
A Struggle for Recognition: The Saint Louis *Schillerverein*

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In the latter half of the nineteenth and first third of the twentieth centuries, Saint Louis “was one of about a half dozen [cities] in the United States that by 1910 had over 100,000 citizens of German birth or origin” and was also home to nearly a hundred different *Vereine*, or clubs (Detjen 5). The *Westliche Post*, a German language newspaper, lists seventy such *Vereine* as having participated in unveiling a statue of Friedrich Schiller on 13 November 1898 and Hermann Knauer, counts, “[z]u etwa 40 deutschen Gesangsvereinen gesellen sich 20 deutsche Turn- und 80 gegenseitige Unterstützungsvereine” (58). One of these took up the task of preserving the memory and works of Friedrich Schiller. Many such Schiller clubs were active in German-American communities throughout the United States (Hertel 155-73), not to mention the countless German-American reading societies which served a broader patronage (Durden 47). Before the advent of television and radio, *Vereine* served as a vehicle for socialization and interpersonal contact for German-Americans as well as their official duties.

In his book entitled *Germans in Missouri*, David Detjen confirms the importance of *Vereine*: “[T]he primary way in which many German-Americans in St. Louis identified with German culture was through personal contact with other German-Americans in various ethnic social organizations” (15). Detjen suggests dividing *Vereine* into four categories, but his rubric omits a fitting category for the *Schillerverein*, whose purpose was, according to its constitution,

Schillers Andenken lebendig zu erhalten, die Pflege der deutschen Sprache und Literatur in Amerika nach Kräften zu fördern, und würdigen deutschamerikanischen Dichtern und Schriftstellern Unterstützung durch die Deutsche Schillerstiftung in Weimar zu ermöglichen. (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed. 18)

Although the *Schillerverein* undoubtedly had a secondary social function (it even had a social committee), one can infer that the *Schillerverein* was not a club that sought to protect German culture in the same sense as the other *Vereine*. The *Schillerverein's* membership included,

out of 126 members in 1908, 25 who possessed doctoral degrees. In consideration of the club's high number of educated members as well as its expensive dues (\$2 in 1900, \$3 in 1908, roughly equivalent to \$41 and \$55 respectively in 2002), one might safely assume that the *Verein* took its mission of protecting German language and literature seriously. The existence of such a serious club for the sole purpose of protecting German language and literature must have indicated a threat, imagined or real, to German culture. One could even read the St. Louis *Schillerverein* as a literary backlash to a German-American culture that was increasingly diluted by other clubs which gradually allowed purchase of English books with club funds, as Durden points out:

As the [nineteenth] century advanced and the ability to preserve the exclusiveness of German culture became more difficult to maintain, German citizens founded reading societies which continued the communal governing structure as exemplified in the early Reading [Pennsylvania] *Leseesellschaft*, but permitted readings in literature other than German. (56)

Furthermore, if one understands the *Schillerverein* in light of Charles Taylor's essay "The Politics of Recognition," it becomes clear that a serious threat to German culture existed. Before I discuss Taylor's essay, I would like to describe the *Schillerverein* in greater detail. I would like to assert that Charles Taylor's thesis proves to also be accurate in the case of the German-American community in St. Louis in the early twentieth century with regard to its own manifestation of the Schiller cult. The roots of the *Schillerverein* of Saint Louis lie in Marbach, Germany (Schiller's birthplace), where a club formed whose mission was "die Pflege des Andenkens an Schiller" (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed. 18).

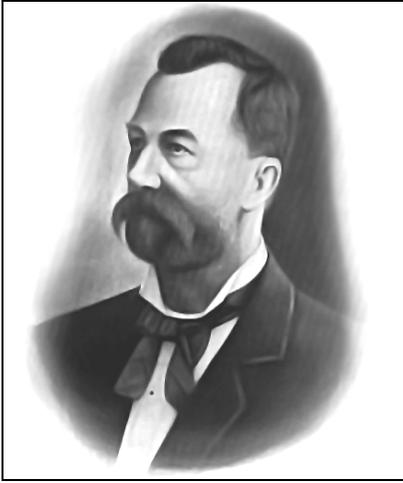
A letter from Geheimrat Dr. Steiner, the chair of the organization in Stuttgart, piqued the interest of Dr. George Richter in Saint Louis. He and others met for the first time in 1896 to discuss a possible chapter of the *Schillerverein* in Saint Louis. Dr. Richter's acquaintance with Emil Preetorius, owner of the *Westliche Post*, led to the first official meeting of the organization in the newspaper's editing room on 1 March 1896. Those present elected a board of directors, who drafted a constitution. At the next meeting on 12 May 1896, the constitution came into effect. The *Verein* granted membership to any adult, provided he or she met acceptance by a two-thirds majority of those members present at a particular meeting. The final board of directors consisted of twelve

