

1906 Wheeling Saengerfest Revisited

By Seán Duffy.



Singers from the Liederkrantz-Turner Club perform at the Ohio County Public Library in 2010.

On Sunday, May 29, the Ohio County Public Library in Wheeling will welcome back the Liederkrantz-Turner Club, a German singing society from Dayton, Ohio, accompanied by the Kolping Society of Cincinnati. The Liederkrantz-Turner singers were in town six years ago to mark the 125th anniversary of Wheeling's 1885 Saengerfest, an elaborate, regional German choral singing festival. So memorable was their first Wheeling experience, they requested a return, along with their friends from Cincinnati, to mark the 110th anniversary of the last Wheeling Saengerfest, hosted throughout the city during an oppressive August heat wave in 1906.

Late Nineteenth Century Wheeling was truly a robust German-American town, with a German language newspaper, mandatory German language classes in many schools, and German language services in many churches. Between 1855 and 1961, the town was also home to numerous German singing societies, including the Arion, Harmonie, Maennerchor, Beethoven, Germania, Liedertafel, Mozart, Concordia, Liederkrantz, and Teutonia. The singers were mostly male, accompanied, when needed, by female singers from the Women's auxiliaries. The societies often had their own musicians.

In addition to their individual concerts, which often featured formal balls and dinners, these groups joined forces annually to sponsor Wheeling's biggest 4th of July celebrations at the Fairgrounds on Wheeling Island.

The singing societies also sponsored three big regional singing festivals, or Saengerfests, in 1860, 1885, and 1906. Other singing societies journeyed to Wheeling from all over Pennsylvania and Ohio for a few days of concerts, parades, and picnics. The 1860 Saengerfest featured performances in Washington Hall and the Athenaeum (converted not long after to a Civil War military prison). The 1885 version was held at Alhambra Palace Hall, a huge roller-skating rink at Chapline and 33rd Streets, and ended with a "Monster Parade" and "Grand Excursion to Wheeling Park."

By the time of Wheeling's 1906 Saengerfest (held for the Central Ohio Singing District) only the big three societies were in operation: the upper crust Arion (a merger of the Harmonie and Maennerchor), which operated Arion Hall at 20th and Main Streets; the working class Beethoven, which would be the last of the Wheeling societies still standing, surviving until 1961; and the working class, South Wheeling based, Mozart (a merger of the Concordia and Liederkrantz supported by Henry Schmulbach and his brewery employees), which operated Mozart Park (and beer garden). Schmulbach's chief rival, brewer Anton Reymann, was a prominent member of the Arion Society, and operated his own beer garden at Wheeling Park.

The 1906 Saengerfest was the biggest of them all. Held primarily at the Court Theatre, it featured 24 singing societies from Columbus, Steubenville, Dayton, and many other Ohio towns. The Cleveland Symphony Orchestra served as the primary orchestra, backing a chorus of 700 men (for whom a huge wooden scaffolding was special built on top of the Court's stage), and another chorus of 600 children. Many buildings throughout town were draped with German and American flags and bunting for the occasion and the hotels were booked full with visitors. The festivities ended with another monster parade and a massive, Schmulbach beer-fueled picnic and party with dancing, bowling, shooting and general merriment at Mozart Park.

Despite the grand success of the 1906 Saengerfest, and despite Wheeling's status as a staunchly German town, just a few years later, its distinctive German character would be virtually erased. America's entry into

the Great War sparked a highly effective national propaganda campaign against the German enemy. The ensuing anti-German backlash caused dramatic changes in Wheeling. In 1918, all German language instruction in city schools was discontinued, Wheeling businesses like the German Bank dropped the word “German” from their corporate names, and all of the German Singing Societies (except for the Beethoven) became extinct. And Wheeling would never again experience the merriment of a Saengerfest, that is, until the Ohio County Public Library revived the tradition in 2010.

And on Sunday May 29, you will have the opportunity to experience another Wheeling Saengerfest at the library, because, despite Wheeling's loss, German Singing societies continue to thrive in other American cities. In fact, the Dayton and Cincinnati singers are stopping in Wheeling on the way home from the National Saengerfest, the Triennial German-American Choral Event of the Nord-Amerikanischer Sangerbund, being held in Pittsburgh, Thursday May 26th through Sunday May 29th, hosted by the Pittsburgh Sangerfest Committee.

The library doors open at 1 PM and, after an introduction by Dr. David Javersak to provide the historical context, the Liederkranz-Turner Club and the Kolping Society will perform. Free German festival food created by Chef Chris Kefauver and the culinary arts department at West Virginia Northern Community College will be served. There will also be door prizes, including some from the Wheeling Brewing Company, which has crafted the seasonal Saengerfest Schwarzbier, a pilsner dedicated to the history of German singing in Wheeling.

The Wheeling Saengerfest program will be dedicated to the late Dr. Edward C. Wolf, whose research and writing ensured that Wheeling's German singing societies would not be lost to history. Visit the library's online calendar at www.ohiocountylibrary.org or call 304-232-0244 for more information. See you at the Saengerfest!



In this real photo postcard from the collections of the Ohio County Public Library Archives, “Arion Hall” at 20th and Main Streets is decked out in bunting and flags for the 1906 Saengerfest. The building still stands.
