workshop, or exhibit with the Exhibitions and Events Committee. Our biggest asset, the Morgan House, is over a century old and the Property Committee takes special care to preserve the structural and historic integrity of the home. We have several other committees listed below for you to consider. Contact us today to get involved in our mission to preserve and share our local history.

WCHAS Committees

- ◆ Collections
- ◆ Exhibitions & Events
- ◆ Property
- ◆ Revenue Development
- ◆ Outreach
- ◆ Membership
- ◆ Historic Sites & Markers