
Sophie Gudden: A German-Wisconsin Feminist and Oshkosh Leader of 100 Years Ago

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In anticipation of the showing of MKI's exhibit "Neighbors Past and Present: The Wisconsin German Experience" in Oshkosh in early 2020, many intriguing tales of German immigrants have surfaced. After all, in the 19th century Oshkosh was the second-largest city in Wisconsin and destination of many German-speaking immigrants, including workers in the wood industry, who were imported to labor in the lumber mills along the Fox River, and farmers who found the landscape much like home. Oshkosh was also the site of a thriving brewing industry, a culture brought over from the homeland, and a huge number of saloons, pubs, and taverns where the bubbly beverage was served. The city was home to two Turner Halls and no less than eight different German-language newspapers from 1852 to 1920. But one story stands out, sadly all but forgotten though an important part of the city's heritage: that of Sophie Gudden (1861–1919).

The name Gudden may ring bells for Bavarians, for Sophie's father, Dr. Bernhard von Gudden, achieved notoriety as the psychologist who diagnosed King Ludwig II of Bavaria as insane, and who drowned with him under mysterious circumstances in the Starnberger See in 1886. Sophie, born in Munich on August 21, 1861, was one of nine children, many of whom went on to illustrious careers as artists and doctors. She married her American cousin, who



Sophie Gudden, *Oshkosh Northwestern*, February 26, 1907, p. 7

was also named Dr. Bernard Gudden (though without the h), when he was studying medicine in Munich. In 1884, the couple moved to America, where Dr. Bernard Gudden had his medical practice in Oshkosh, near his home town of Black Wolf. Here he became a prominent general practitioner and surgeon, and proprietor of the German American Hospital. Sophie soon became well known as a cultural leader for her activities in lo-

cal arts organizations such as Twentieth Century Club, but she was also active in statewide workers' rights campaigns through the Wisconsin Consumers' League. An eight-hour day and minimum wage for women and improved child labor laws were among her strong concerns. She became centrally involved in the women's suffrage campaign, speaking around the country at political and public events in German and in Eng-

Mrs. Dr. B. C. Gudden left this morning for Munich on account of the recent death of her father, who was drowned with King Ludwig of Bavaria. She will be accompanied to New York by Dr. Gudden.

Oshkosh Daily Northwestern, June 16, 1886, p. 4

lish, and writing articles for English and German newspapers. She worked with the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association, but demanded a more radical strategy and so founded the Wisconsin Political Equality League, of which she served as vice-president. In her last years, she was confined to a wheelchair due to arterial sclerosis, but though that limited her mobility, it did not slow down her activism, for, as she said, “my tongue was never affected by sclerosis.”

In addition to her political writings, Sophie Gudden had literary interests. In 1893, she published *Familienfestspiele* in Stuttgart, a collection of short dramatic sketches for amateur performance; her book of German-language fairy tales and a novel were never published and appear to be lost.

Dr. Bernard Gudden committed suicide in September 1916 following a nervous breakdown and depression, but Sophie Gudden remained a loud voice and visible leader in the suffrage cause. She died just weeks after Wisconsin legalized suffrage, on July 23, 1919. The Guddens, who are buried in Black Wolf, had no descendants.

Mrs. Gudden owned a considerable art collection, but the only public bequest in her will was the donation of

two paintings from her collection to the city of Oshkosh for display in the Public Library, which stood around the corner from her home. One painting of a child was by her brother, Rudolf Gudden (1865–1935), an accomplished artist in Munich, and the other, of an old woman, was by her brother-in-law Paul Ritter (1859–1888, not to be confused with his famous uncle of the same name, also a painter). These two fine paintings appeared to have been lost after her death, abandoned and neglected for

a century, but just recently they were found and identified in storage at the Oshkosh Public Museum, where they had landed with incorrect attributions and confusing paperwork.

Despite the prominence that she enjoyed during her lifetime, Sophie Gudden has been all but forgotten today. Her fascinating story deserves to be rediscovered and retold. May it also be an inspiration to look for other forgotten history. 🗝️

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Unattributed clipping, 1919, Oshkosh Public Library, reprinted in Michael J. Goc, *Oshkosh at 150: An Illustrated History of Oshkosh* ([Friendship, WI]: New Past Press, 2003), p. 78. The image is titled, “Wisconsin Suffragists in Convention,” and also shows Meta Berger, Helen Haight, Jessie Annette Jack Hooper, and Ada James