

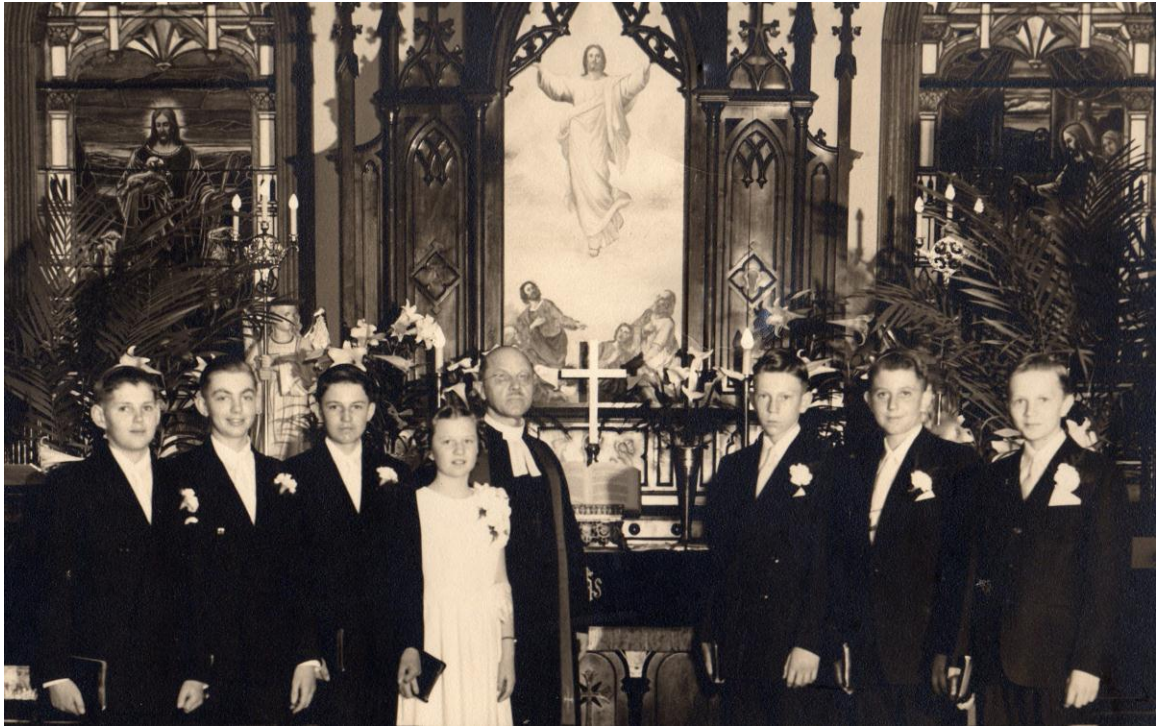
Rockville's Germans 1860 - 1960

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*(The following article was extracted from a paper prepared by Dr. Abbott.
The paper in its entirety is available at the Vernon Historical Society)*

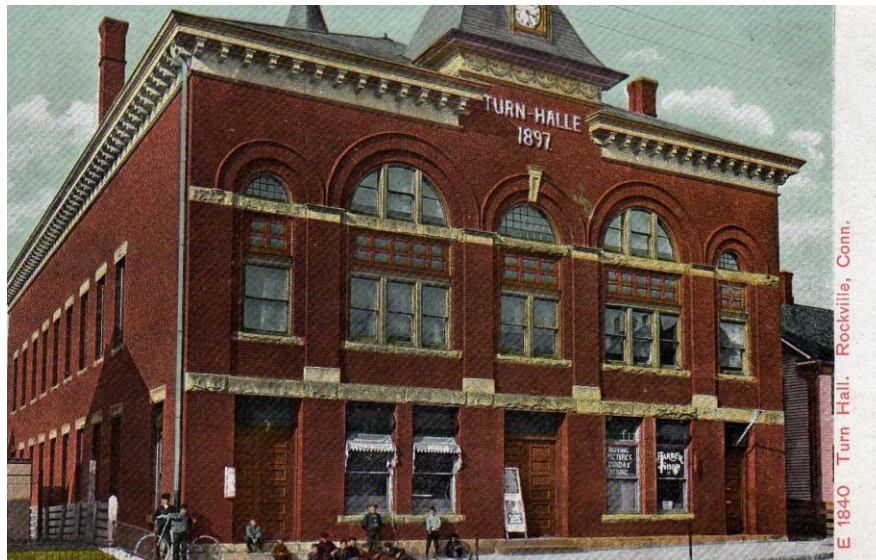
As early as 1860, the Germans of Rockville were beginning to emerge as a distinctive ethnic group. The Census of 1860 lists 58 single individuals and 96 families of German birth residing in Vernon. A large number of single men and women lived in boarding houses, and families, while not residentially segregated, did appear to cluster in small groups throughout the village of Rockville. All but 28 were employed in the mills, only 4 were unskilled day laborers, and four were female domestics. Three were farmers, two were merchants, and the remainder were skilled workers such as, tailors, watchmakers, blacksmiths and shoemakers. None were illiterate. Although they occupied the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder, as a class they were not destitute. From the census schedules one can also gain some insight into the family structure of this group. It was acceptable for women to work: single women and older daughters were employed in the mills, but only six wives were working in 1860. German families tended to be quite large and women were probably more needed at home. Children, however, were put to work in the mills at about the age of 13 or 14. Until that age they attended school. No child was in school beyond the age of 15, but no high school existed in Rockville at this time. Of those over the age of 14 who were working and living at home, all were employed as weavers. The 1860 census data indicated that the Germans were, as a group, a highly skilled, thrifty people possessing a basic education and that they were regularly employed in the textile mills.