members who chose a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. The *Schillerverein* engaged in various activities and sponsored events to encourage the preservation of German culture in Saint Louis during its existence.

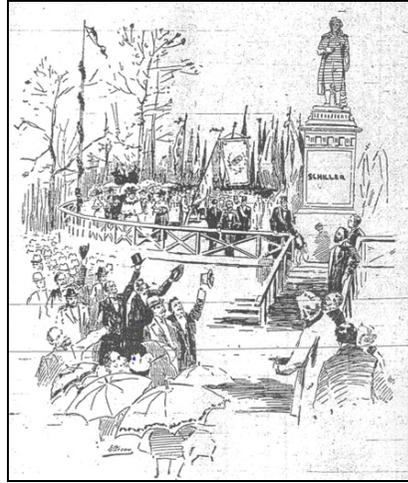
Two events held nearly every year were the commemorations of Friedrich Schiller's birth and death days. The first commemoration (*Gedenkfeyer*) of Schiller's death day happened on 9 May 1896 in Washington University's Memorial Hall (when the University was still located downtown), at which Emil Preetorius and George Richter gave speeches in honor of the famous poet. The first celebration of Schiller's birthday took place on 10 November 1896 in the meeting hall of the *Liederkränz* (another German-American *Verein*) and featured a reception with wine, speeches, musical entertainment, and a display of artwork.

Other programs sponsored by the *Schillerverein*, although less tenacious through the years, help construct a clearer picture of the club's contribution to the preservation of German culture in St. Louis. Otto Heller, charter member and founder of the Washington University German Department, announced on 3 December 1896 a program of speeches and colloquia open to the public. A note on the meeting of 15 April 1897 announces a competition for the best papers on the theme "Schiller und unsere Zeit." The *Schillerverein* offered prizes for the contest of \$50 and \$25 in gold. In 1898, the *Schillerverein* established classes for advanced students in the Sunday schools of the various *Turnvereine*, which focused on the study of German literature and cultural history. In addition, the *Verein* donated "eine Anzahl billiger deutscher Klassiker" to schools and hospitals for distribution as those organizations saw fit, either as prizes or as communal reading material (*Schillerverein* 2nd ed. 8).

In 1899, in addition to the donation of \$10 to the Washington University student library, Otto Heller began a series of *Leseabende* where interested parties could meet for the discussion of Schiller's plays. In 1903, in anticipation of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition to be held in Saint Louis, the *Schillerverein* considered participating in the exposition by means of a pavilion. As recorded in its chronicle, the *Verein* decided against a booth in the fair: "Der Plan, eine deutschamerikanische Ausstellung anzuregen, wurde fallen gelassen, da die Anteilnahme an einem derartigen Unternehmen zu lau erschien" (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed. 12). However, the same source mentions that in 1904, "An der großen Feier des Deutschen Tages am 6. Oktober auf der Weltausstellung beteiligte sich der Schillerverein in würdiger Weise" (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed. 13). Two members gave speeches there: Emil Preetorius and George Richter.



