

A German “Picnic in the Forest” as a Civilizing Influence on American Culture (1896)

Abstract

This source describes a picnic organized by the German Workers' Association in Chicago in 1896. Participants enjoyed music, beer, and dancing, and they gushed about the German forest, which stands as a symbol of Germanness alongside language, modesty, and knowing how to have a good time. Germans from different regions joined together in an “imagined nation” abroad. The party also included young American men and women, but the text differentiates them from the Germans, who are described as more athletic and graceful.

Source

Picnic for the Workers' Association of Des Plaines Hall in Ogden's Grove

Ogden's Grove. — Coffee and cake. — Over a glass. — Music and musicians. — *Ach*, I am so tired, etc. — Dancing men and women. — Young America dances too, and how! . . .

“Make your way up toward North Avenue until you come to Halsted Street; go right on Halsted until you come to Willow Street; there turn your face to the setting sun, look up, and you will see the green treetops, make your way toward them until you come to the entrance; pass directly through the gate—and the forest-shadows will surround and cool you.” This is how a friend described the way to Ogden's Grove.

“Forest-shadows”! Who could resist this enticement? I set out for Ogden's Grove; already on Halsted Street I could hear the sound of festive horns, and I quickened my pace. Yes, the trumpeters' call was coming from there, from among the trees!

Sunshine, forest green, forest-shadows, and the blare of trumpets! What more could a German heart desire on a Sunday afternoon? — A good glass of beer!

“Countryman,” I asked the cashier who took my 15 cents, “do you also have a spot of beer in this place?”

“Oh, plenty!” answered the Holsteiner, “and good company as well!”

The Workers' Association of Des Plaines Hall held a picnic in the oaken halls of Ogden's Grove, and came in droves with their wives and children. So many members of the public also came to celebrate that all the tables and benches were occupied.

Cheerful groups everywhere: here families became acquainted over Sunday afternoon “nectar”—extra strong coffee—and the necessary accompaniment, “ambrosia,” in the form of *Stippels*, ring cakes and butter cakes. Chatting and joking in all the dialects of our dear German homeland, talking and interrupting . . . and beer-drinking groups of young and old men . . . of course, it goes without saying that a big crowd of “skipping and leaping boys and girls” was also not lacking, for all Germans agree they enjoy this . . . but American youth also jumped around with them under the trees.

There was pause in the music; but the musicians . . . got busy with the beer . . . and then climbed happily . . . back onto the decrepit bandstand and from then on horn, flute, and fiddle resonated through the forest . . . From all sides, people crowded onto the dance floor . . . slim, strong young figures: the girls in their finest Sunday dress, simple, tasteful, elegant, in accordance with their means and abilities, yet by no means garishly dressed. The few young ladies with cropped hairstyles and “Grecian bands” apparently belonged to the Celtic or Anglo-American tribes, but were no less comely on that account; only the styles are different . . . All of Germany . . . from the sea coast to high Switzerland, danced here in unity . . . Young America was also present; but these youth, though tall and used to taking long strides, huddled together anxiously during the dancing . . . quite shockingly, desperately . . . as though dancing were a harsh punishment. Tempo and keeping a beat seemed quite unknown to America’s ears and feet. The youngest German friend I made today, from Hannover, could use his long legs better.

Ha! For the Germans, nothing compares with a party in the forest under the green oak trees! This has remained with us from our forefathers’ forest lives . . . I forgot that I was under foreign trees, so far, far from my homeland; I exchanged friendly words with many and was happy with other happy people. Sadly, I would soon again be reminded of the reality of my outsider’s existence. Why am I so awkward and so unable to insert myself into the local scene?

Source: *Der Westen*, 22. July 1869; reprinted in Hartmut Keil, ed., with the assistance of John B. Jentz, *Deutsche Arbeiterkultur in Chicago von 1850 bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Eine Anthologie*. Ostfildern: Scripta Mercaturae, 1984, pp. 214–15.

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