

## **German pride reached apogee with October 1913 festival**

It was a celebration of an immigrant community and its language and culture unlike anything ever seen in Bloomington history, before or since.

“Deutscher Tag,” or German Day, was a three-day festival that ran in mid-October 1913. The occasion was the one hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig, a decisive defeat for Napoleon which marked the end of French dominion in Germany and the subsequent rise of the German nation state.

Today, it’s hard for us to appreciate the size and strength of Bloomington’s German community. Back in 1913, German houses of worship included St. Mary’s Catholic on W. Jackson, Evangelical Friedens on W. Front, and the Jewish synagogue on N. Prairie. There were German-language schools, and there was even a German-language weekly newspaper, The Bloomington Journal.

The German Day organizing committee represented a who’s who of the business community, including A.A. Rothmann of Meyer Brewing Co.; Oscar Mandel of My Store, a discount department store; and two men whose companies carried their names, the confectioner Paul F. Beich and retailer C.W. Klemm.

The celebration included the recreation of the famous Berlin boulevard “Unter den Linden,” (meaning “under the linden trees”), along E. Washington from Main to East streets. Both sides of the street were lined with decorative structures and buildings were draped with German and American flags.

The celebration opened Wednesday, October 15, with a grand concert at the Coliseum. The Bloomington Band led a procession down Unter den Linden to the Coliseum, receiving “cheer after cheer” as it played “Die Wacht am Rhine” (“Watch on the Rhine”). The central Illinois Saengerbund (the term for a German singing and social society) provided much of the evening’s music.

Speaking almost entirely in German, Hon. Michael F. Girtten, a retired Chicago judge, delivered the keynote address. “It should be the pride of you German Americans to keep up the language of the fatherland,” declared Girtten.

The highlight of the festival was Thursday’s parade, which started at the Coliseum and made a circuitous route through downtown, north to Franklin Park and back downtown. Public schools were closed so children could watch the procession, and the crowd swelled to the thousands, including many out-of-towners.

The parade featured five floats—described by The Pantagraph as “the most elaborate and beautiful ever seen in Bloomington”—recounting the epic story of the German immigrant in America. One of these allegorical floats carried Columbia, a young woman

representing America. There was also a float for Germania, whose bodyguard included twenty-five “horsewomen,” with each costumed rider carrying the flag of a German state.

Yet with war looming in Europe, and fears, spoken and unspoken, of German militarism, local newspaper coverage stressed the patriotism and allegiance of local German Americans.

The German immigrant, noted The Bloomington Daily Bulletin, exemplified the “humble virtues” of citizenship, including “promptness in the discharge of business obligations, perseverance and economy.” The Pantagraph praised the “Teuton” for his “solid and sturdy worth, manhood, good humor, good nature and good sense.”

The celebration ended Friday, October 17, with a banquet back at the Coliseum. The program included music from the Majestic Theatre orchestra and the Bloomington Maennerchor (a German society translated as “men’s chorus”).

The menu featured olives, celery, pickles, cold roast ham, potato salad, fish salad, bread, crackers, pretzels, cheese, wine, lemonade, “malt tonic,” cake, coffee, and cigars. Toasts were limited to five minutes in duration.

For German Americans, the era of good feelings ended abruptly in 1917 with America’s entry into what was called “The War to End All Wars.” In Bloomington, as elsewhere, a nativist or “superpatriot” movement put an end to German language newspapers, church services, and schools.

It was a stunning turn of events, and the persecution of German Americans remains a stark reminder that our freedom and identity can be snatched away with startling rapidity and ease.