Preetorius, another charter member of the *Schillerverein*. (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed. 23)



The unveiling ceremony in 1898 (*Westliche Post*, 14 November 1898)

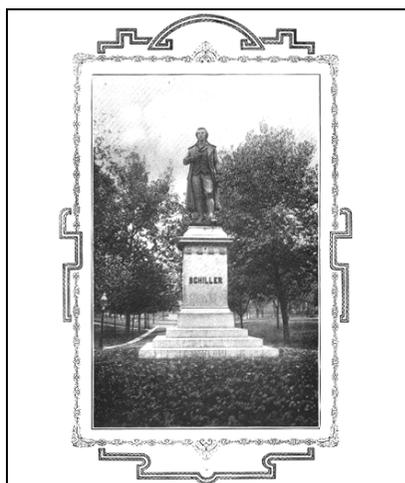
Quite possibly the largest event hosted by the *Schillerverein* was Schiller's birthday in 1898. In addition to a *Vorfeier* in the Germania-Theater which included staged scenes from Schiller's dramas, musical and gymnastic performances, and speeches; the heart of that year's celebrations included the unveiling of a monument of Friedrich Schiller, a gift to the city from General Carl Stifel, according to the *Westliche Post* on 14 November 1898. The statue is now located at Schiller Plaza on Market Street, opposite the downtown post office. It is a copy of the statue Ernst Rau had created in 1876 for the Marbach *Schillerverein*. The *Schillerverein* was in charge of the mammoth occasion. A parade stretched from Monroe to St. Louis Avenue and had to be divided into six sections. Detjen claims that 30,000 German-Americans took part in the festivities (16).

The *Westliche Post* gave a brilliant description of the important event, although there may have been some exaggeration: "Ein jeder vertretene Verein trug mehrere Fahnen und nach Auflösung des Zuges nahmen die Bannerträger mit denselben auf der Tribüne, welche das Standbild umgab, Platz, eine prächtige, farbenreiche Staffage bildend" ("Enthüllung" 21). The newspaper notes that a choir of 400 members sang "Kreutzer's 'Das ist der Tag des Herrn'"; it is unclear if this was a single choir, or a conglomeration of the different *Gesangvereine*. The latter could be true in light of the following description: "Andachtsvolle Stille herrschte in der tausendköpfigen Menge, bis die letzte Note verklungen, worauf sich ein brausender Applaus erhob, der sich erst legte, als Herr

Max Hempel hervortrat, um die deutsche Festrede zu halten” (“Enthüllung” 21). The tone set by the *Westliche Post* indicates the magnitude of the unveiling of the *Schillerdenkmal* and its importance to the German-American community. One would imagine that if the security of German culture and literature were in danger, those present would not have shown such respect for Schiller or such elation in the actual unveiling of the statue: “Entblößten Hauptes beobachten die Umstehenden den Act und dann erhob sich ein Jubel, in den alle, im Park anwesenden Personen begeistert einstimmten” (21-22). Christiane Hertel, in her article on the Schiller cult in the nineteenth century points out that, “the *tableaux* [such as the St. Louis Schiller monument], like Goethe’s *Terborch*, occupied an intermediate style with which a broader audience could more readily identify, despite the fact that most of Schiller’s dramas treat of aristocracy in foreign lands and distant pasts. [...] Broad appeal [...] was the aim of the Schiller cult” (168). The phenomenon Hertel describes would certainly also apply to the German-American community in St. Louis. Furthermore, Spuler reminds the scholar that Schiller was for German-Americans and American Germanists “ennobled and mythologized — he became the vessel of personified virtues, void of all baseness” (73). Schiller’s elevation proves to be crucial in the way the St. Louis *Schillerverein* understood its mission.



Title page of the *Schillerverein*'s official publication. (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed. 1)



Monument to Friedrich Schiller in St. Louis (*Schillerverein* 3rd ed 35)

Bearing in mind the above mentioned jubilant scene from the statue ceremony in 1898, let us consider reasons for the existence of an organization like the *Schillerverein*. Detjen establishes that almost all of the *Vereine* in Saint Louis carried some element of social interaction (15). Knowing this, one could assume that the charter members of the *Schillerverein* would already have had a sufficient social outlet among the other *Vereine* in Saint Louis, which existed long before the *Schillerverein*. The *Schillerverein's* constitution states clearly that one of its purposes was to keep Schiller's memory alive. That an organization whose name is *Schillerverein* stated so simply in its constitution that it sought to preserve the memory of Schiller seems oversimplified. According to the *Schillerverein's* own publications, it sponsored activities that involved much more than the somber remembrance of Schiller.

