

Germans Organize Local Turnverein

In this column and the next one, we will look at the early history of the Turners in Monroe and the building of the original Turner Hall. Even though the group wasn't incorporated until 1863, they formed early in 1860. Several references made to the Turners in the Monroe Sentinel in 1859 and 1860 are printed in the book, *Becoming a Village: Monroe in the 1850s*. The first of those was printed on November 2, 1859 and refers to an event where the "Germans of Monroe" were hosting a German poet at "Turner's Hall."

"The Turners of this village" planned to celebrate the organization of their society with a festival in their hall on Wednesday, March 20, 1861. The exercises were open to the public beginning with a speech by the president, followed by a theatrical exhibition and a dance with music by the New Glarus Band. A reference was made the following month that the "German Turners" were forming a "volunteer company."

The Monroe Sociable Turn Verein of Green County, to be known simply as Monroe Sociable Turn Verein, was incorporated with "a meeting of not less than five persons of full age and citizens of the State of Wisconsin" held on August 15, 1863. Richard Borsch was chosen as the chairman of the meeting and Herman Stahl, clerk. The objectives of the society were to serve as sociable entertainment as derived from conversation, discourse, and music; promote mental culture; and practice and teach the art of gymnastics. Stahl, Anton Miller, and Morris Roth, all immigrants from Germany, were elected as trustees for a one-year term. Richard Porsch [sic] and Herman Strahl [sic] signed the papers. The 1891 city directory mentioned that Ed Ruegger and John Erfort were charter members, as well as others, who were not named, for a total of 12.

By the middle of that decade there were references to masquerade balls being held at McKey's Hall, awards being given to some members of the Monroe Turnverein at the state level, and a grand ball at McKey's Hall. An article in the March 27, 1867 Sentinel stated, "The German Turners of this place had a very pleasant time at their hall last Wednesday evening, consisting of gymnastic and literary exercises, and excellent music by the Silver Band; the entertainment finally closing by the distribution of prizes and a social dance. For the best gymnastic feats, the first prize was awarded to Edward Miller; second prize, Daniel Germann; third prize, John Spahr. The contest for the prizes was quite spirited, and closely contested, many of the competitors performing feats of remarkable strength and agility, which frequently elicited hearty applause from the large audience that witnessed the exercises. Our German friends know how to pass a pleasant evening." McKey's Hall would have been in the building that was torn down in the 1920s to build the Eugene Hotel on the west side of the square.

It was announced on September 18, 1867 that the German Turners were "considering the project of building a large hall for the use of their association," which met with the favor of the German population. The plan was to have it done by the following August so they could host the state convention of Turners.

Within three weeks they had plans to build the large brick hall, 60 by 80 feet, on their lots near the Foundry; the foundry was located where the food pantry is now located. The plan was to lay the foundation yet in the fall and complete the building early in the summer. They had raised a considerable amount of money from their association, but still needed help from the community. They planned to get subscriptions on bonds from local businessmen, payable in five installments of \$5 each. The bonds were to be repaid to the subscribers from the rent of the hall and other rooms in the building. It was expected that the "new building will be an important improvement in our village, and can be used for festivals, concerts, exhibitions, dancing, &c. It will be built and furnished in good style, and will afford superior accommodations for public assemblies of all kinds."

The foundation was not laid in the fall as planned; Ed Reugger, chairman of the building committee advertised on March 11, 1868 that he would receive sealed proposals for the excavation for the foundation by March 18. Specifications and plans could be seen by contacting him. They had "succeeded well in raising money on their bonds, and will find no difficulty, we trust, in securing the remainder of the required amount." The hall would be built in the modern style of a theater building with an addition of 20 by 20 feet for the stage and dressing rooms. Other features were "gallery, boxes, raised seats, and other improvements necessary to comfort and convenience." It was to be a hall "equal to any in the state for all practical purposes."



This unknown group of people are shown outside the Turner Hall that was built in 1868 on the same location as the current building. The front doors of this building faced east, unlike the current building whose main doors are on the south. The opening of this fine building was a historic event for Monroe.

During this time, the Turners stayed busy with a ball for the benefit of the state teacher's gymnastic fund on Easter Monday, April 13 at McKey's Hall. Another ball was held in the same hall, for \$1 per couple, in the evening after the cornerstone for the new building was placed on April 27.

More about this building and organization will be shared next week.