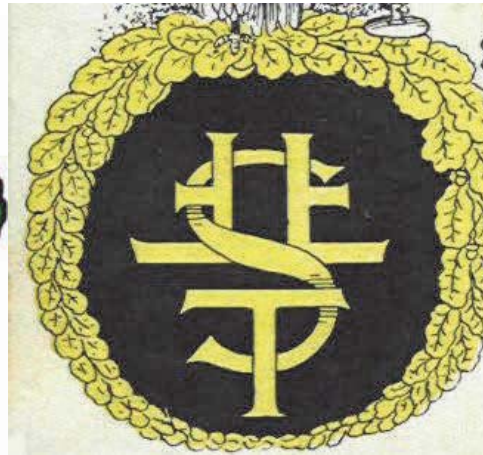


The German-Americanization of the Motto of the Turner Movement

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei!
(Friedrich Ludwig Jahn)



Turner Mottos

Shown above is the motto of the Turner movement in Germany, which was created by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) who is best known as Turnvater Jahn. The motto was: *Frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei!* (Fresh, pious, happy, free!) Below it is the 4-F symbol of the motto, with two back-to-back F's placed upside down over two back-to-back F's. Next to it is the FFST German-American Turner symbol, with these letters intertwined. This stands for the revised motto of: *Frisch und frei, stark und treu!* (Fresh and free, strong and true!).

The new German-American motto was based on the German motto and was adopted in 1880. The question obviously arises as to why the German-American Turners revised the German motto and symbol. The following discussion aims to address that question. References to the history of the Turners in Germany and America follow at the end of this article, as no attempt is made to recount their history here.

The Turner motto created by Jahn understandably became the German-American Turner motto in the 1850s, when the first Turnvereine were established in the U.S., and it remains the Turner motto in Germany to this day. However, after the Civil War, German-Americans apparently felt there was

a need to update and revise the motto, and so it was changed at a convention of the Turnerbund, the national federation of German-American Turnvereine..

Its ninth convention met in Indianapolis, Indiana from 30 May to 2 June 1880, and one of its first decisions was to replace the FFFF motto with the FFST revision. The new motto and symbol can be found in Turner publications and Turner societies across the country, causing members and others to often ask me why they differ from Jahn's motto and symbol that are still in use in Germany.

The report of the 1880 Turner convention provides no explanation as to why the motto was changed, only that it had made that decision. So, one can only conjecture that Turners felt more comfortable with the wording of the new motto. At the time it was changed, Wilhelm Pfaender (1826-1905) served as President of the Turnerbund, and presided over the convention, so the motto would likely not have been changed without his approval and support.

Pfaender was born in Heilbronn and helped establish Turnvereine there and in Ulm. After coming to America shortly before the 1848 Revolution, he settled in Cincinnati, where he was a co-founder of the Turnverein, and its first president. He also became president of the Turner Settlement Society, which settled New Ulm, Minnesota in 1856. There, he co-founded the Turnverein, and became its first president as well. When the Civil War broke out, Pfaender served in the Union Army (First Lieutenant, First Minnesota Battery), and also served in the U.S.-Dakota War (Lieutenant Colonel, First Minnesota Mounted Rangers). He later held public office in New Ulm and the state of Minnesota.

Why, then, did the German-American Turners change their motto? The new motto reflected the profound changes that German-American Turners had experienced since coming to the U.S. The 1848 Revolution had failed, and their hopes of unity for the German states under a republican form of government had been

shattered. However, they had now found their freedom-loving ideals fulfilled in their new homeland.

The new motto also reflected their Civil War experience. German-American Turners had fought in great number on behalf of the Union. They most likely were still "happy" and I am sure that many of them, or at least a goodly number, were "pious." However, the words in the Turner motto must have struck them as antiquated, and not reflective of their immigration and Civil War experiences.

The words dropped mirrored more how Turners viewed themselves in Germany prior to the 1848 Revolution, and in the U.S. before the Civil War, but had become dated by 1880. Turner soldiers could justifiably identify with a motto that Turners were strong and true, but one that declared them pious and happy would have seemed absurd.

Post-war Turners most likely wanted to emphasize the liberty they had found in the U.S., as well as their military service and loyalty in the Civil War. The latter was quite important to them, as the war took place right after the Know-Nothing era of the 1850s when their presence in the U.S. had been questioned, and become the target of nativist hostility and violence.

The status of German-Americans had been considerably elevated due to their service in the war, and the "German vote" was also something that politicians now had to reckon with at election time. German-Americans, therefore, had clearly demonstrated their importance in American society as an ethnic element. So, in the post-Civil War era the feeling must have prevailed that the German motto was no longer appropriate, and did not reflect their military service or their political clout.

The report of the 1880 Turner convention provides no rationale as to the change, not one word. It is only reported that the new motto was adopted. Obviously there must have been a widespread feeling among the Turners that the

change was necessary. Moreover, the fact that the president of the Turnerbund was Wilhelm Pfaender, one of the foremost Turners of the time, added weight to this change. The matter looks to have been a foregone conclusion, with no need of discussion or debate.

In conclusion, two points should be made about the process and significance of the changes made to the German Turner motto and symbol. First, the process whereby Turners changed the motto and symbol can best be described as German-Americanization. Rather than continue to use or reject the German motto and symbol, German-American Turners adapted them to relate to their experience in America. This showed their creativity in transplanting some important aspects of Turner culture to the Turner movement in America. Second, it should be noted that the letters on the German-American Turner symbol are all intertwined, thereby stressing Turner unity, whereas the letters of the German symbol are separate. This may have been the best way to bring the letters of the new motto together artistically, but it also reflects the organizational unity promoted by the Turnerbund.

Both of these points illuminate the versatility that German-American Turners displayed in transmitting Turner culture to America, thereby providing a fascinating example of the symbiotic nature of German-American culture, which was creatively being adapted to life in America.

For further reading:

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