One could argue that the charter members of the *Schillerverein* wanted to preserve German language and culture not simply because of how much they loved their German heritage. Besides its elements of socialization and preserving the memory of Schiller, the *Schillerverein* must have existed to fill a different need: to protect vicariously the identity and recognition of its members and German-American culture as a whole. One might argue that the other *Vereine* were already encouraging the preservation of German language and culture before the *Schillerverein* even existed. In light of Charles Taylor's essay "The Politics of Recognition," the other *Vereine* in Saint Louis might have achieved their preservation of German language and culture more efficiently than the *Schillerverein* by supporting social activities which concretely improved Germans' self-image and helped them forget about the social hurdles one encounters living in a foreign country. Since the *Schillerverein* consisted of more educated individuals than the typical *Verein*, one can assume that they had taken time to think carefully about the implications of their possible integration into American society. While some kinds of integration may have been necessary to life in the United States at the time, complete integration would have resulted in a loss of self-image.

In fact, Olson indicates that those German-Americans in Saint Louis who "belonged exclusively German clubs (25.4 percent) can be considered the least assimilated" (273). The *Deutsch-amerikanische National-Bund* (DANB), an umbrella organization which supported smaller clubs such as the *Schillerverein*, recognized the dangers of total integration. This unifying club sought to awaken and strengthen the sense of unity among the people of German origin in America. The DANB's opposition to integration also manifested itself in the

Germanische Kongress held during the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. At this meeting, the majority of the speeches (including Otto Heller's) focused on the superiority of German values.

Charles Taylor points out that when a system of government changes from one of absolutism (in which self-legitimation and fulfillment arises from a relationship with an entity above oneself, i.e., the monarch or God) to one of democracy (which emphasizes the equality of all citizens), one must suddenly change the way one legitimizes oneself as a person (39). That democracy places (or attempts to place) every citizen on equal footing in regards to obtaining community services and gaining access to the political system, strains one's sense of identity. One must acknowledge the equality of all one's neighbors with oneself, but also relinquish some of the characteristics that gave one identity in the past, i.e., land ownership, an education, church membership, etc. Taylor points out how identity affects one's self-image: "The demand for recognition in these latter cases [of multiculturalism] is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental characteristics that define human beings" (25). The charter members of the *Schillerverein* had undoubtedly scrutinized the implications of democracy and were familiar, at least on a subconscious level, that to continue to propagate a self image, they had to be able to identify with something greater than themselves, moreover something German.

The speeches given during various club events by members of the *Schillerverein* are wrought with embellished language that sings the praises of one German author in particular, Friedrich Schiller. One can read in the first paragraph of Dr. Bahlsen's speech at the celebration of Schiller's 145th birthday not only the duality that Schiller overcomes metaphorically, but also the way in which he unifies Germans everywhere in the way they appreciate his work:

Schillers Poesie trägt das Gepräge der Vornehmheit, und doch ist der Dichter so populär geworden wie kein anderer seiner Nation, weder vor noch nach ihm. Dies erklärt sich, sobald man nur den Begriff Popularität im richtigen und besten Sinne fasst. Der Dichter hat uns selbst die Definition gegeben und zwei Wege zur Erreichung der Volksgunst bezeichnet: In dem einen Falle hätte der Dichter der großen Masse zu gefallen und auf den Beifall der Gebildeten zu verzichten, im

anderen Falle die Kluft zwischen beiden aufzuheben
und das Volk zu packen und mit sich emporzureißen.
("Zum Gedächtnisse" 8)

Goethe satisfies, according to the *Westliche Post*, the need of a community of German-Americans to have a central cultural icon with whom they can identify. Charles Taylor might say that since the members of the *Schillerverein* recognize the need and place for a central canon of cultural values, their tendency to cling even tighter to it has an adverse effect, namely, the community's dependence on this canon of values. Taylor asserts the following about groups and individuals struggling for recognition: "Their own self-depreciation [...] becomes one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression. Their first task ought to be to purge themselves of their imposed and destructive identity" (26). I would argue that the other *Vereine*, as opposed to the *Schillerverein*, were more successful in the eradication of their "imposed and destructive identity" by the sheer fact that they did not encourage German culture as forcefully. Rather, they sponsored events and activities (i.e. gymnastics, singing) that allowed German-Americans to enjoy their German heritage and community in a positive light in conjunction with their lives as Americans. The members and guest lecturers of the *Schillerverein* seem to want to play a more active and pragmatic role in the defense of German culture. They seem to fall under the generalization that Durden makes about reading societies: "[T]he readings, restricted to the German language, served as a subtle method for preserving the linguistic, cultural, and social traditions of Germany in a non-German speaking country" (56).

