

# German-American Society of Spokane

## A brief History

Our Deutsches Haus has seen many changes since 1897 when its foundation was laid. These changes were of a structural nature, providing us the necessary facilities to meet, to sing and dance, to teach and learn, to cook and relish the culinary art of our homeland. Our beloved organization predates even our old building and has undergone changes including four name changes since its formation during its almost one hundred and thirty-year history. And yet our basic ideals and our cultural core has endured since the eighteen sixties. As we look into the hearts of our aging members, we will discover an enduring pride in our beloved culture, our music and literature, our customs and our hearty and flavorful food.

It is with nostalgic interest that I turn the fragile yellowing pages of the German newspaper, *Washington Post*, where we get an insight of German pioneers in our community. During those early pioneer days of the early eighteen sixties, the German immigrants in Eastern Washington were full of pride, ambition and energy. They worked hard in the fields and forests, applying their various trades and crafts, and still they found the need, the energy and ambition for singing, dancing and gymnastics. Their early meeting place was the Concordia Hall in downtown Spokane, or Spokan Falls as it was then known. Although our current membership has relaxed its gymnastic ambitions, singing and dancing remain part of our cultural expressions to this day.

An old five-page typewritten account by an unknown German club member describes the very lively social activities during the eighteen eighties. I assume that whoever wrote about our early German pioneers, must have researched the *Washington Post*, probably the

way I was captivated in reading these fascinating details in the historical documents section of the MAC. These records give us a detailed description of the activities of our German pioneers who lived here in Spokane and the surrounding areas.

Their early gymnastic facility was in Concordia Hall in downtown Spokane Falls, where in 1889 they formally founded the *Spokane Falls Turnverein* (gymnastic association). It is to this legal incorporation that we of the German-American Society trace our direct association. At that time there were already other German associations, who also used that facility, notably the *Männergesangverein Concordia*, whose name our current German choir has adopted. The *Deutscher Kriegerverein* (German war veteran) regularly held their meetings there as did the *Zitherklub Harmonie*.

There were many lively social gatherings, dances and balls scheduled monthly and weekly. People from throughout the Inland Empire came to attend the many functions at the Concordia Hall. As their popularity and membership quickly grew, they searched for a larger place. The Old Comique Theatre in downtown Spokane Falls served the purpose for a while. It provided adequate space to even hold monthly exhibition gymnastics for the men and young boys referred to as *Schauturnen der Männer*.

Eventually the increased membership called for discussions and plans to build a facility of their own. Meetings that included all the German associations were held for the purpose and desire to unite as one organization for the preservation of German culture. At that meeting no conclusion was reached.

The *Turnverein* continued its pursuit of acquiring a facility of their own. At the *Turnverein* meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1891, one of the members, a Herr Paul Schulze, who was also associated with the

Northern Pacific Railroad, presented an offer from the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, a parcel of land for only \$20.00 as a gift to the association. This piece of Railroad property became available with the condition that a structure be built within nine months and that the construction costs be at least \$2500.00, otherwise the property would revert to the railroad company.

Financial difficulties were the primary reason why this generous offer was not pursued right away. In April 1892 a new choir, *Frohsinn* was formed, whose members participated in *Schauturnen* and wished to join in the pursuit to building a new facility. For this purpose, a committee of 6 *Turnern* (gymnasts) was formed. For the next three years nothing about building plans was mentioned, only of new German clubs and associations such as the *Hermans-Loge* was formed and joined the organization. The *Turnverein* also added their own choir section at that time.

In October 1895 a building fund was finally started with a \$50.00 donation. This fund grew, as did the memberships of the various German clubs and organizations that regularly assembled in the Comique Theater. In September of 1897 the *Turnverein* received notice that the Comique Theater would no longer be available, which then prompted plans for acquiring property for the construction of their own *Turnhalle*. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of September it was decided to purchase the property on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. Within two days the architect Preusse delivered completed construction plans to the *Turnverein*, which were immediately approved and accepted. Ross and Bol were awarded the construction contract and by the end of October construction began. Construction progressed so rapidly that by the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1897 the general meeting could be opened in their own *Turnverein* hall. It was exactly eight years that their long-awaited wish of having their own hall was fulfilled.

