

The aking of ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 1830-Present

The Germans Settle in Milwaukee

*Turner Hall with
Horse and Carriage*



*Valentin Blatz,
Brewery Owner,
1826-1894*



*Horse-Drawn Beer Wagon
for Schlitz Brewing Company*



*Mathilde Anneke,
Milwaukee's First
Feminist*

Connecting to “The Making of Milwaukee”

Video Chapters: #4 - Here Comes the Germans

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - Coming to Milwaukee

The Germans Settle in Milwaukee

People from all over the world have immigrated to Milwaukee to make a better life for themselves and their children. In the 1800's, though, immigrants in Milwaukee were almost all from Europe. One group of immigrants stands out for making Milwaukee a very unique American city. They are the Germans. Germans came to Milwaukee in droves during the 1800's. By 1880, 27% of Milwaukee's population was German. So many Germans came to Milwaukee in those years that by 1990 almost half of the people who lived in the Milwaukee area were related to someone who was born in Germany.

During the 1800's it was common to hear more people, in certain areas of Milwaukee, speaking German than English. Some stores even had signs in their windows that said, "*English Spoken Here*," to make sure that people who were not German knew they could shop there. There were German newspapers and German was spoken in schools, clubs, opera houses, recreational centers, and churches. Milwaukeeans knew that their city was a very German place.

Some of Milwaukee's Germans were extraordinary or famous people because they accomplished well-known things for the city. Peter Engelmann was one such person. He was a teacher and a principal at a German academy in the mid-1800's. He also collected different plants, insects, and animals. His collections helped start the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Another important person was Mathilde Anneke. She and other women helped fight for women's rights way back in the 1800's. In 1848, when women did not work outside the home, she started a newspaper called the *Woman's Time*.

The Usinger family became well known in Milwaukee and across the country for making tasty sausages and meats. The Usinger factory and store are still on Old World Third Street. German brewers like Frederick Miller, Frederick Pabst and many others helped to make Milwaukee famous. Even today Milwaukeeans are reminded of their city's German history because their baseball team is called the Milwaukee Brewers.

Milwaukee had its famous people, to be sure. But most Milwaukee Germans were ordinary people, known mostly to their families, friends, and co-workers. They had German last names like Schmidt, Schultz, and Schwartz as well as Baumgartner and Mueller. Some were common laborers who worked in factories and on farms. Others were skilled craftsmen who worked with wood and metal. Still others were teachers, doctors, engineers, inventors, and housewives. Together they helped build Milwaukee's homes, roads, schools, parks, churches, and businesses.

Germans formed a close-knit community near downtown. One important place where Germans gathered was called Turner Hall. Known in German as the "*Turnverein*", Turner Hall was a club where people gathered to exercise their bodies by practicing gymnastics, and to exercise their minds by discussing important social and political issues of the day. Turner Hall still stands on 4th Street in Milwaukee.

Even though Milwaukee Germans had much in common and formed close-knit communities, they were very different from each other. Germany was not even a country until 1871, so people living in that part of Europe often dressed differently and had different traditions. Some Germans were Pomeranians who lived in Pomerania, which is in northern Germany. Others were Bavarians and lived in Bavaria, the southern part of what is now Germany. Some Germans followed the Lutheran religion, some were Roman Catholic, and some were Jewish. There were even differences in the way they spoke German!

Because they had their differences, Germans who came to Milwaukee did not always get along. Sometimes there were religious conflicts when Roman Catholics and Lutherans disagreed with each other. It was certainly common for Catholic and Lutheran Germans to not understand the religious traditions of German Jewish people. The Germans had different political views as well; some were socialists, some were

democrats or republicans. Sometimes Germans didn't understand the cultural traditions of other immigrants and vice versa. For example, the "Yankees" in Milwaukee, people who came to the city from the northeastern United States, did not like Germans going to beer gardens on Sunday.

In the early 1900's, the worst problems for Milwaukee Germans occurred because of something that happened thousands of miles away. World War I was a war in Europe where Germany fought against France, England, Russia, and other countries. The war began in 1914 and the United States joined the war against Germany in 1917. Sadly, there were people in Milwaukee who thought that any Germans, even German American citizens, were the enemy. In Milwaukee, this prejudice influenced thousands of German people to hide their cultural identity and traditions. For example, a group of German families had a club they called, "The German Club". Because of the bad feelings directed at Germans, they changed the club's name to The Wisconsin Club. In another case, the German-English Academy became known as Milwaukee University School. Some Germans even changed their names to sound less German. For example, the last name Schmidt was sometimes changed to Smith.

Despite the problems for Germans caused by reactions to World War I, German influence is still highly visible in Milwaukee. In many ways, it was the Germans who made it acceptable to speak a different language, eat different food, and live a different way of life in the American city of Milwaukee. For the many other groups who came to Milwaukee, like the Polish, Italians, Irish, Greeks, African Americans, and later people from Mexico and Asia, Germans led the way in making Milwaukee a diverse city of many nations.

One German, who was happy that he came to Milwaukee in the 1800's, wrote this to his relatives in Germany:

*"I thank the Lord that I am here,
and regret that I did not come sooner."*

Gurda, John. (1999). Chapter 3: *"Here Come the Germans"*, pg. 74,
The Making of Milwaukee. Milwaukee: The Milwaukee County Historical Society.