

## [ANN: Symposium Report -- "German Iowa and the Global Midwest," October 5th-8th, 2016, Iowa City.](#)

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"German Iowa and the Global Midwest"

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Symposium Report

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"German Iowa and the Global Midwest" met in Iowa City October 5th-8th. In his opening remarks, H. Glenn Penny (University of Iowa) noted that the symposium is part of a series of events examining the role of Germans and German-Americans in the Midwest. The project includes a museum exhibition, now open at the University of Iowa Old Capitol Museum in Iowa City, (which will travel statewide in 2017); a mobile museum exhibit; an online archive with over 1500 documents, images, and historical newspaper sources; musical, theatrical, and puppetry performances; and literary readings. ([www.germansiniowa.com](http://www.germansiniowa.com)).

While introducing the keynote speaker, the German Consul General in Chicago, Herbert Quelle, noted the coming 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. entry into World War I in 2017 and the anti-German sentiment and violence against German-Americans that followed. Quelle emphasized the timeliness of an examination of anti-immigrant violence and xenophobia amid the contemporary migrant crisis—a connection raised throughout the symposium. In his keynote address, Frank Trommler (University of Pennsylvania) examined tensions between a "conformist," melting-pot vision for American immigrant culture and the preservation of ethnic identity. Trommler presented a broader perspective on the anti-German violence, identifying the interplay of multiple contradictory threads of discourse concerning German-Americans. He highlighted a group of American "literary rebels," including H.L. Mencken and Theodore Dreiser, who rejected the Anglo-American puritan tradition and took a pro-German stance. Trommler's keynote was followed by a performance from the University of Iowa's Männerchor and the Chamber Orchestra, featuring a musical re-creation of an 1898 concert from a regional *Sängerfest* in Davenport, Iowa. Glenn Ehrstine (University of Iowa) delivered a historical overview of the Davenport *Sängerfest* and the popularity of German-American *Männerchor* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Midwest.

The question of integration into American culture resurfaced in the presentation by Kathleen Neils Conzen (University of Chicago). Conzen detailed the migration paths of one Luxembourgian family (from her own family history) and the transnational nature of their movement. Conzen noted that families and individuals in Europe often moved for financial gain and social standing, and extended this pattern across the Atlantic. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Luxembourgians formed "colonies" in upstate New York, Ohio and Chicago, and continued to push further westwards into Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas, while circling back through those networks. Conzen concluded that the further west the Luxembourg immigrants moved, the more their ethnic identities dissolved, though many patterns still

persisted.

The following panel from University of Iowa students focused on Germans and German-Americans in Iowa during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. UI history PhD student Marie Synofzick used the history of the Amana Colonies—located just west of Iowa City—to engage German-American identity formation. Synofzick shared photographs from Amana’s “Oktoberfest,” which offered visitors a Bavarian-tinged “German culture” quite distant from the community’s pietist heritage. As Synofzick argued, the community’s embrace of different guises of Germanness reveals the flexibility of German-American identity among the Amana residents. UI senior Ryan Ballard spoke on the German-American community in Davenport, Iowa, which experienced particularly violent episodes of anti-German sentiment and “hyper-patriotism” following U.S. entry into World War I. When Germans disappeared from Davenport census data in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ballard concluded they had begun checking the “American” box and shedding their German identity. Moreover, the Germans in Davenport did not act in unison, and many participated in the anti-Germanism that caused those affiliations to change. UI junior William J. Simpson spoke about the Quaker-based Scattergood refugee hostel, which operated from 1939-1943 outside West Branch, Iowa. The hostel assisted German and Austrian refugees of Nazism as they adjusted to American culture and sought to support their families. Simpson found that this “haven in the heartland” allowed the “guests” to adjust to American culture within an environment of respect and harmony quite distinct from the hostility many refugees experienced on the East Coast.

In the afternoon panel, Bradley Naranch (University of Montana) redirected the examination of German-American influence in the Midwest back to Germany. Naranch highlighted a contrast between human agency and human-centered causality and used these two poles to interrogate how German immigrants shaped German history. He argued that German migrants provided motivation for German state actors to create a strong state that could protect the interests of Germans living elsewhere. Thus, according to Naranch, German immigrants to the Midwest were not passive actors and exercised “unintentional agency.” Returning to the German-American community in Davenport, Iowa, Alison Efford (Marquette University) traced the shifting ethos of the German-American community from a belief in the expansion of rights in the period of the American Civil War to a more restrictive notion. Describing German-Americans in Davenport as victims and victors, Efford argued that one must consider German-American discrimination in a longer-term perspective. Despite the violence during World War I, Germans were otherwise successful in obtaining civil rights and spared much of the anti-immigrant fervor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After relocating to the University of Iowa’s new Voxman Music Building, Kelsey Kramer, a UI PhD Candidate in musicology, spoke about her research on musical activities in Iowa’s German POW camps. Kramer described how German classical music played an important role for the POWs, as they sought to remember a Germany free of the stain of Nazism. Following Kramer’s presentation, university musicians performed a re-creation of a POW concert from May 6th, 1945—when Hitler’s suicide was already known to them—with selections from Franz Schubert’s song cycle *Winterreise* and a rousing performance of Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

