

Strolling Through Milwaukee's Ethnic History

by Jill Florence Lackey and Rick Petrie



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Introduction

Between 2000 and 2012 Urban Anthropology Inc. conducted a study of ethnicity in Milwaukee County. Over 400 interviews of people in over 60 ethnic groups were conducted. The study resulted in the book, *American Ethnicity in the Twenty-first Century: The Milwaukee Study* by Dr. Jill Florence Lackey (Lexington books, 2013). This book is currently used in college classrooms. However, the staff at Urban Anthropology Inc. wanted to produce a book designed for a local lay audience, hence the current publication was planned.

Strolling through Milwaukee's Ethnic History provides an "up close and personal" look at local ethnic life by directing readers to the neighborhoods and venues where the groups left their marks. It brings readers directly into their experiences, whether it involves strolling through the environments they built or participating in contemporary ethnic activities.

There are surely other venues in Milwaukee where ethnic activity can be seen. The best place in Milwaukee to experience multiculturalism at one venue is at the Holiday Folk Fair International held annually in November (see <http://www.folk-fair.org/location.html>). Other sites include various ethnic festivals at the Henry J. Maier Festival Park (see <http://milwaukee-world-festival.com/calendar-of-events>).

Outline of book

Strolling through Milwaukee's Ethnic History provides historic journeys into the experiences of some of the main ethnic groups in Milwaukee County. Chapter One includes historical walking tours of Milwaukee County ethnic groups with populations of at least 25,000 in Milwaukee County in 2010. These include (in alphabetical order) African Americans, Germans,

Irish, Italians, Mexicans, and Poles. The narrative invites readers to learn the history and local contributions of these groups by walking the paths they took during significant periods of their history. Each segment ends with a short description of current ethnic activity that might interest readers.

Chapter Two includes information on those ethnic groups that had populations of more than 10,000 but less than 25,000 in Milwaukee County in 2010. These include (in alphabetical order) the English, French, Hmong, Jews, and Norwegians. Each segment describes historical experiences and provides a description of some current activity that represents the group well and might interest readers.

Chapter Three includes information on special ethnic groups with populations in Milwaukee County under 10,000. By "special" the authors mean that the groups (a) made significant contributions to the history of Milwaukee County, (b) are currently on the rise in the area, or (c) had engaging experiences in Milwaukee County. These include (in alphabetical order) the Burmese, Czechs/Slovaks, Greeks, Kashubes, North American Indians, Puerto Ricans, and Scots.

Chapter One: Major populations

Chapter One covers the ethnic groups that had populations of at least 25,000 in Milwaukee County in 2010. They are the African Americans, Germans, Irish, Italians, Mexicans, and Poles. The groups will be presented historically, per the time of arrival of large population waves.

While each of the ethnic groups presented had multiple areas they settled in Milwaukee County, this book focuses on the areas where the groups tended to have the most influence. Put on your most comfortable shoes, dress for the weather, and enjoy your strolls through Milwaukee ethnic history!



Milwaukee's City Hall, by German architect, Henry H. Koch

The Germans

To understand Milwaukee at all is to know something about the German presence here. The Germans began arriving in large number in the 1840s before Milwaukee was even a city. When Solomon Juneau became Milwaukee's first mayor in 1846, the inaugural address was printed in both English and German. As today, the Germans were remarkably diverse in cultural practices, social class, and religion.

Within a few years of their arrival, German development could be seen everywhere in Milwaukee. Most of the city's north side was settled by Germans and in time the city became known worldwide as the "German Athens." Let's take a walk through that era.

A literal walk through Milwaukee's German history

Let's begin at the Pfister Hotel on the corner of Jefferson Street and Wisconsin Avenue. Once you've arrived, you'll note the beauty of the Romanesque Revival building. It was built in 1893 by Guido Pfister, a German immigrant who also owned a tanning business.

Next, walk west two blocks to Broadway, turn right, and continue on for three more blocks. There you will find Old St. Mary's Church. The church was built in 1846 and was the central home of German Catholic immigrants. Read the inscriptions.

You are at the corner of Kilbourn Avenue and Broadway. Walk north and you will be on the campus of the Milwaukee School of Engineering. The college was built in 1903 by the Germans who believed that Milwaukee needed a technical workforce. Stroll north through the lovely campus, taking in the view.

When you reach Highland Avenue (a pedestrian street), turn west and continue to 270 East Highland Avenue. Here you will find the Blatz Building. Today it houses condos but it was originally opened as the City Brewery in 1846 by Johann Braun ~~and~~ later became the Valentin Blatz Brewery in 1889. It was one of the top German breweries in the city. A jingle well-known across the country in the middle of the twentieth century was "I'm from Milwaukee, and I ought to know; It's draft-brewed Blatz beer wherever you go."



