

Denison Conference Dedicated to German-American Henry Finnern

Actor Eric Braeden keynote speaker at three-day conference

Henry Finnern (1877-1971) published the newspaper *Der Denison Herold*, first in the German language, in Denison, Iowa. He also served as Denison's postmaster and as a representative in the Iowa Legislature. He was president of the Denison Opera House Company for 50 years. And he recently was the reason for a gathering, "Legacy of 1848 – Henry Finnern Conference," in Denison.

German-American historian Joachim "Yogi" Reppmann, who has researched the life and accomplishments of Finnern, says he followed in the footsteps of the German revolutionaries known as the 1848ers who "provided an intellectual transfusion, which not only affected their fellow United States countrymen but also had a pronounced effect on the political and social history of America during one of its most critical periods — before and during the Civil War.

"Before the backdrop of his humble upbringing in a tiny German village in Schleswig-Holstein, he fought for equality and fairness in Denison."

Reppmann, who lives part of the year in Flensburg, Germany, and spends the winter months in Northfield, Minn., became aware of Finnern when he and a fellow undergraduate researcher first visited

America in 1978.

Reppmann was interested in particular in U.S. cities with connections to the state of Schleswig-Holstein, including Denison and Davenport.

He wrote a book about Finnern, "Triumph of Will," with Stuart Gorman, a former student at his Carleton College at Northfield. It was published in September 2009.

A passage in the book sums up Reppmann's feelings about Finnern: "Whether giving money to neighbors to fix their plumbing, building an opera house, serving as the town's postmaster or representing its citizens in the state Legislature, Henry's achievements perfectly reflected Denison's town motto of 'It's a wonderful life.'

"Heinrich Christian Finnern had achieved the goal that all men strive for: He had left the world a better place than he found it."

Anti-German hysteria that had been building up throughout World War I forced him to stop printing his newspaper in the German language.

Reppmann and another German-American historian, Don Heinrich Tolzmann of Cincinnati, organized the three-day conference that featured Hollywood actor

Eric Braeden as a keynote speaker. Braeden is a star of the daytime television drama "The Young and the Restless."

Born in Minnesota, Tolzmann is the author of many books on German American history. His latest title is "German-Americana:



Actor Eric Braeden, left, and "Yogi" Reppmann at the conference in Denison, Iowa

Selected Essays."

On what Reppmann calls "Finnern's darkest day – October 6, 1918," anti-German hysteria that had been building up throughout World War I forced him to stop printing his newspaper in the German language. The book recounts how a group of about 500 people from southwest Iowa gathered in Dow City and drove to Denison to meet near the office of *Der Denison Herold*.

They were joined there by a "few hundred curious, concerned and equally incensed Denison residents," according to the book.

Finnern spoke to the crowd, showed his draft card, the War Savings Stamps he had purchased and affirmed that he was a loyal American who had lived in the United States since age 13.

The mob was not completely satisfied with the case Finnern had made until he announced that the publication of *Der Denison Herold* would cease immediately.

The paper became the *Denison Herald*, printed in English. It later merged with the *Denison Bulletin*.