The dedication ceremony on New Year's Eve of 1897 took place with great fanfare and celebration. The January 7<sup>th</sup> addition of the *Washington Post* describes the events and the entire program in glowing details. (I translated and wrote about the details in a previous article, *Our Cultural Haven*.) To this celebration admission of \$1.00 was charged for men. Ladies were admitted free of charge. It was reported that they netted a profit of \$252.40.

The new year in 1898 began with the threatening claim that a Mr. Cowley actually owned the property on which the *Turnhalle* was built. It was not until the 5<sup>th</sup> of March that the jubilant news was received that the Northern Pacific Railroad and Mr. Cowley had reached an agreement. It was then legally established that the grounds and building were the legal property of the *Turnverein*.

The turn of the century proved to be a glowing and prosperous time for all the German clubs in Spokane that associated themselves with the *Turnverein*. A class of 54 children further reflected the growing German membership, the prosperity and confidence in its future. The membership of the men's gymnastics had more than doubled. It then became necessary for expansions and additions to the *Turnhalle*. In the fall of 1900 plans were approved for an addition to enlarge the building. This was soon completed as well as the construction of a stage that was added to the interior of the hall. In 1903 the German drama club TALIA made great use of the addition of the stage with its many dramatic presentations in the *Turnhalle*.

Despite these newly additions, the hall again became too small, so in 1905 the architect Preusse was again engaged to design and oversee the following substantial improvements: In the lower level, living quarters for housekeeping personnel were added (these were occupied until the late 1960s). Additional conference rooms were also added in

the lower level. With these new improvements water lines had to be installed, which also served the newly installed washrooms for women and for men. These improvements also included the necessary sewer lines that had to be installed and hooked up to the City sewer system. Even dressing rooms for women and for men were constructed. The outside of the building also received a facelift; its outside walls were to be covered with a rustic ornamentation of some kind which at a later renovation was covered up with a brick veneer.

With these improvements, other clubs rented the facility such as the St. Joseph Club as well as the *Sachsenverein* who made use of the building in April of 1905.

In March of 1906 major masonry work had to be done. It was necessary to build a new foundation as well as cover the outside of the building with the brick facade. Again, Architect Preusse provided the plans, free of charge. The project was completed at a cost of \$1480.00.

In August of 1907 a Sangerfest took place in the *Turnhalle*, our current Deutsches Haus.

During the last one hundred and twenty-nine years our German Club has been known by four different names. Although our German pioneers filed their first articles of incorporation on December 9, 1889 as an athletic club, it was also the focal point, the cultural center towards Germans in and around Spokane Falls gravitated. As more German clubs joined the *Spokane Falls Turnverein* as it was known, they wanted to be identified as more than an athletic club. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 1915 they drafted new articles of incorporation to be known as *Deutsche Gesellschaft of Spokane*.

Germans in our region were loved and respected, for their diligence, craftsmanship, their music and culture. But when World War One started, Germans here as well as throughout the United States felt uneasy to display their cultural heritage. Although they had done nothing to contribute to the hostilities, yet when the United States entered the war against Germany, loyalties came into question. To remove suspicion that this organization might be supportive or at least sympathetic to their Fatherland, they changed their name to simply *Third Avenue Society of Spokane* on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1942.

For the next twelve years, German songs, and German *Gemütlichkeit*, German culture on the whole remained subdued. Its dampened cultural spirit was kept alive by old board members that met at various homes rather than at our *Deutsches Haus*. It took a while for wounds to heal after hostilities had stopped in Europe. Then with the arrival of German War Brides, who yearned for a bit of German culture, an interest grew to revive our old Cultural Haven on third Avenue. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1954 members of the Third Avenue Society felt secure enough to openly acknowledge our German cultural heritage to adopt its current name of German-American Society of Spokane.

Today our *Deutsches Haus* welcomes all who enjoy and support our German culture, our food and music, and above all, our *Gemütlichkeit*. Those are the only conditions to be a member of our treasured organization, the oldest ethnic society in our region.

Edgar Bueschke