Feeling a little of the German presence now? There's much more. On Highland Avenue, walk three blocks to North

Water Street and turn south. Continue on for several blocks to Wells Street. You will pass the majestic City Hall, designed by Henry C. Koch in the Flemish Renaissance Revival style and completed in 1895. Turn west on Wells. There you will run into the gorgeous Pabst Theater. It was commissioned in 1895 by Frederick Pabst, another beer baron and designed by architect Otto Strack to resemble the European opera houses, again in the Renaissance Revival style. It clearly represented the best in the German Athens tradition.



Next, walk west on Wells Street over the bridge and just past Plankinton Avenue to the eight-story Germania building. It was built in 1896 with the statue of Germania on a plinth

over the door as the symbol of Germany. The building was home to a number of German publications. The name was changed to the Brumder Building in 1918 in response to anti-German sentiments in Milwaukee following World War One.

Now continue about two blocks west on Wells Street until you reach Old World Third Street. Turn north and walk three blocks. You will notice Usinger's Sausage, a major German enterprise in Milwaukee.



Check out the rest of the block. You will also notice the very ornate Mader's restaurant. Stop here to look inside and glance at the menu. Have you ever tried dishes named *Rheinischer Sauerbraten*, *Wiener Schinitzel*, *Kasseler Rippchen*, *Rouladen*, or *Ritter Schnitzel*?

Your final stop is Turner Hall, which is just around the corner on North Fourth Street between State Street and Highland Avenue. Constructed in 1882 by the same German architect who designed City Hall and the Pfister Hotel—Henry H. Koch—Turner Hall became home to the Milwaukee Turners.



The first Turner Societies in the United States were founded by German immigrants and exiles who left Europe during the failed revolutions of 1848. The refugees subsequently became known as the Forty Eighters.

Go inside Turner Hall and look around. Note the gymnasium. The Turner societies, following their German models, were mainly gymnastic clubs that also promoted the right of free speech and clean government. Many of the Forty Eighters and Turner members would become active in liberal movements nationwide and even worldwide, such as the Socialists. The Socialist movement in Milwaukee began in the 1850s. The movement increased in momentum until it reached its peak among workers in the early twentieth century. During the century, three elected mayors and one congressman in Milwaukee were Socialists, as were scores of other political office holders across the county.

Next, walk through the restaurant/beer hall on the first floor of Turner Hall. Look at the photographs and the wall plaques. Note the emphasis on a fully-lived life. The success of Socialism in Milwaukee had much to do with German practices here. According to German scholar, Don Heinrich Tolzman, in the *German American Experience*, Germans brought with them "a large capacity for the enjoyment of life." Among the leisure time activities that Germans contributed in mass to US culture were music, theater, art, architecture, gymnastics, and a penchant for Sunday frolicking.

Now walk upstairs to the Turner Hall ballroom. Stroll about and experience more of the German fully-lived life. During the height of the Socialist influence locally, most of the voting population in Milwaukee also shared German roots and probably recognized cultural affinities with the Socialists—most of whom were Germans themselves. The Socialists were the only political party locally to oppose Prohibition early in the twentieth century, an issue that clearly united Germans in Milwaukee. In addition, Socialist community events such as bazaars, minstrel shows, plays, and picnics were well attended by members of the greater Milwaukee community.

It is time to stop and eat a little German food. Enjoy something at Turner Hall or return to Mader's on Old World Third. Do you now have a better understanding of the Germans in the history of Milwaukee?

But what about the Germans today?

"The Germans have a history of being involved in healthy activities, with the nature walks and the gymnastics."

"My grandfather was always so proud of the fact that by the time that he came to America to the time he retired, he never missed a day of work. There was never a day he didn't work. That was typical in the German community. Nobody wanted to miss a day of work."

Quotes of German informants from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Milwaukee Germans today

World Wars One and Two took their toll on the German influence in Milwaukee. Fearing the post-war backlash, large numbers of Germans changed their names. Schmidts became Smiths; Brauns became Browns; Muellers became Millers. The German press nearly disappeared. Many ethnic Germans moved from the City of Milwaukee into the suburbs.

But not all German culture disappeared in Milwaukee County. In addition to German Fest held each summer on Milwaukee's lakefront, Oktoberfests are celebrated everywhere. One of the best places to participate in this festival is at the fabulous Old Heidelberg Park at 700 West Lexington Boulevard, Glendale.

Prost!