On Saturday morning, the symposium audience was treated to an old fashioned detective story, presented by Walter D. Kamphoefner (Texas A&M University). Kamphoefner described his journey to discover the historical Jürnjakob Swehn, the Mecklenbergian protagonist of Johannes Gillhoff’s 1917

novel *Jürnjakob Swehn, der Amerikafahrer*. Kamphoefner humorously recounted the fits and starts in his research, using local government and census records and the presumed letters of the historical model for Jürnjakob.

Saturday's second panel focused on varieties of German-American transnationalism. Jana Weiß (University of Münster) discussed the outsized role of German immigrants in the 19th century "rebirth of American brewing." Germans were so central to beer production that "German" itself became an international byword for brewing excellence. Midwestern concerns catered to this connotation, as an Americanized *Gemütlichkeit* figured prominently in marketing campaigns. Weiß thus echoed Marie Synofzick, demonstrating German-Americans leveraging their culture to meet market demands. Bethany Wiggin (University of Pennsylvania) moved us forward and back in time to discuss the connections between America's colonial German communities, radical Protestantism, and today's ecological concerns. Wiggin described her recognition, in the midst of local heritage work, that the theological currents spurring German colonial anti-slavery agitation might extend towards Green issues today. Andrew Zimmerman (George Washington University) replanted us in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Midwest: namely, an antebellum Iowa riven by conflict. Deep entanglements between German immigrants and black abolitionists generated cross-racial collaboration on the basis of shared "radical" agendas. As illustration, Zimmerman discussed John Brown, as well as the pragmatic anti-slavery of working-class German "communists." Zimmerman concluded with the stirring Second Battle of Boonville, during which an "enslaved rebel" escaped to an ethnically German Union unit (identifiable by accent), fully aware of Germans' radical reputation. By locating the global in the superficially local, Zimmerman's "plebian transnationalism"—or, an internationalism that doesn't recognize itself as such—provided perfect illustration of the conference's broader theoretical outlook.

In discussing Jewish lives in the Midwest, the symposium's final panel considered the boundaries of ethnic and German identities. Tobias Brinkmann (Pennsylvania State University) utilized credit reporting agency records to track Jewish peddlers from German-speaking lands making their way across the Midwest. On account of this mobility and entrepreneurialism, Jewish integration into "German" associational life across the small-town Midwest was common and transitory. Consequently, such data has allowed scholars to draw conflicting conclusions about the "Germanness" of these migrants. Brinkmann warned against the historiographical conflation of German and Jewish immigration prior to the arrival of East European Jews, given the tenuousness of these connections and the disenfranchisement of Jewish communities within German-speaking Europe. Kit Belgum (University of Texas at Austin) used four case studies of German-Jewish Iowans to explore transgressions across the Midwestern ethnic divide. Like Brinkmann, Belgum utilized associational records to demonstrate the mobility and communality of German-Jewish men, noting the ethnic particularism animating German and Jewish identity. Jeannette Gabriel (University of Iowa) made explicit the invisibility of women in historical narratives of Jewish migration. Gabriel argued that this neglect derives from a focus on elite actors as well as economic or political activity. Spearheading a project on Iowa women's Jewish past for the Iowa Women's Archive, Gabriel identified three key areas: communities with few surviving sources, families arriving in Iowa after the 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration peak, and 20<sup>th</sup> century refugee communities. Gabriel highlighted how a tradition of Reform Judaism within the German-Jewish Midwest, and the accompanying emphasis on social justice, united these communities across space and time. Quite appropriately, all three papers in the final panel complicated the overall premise of the symposium, demonstrating the slippery

saliency of “Germanness.” In her closing remarks, Elizabeth Heineman (University of Iowa) urged an intersectional analysis linking this history to that of other “hyphenated Americans” to sharpen our discussion of power and privilege, and posed the question of what is at stake in identifying these populations as “German,” “German-American,” or “American” at different points in this history.