In a speech printed in the *Westliche Post* in celebration of Schiller's death anniversary in 1898, Professor Biewend tells a story about a German-American who has integrated himself into American culture to the point of absurdity:

Ein Onkel geht mit seiner Nichte den Broadway entlang
und das Kind (es war ein noch ganz kleines Kind, sonst
wäre dies nicht vorgekommen) redet ihn deutsch an.
Das ärgert den Onkel; er fürchtet für 'dutch' gehalten zu
werden und schnauzt das Kind an: 'When you bin an
the street mit me, you speak English or go on the ander
side; I dont want people to know that I was dutch.' Ob
der gute Mann denn gar nicht daran gedacht hat, daß
man es vielleicht an seinem wundervollen Englisch nicht

hätte merken können, daß er wo anders in Amerika das Licht der Welt erblickt hat? Und wer lacht denn eigentlich über die sogenannten ‘dutchinen’ und ihre deutsche Sprache? Der gebildete Amerikaner gewiß nicht; denn der bemüht sich häufig durch Fleiß und mit großen Unkosten, die deutsche Sprache zu erlernen. (“Schillers Todestag” 9)

Although this anecdote serves as comic relief for a somewhat dull speech, it has some serious implications. By using hyperbole, the speaker points out that some German-Americans are so embarrassed about their German background that they avoid their native language to the extent of prohibition of their descendants from using it, but also sounding uneducated in the host language. The fact that the members and guest lecturers of the *Schillerverein* actively sought to counter such embarrassment leads one to believe that they felt somehow threatened by inclusion, no matter how minimal.

I would like to mention one more facet of Taylor’s theory. Taylor might have seen Germans living under the umbrella of American culture as a whole. German-Americans also received signals from American culture in general to try to shed their German identity. The *Westliche Post* desired its readers to above all be Americans and then German-Americans. This position is evident from the paper’s edition of German Day on October 7, 1904, which features “an elaborate drawing showing the allegorical figures of Germania and Columbia (representing Imperial Germany and the United States) on equal footing: On the left one sees Germania with a spear, the German flag, and the shield with the German eagle; on the right Columbia with a spear, the star-spangled banner, and the American eagle” (Lützel 78).

Hermann Knauer writes from Germany in 1904 his impression of German-American culture in Saint Louis:

Beachtenswerte Blüten hat bereits die deutsch-amerikanische Literatur hervorgebracht, und geradezu bahnbrechend wirkten die Deutschen im amerikanischen Musikleben; die deutschen Gesangsvereine zeigten erst den Yankees, wie arm und nüchtern ihr in Kirchenbesuch und Jagd nach dem Dollar geteiltes Leben war. Eine Reihe tüchtiger Bildhauer, Maler, Architekten, Brückenbauer hat das Deutschtum den Vereinigten Staaten geschenkt, und die Bedeutung

deutscher Wissenschaft für das amerikanische Geistesleben leugnet heute kein vernünftiger Amerikaner mehr. Die Geschichte der Deutsch-Amerikaner, meint Cronau, umfaßt lauter ehrenvolle Blätter in der Geschichte des Deutschtums! (55)

According to this “outside” voice who could have perceived German-American culture in Saint Louis at face value without an understanding of the complexities of assimilation faced by German-Americans, the state of German-American culture seems to him a flower in full bloom. The fact that a visitor from Germany could make such positive comments about German-American culture in Saint Louis leads one to believe that it was indeed alive and well during the years the *Schillerverein* existed and that the impending downfall and presumed need for preservation was one fabricated during the advent of this culture’s assimilation into the American melting pot. The *Schillerverein* was, in essence, a preservation project designed to save an endangered species not endangered at the time. The members of the *Schillerverein*, had they listened to the Charles Taylors of their time, might have fought less of an uphill battle towards the end of their club’s existence.

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