By 1870, Vernon's population had grown to 5,446. There were 621 persons of German birth, and, although constituting only 34% of the foreign-born, they had already put a sharp cultural stamp on the village of Rockville where they had concentrated. Rockville's earliest biographer describes the population of the village in this period as "one third... of German birth or descent" and states further that they "were clannish and the social customs of the old world make Rockville seem like a German mountain village." Although the population estimate is unsubstantiated, the characterization of Rockville is probably accurate. Although the great majority of the Germans were still working in the textile mills, by 1870 they had developed a more diverse community, one better able to serve their day to day needs. There were now 17 German owned business establishments, plus a physician and a clergyman. Another 47 provided various other services within the German community. By 1870 they had been in the United States long enough to find steady employment, to become familiar with the language, and to save enough money in some cases to acquire a home. In addition, they had been able to maintain a strong family structure. Neither nor wives nor young children were employed in the mills to any great extent, and children were kept in school long enough to receive a basic education. By 1870 the boarding houses had disappeared, and single men and women were lodged with other German families. One senses in this a drawing together of the German community in an effort to combine their slender resources and look after their own. It was through this drawing together, often described by outsiders as "clannishness", that the German immigrants were able to adjust to their new environment. More significantly, through the creation of their own institutions, they were able to preserve their language, culture and social customs, and thus maintain the solidarity of their community.



The first and most important institution was the church, for it was through the church that language and culture could be maintained. In Rockville, the first German Lutheran services were held in 1856. One of the first actions of the new church, even before a church building has been secured, was to appoint a school committee to plan a German school. In January, 1867, the congregation voted to set up a parish school. The school would meet five hours a day, five days a week. The cost was to be 50 cents a month for children of members and \$1 for non-members. It was replaced by the Saturday School which continued until just prior to World War One. In this school the children learned to read and write German in preparation for confirmation. It was a requirement that all children be confirmed in German.

Social customs were preserved through a rich variety of clubs and associations. The first one to be organized in Rockville was the Rockville Turnverein in 1857. This was an athletic club primarily concerned with physical culture for young men and women, but it was also a social organization. Its gymnasium was frequently used as a meeting place for a variety of activities. So popular was the Turn Hall that by 1897, the Turners were able to build an impressive new brick building at the cost of \$30,000.



Home of the Rockville Turnverein, the Turn Halle was located on Village Street. Later the building was used by the Polish American Club.

While the Turners Society was a purely German organization, part of the immigrants cultural baggage, the Eintract Sick Benefit Society was an organization designed to meet the needs of the immigrant in the United States. Beginning in 1870 with five members, the association had grown to 100 members by 1890. Dues were fifty cents monthly. In case of sickness, members received five dollars per week. The death benefit was as many dollars as there were members, payable to the wife or nearest relative.

Singing societies, another import from the Old World, also flourished in Rockville. First to appear was the Liedertafel, sometime prior to 1879. This was followed shortly after by the Singing and Declamation Club of Rockville. Each of the organizations had their own picnic grove, and their song fests and Sunday picnics are legendary.

If one looks at Rockville today, one must conclude, as Glazier and Moynihan have of New York, that “the Germans as a group are vanished.” World War One did have an impact on the German community, but so far as Rockville is concerned, it was only one of many forces acting to dissolve the ethnic group created by Rockville’s Germans.

The first blow to German solidarity came as early as 1882 when the Lutheran Church was split. A disagreement had arisen within the church over whether members of the church could become members of secret societies. The secret societies involved in the debate were the Masons and the Oddfellows just then being formed. A group of church member opposed the membership of Germans in these organizations withdrew to form a separate church, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church. The willingness of American organizations to accept Germans as members, and the openness of American society in general, was to prove an effective weapon against German solidarity.

The public school was another powerful integrating force. With free public education available, the First Evangelical Lutheran Church soon abandoned efforts to maintain a school, except for German language instruction. The more conservative Trinity Lutheran Church, however, was able to maintain a parish school for sometime, but the average enrollment was only about 50 pupils.

No effort was made to discourage the use of the German language. It was taught in the high school from the beginning, and articles were frequently printed in German in the local newspaper for the benefit of German readers. In December 1884, a free reading room was opened where German newspapers and magazines were available. Nevertheless, the loss of the German language over time was inevitable. The home could not, or would not, match the zeal of the church in insisting on the use of the German language. The second generation learned German, but had no real interest in reading German language newspapers.

Nevertheless, the war had some impact on the community. German were critical of conscription, (Many had originally left Germany to avoid this) and refused to believe the stories of German atrocities. The church collected money for German charities in 1914 and again in 1920. Otherwise Germans seemed to be as patriotic as everyone else. Trinity Lutheran Church abandoned its parish school in 1917, claiming that the war had caused the enrollment to drop to only 24 pupils.

The number of German associations declined slowly over the next fifty years until by 1970 there was only one left. The churches continued German language services for some time: Trinity was the last to abandon German services in 1940.

The 1940 seems to have been the decade that presaged the end of the German community, but the death knell for Rockville’s Germans, as a group, was the closing of the mills in 1951. The history of Rockville’s German is inextricably linked to the history of the woolen industry. The woolen industry created Rockville and the German ethnic community in the 1840s. They both lasted for a hundred years, and when the mills closed, the community was dissolved and dispersed. The German associations dwindled rapidly after 1952; only one is left, a benefit society that will disappear when the last death benefit is paid. In the 1960s, the churches, the last to leave, heeded the call of the suburbs and abandoned their old buildings to build anew in the suburbs where a new kind of city and a new kind of congregation, no longer German, was beginning to take shape. The ethnic community and the industrial city that shaped it were gone: Rockville had entered the post-industrial society.