

Das Deutsche Lied:
The Austin Saengerrunde, 1879-1918

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On April 9, 1917, a reported 20,000 people marched up Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas in a “loyalty parade.” Austin’s main thoroughfare was “gorgeously decorated with United States, Lone Star, and Confederate flags” and schools and businesses shut down in support of the parade. Upon arriving at the grounds of the state capitol building, the marchers “passed in review” for Governor James E. Ferguson and Texas National Guard Adjutant General Henry Hutchings. Participating in this militaristic demonstration of solidarity were two hundred members of the Sons of Hermann and the Austin Saengerrunde, Austin’s German singing club.¹ Judge Rudolph Kleberg, a second-generation German-Texan lawyer, judge, and politician from Dewitt County, was among several speakers who exhorted the assembled citizenry to lend their full support to the war effort against the Central Powers. Kleberg delivered a speech that was likely similar to many he gave in German-Texan communities in 1917-1918. Noting that he didn’t believe there were any traitors in Austin, Judge Kleberg proclaimed that “It is the duty of every American citizen to uphold the banner of liberty. I am proud of my German descent, but prouder still of my Americanism. We have a duty to perform and we should act coolly, courageously, and manly.”² Similarly to Kleberg, many Texans of German descent strove to assert their status as loyal American citizens during the war with Germany. Despite their best efforts, during the First World War German-Texan social and cultural institutions faced a concerted attack from the Texas State Council of Defense, hostile legislators, and erstwhile friends and neighbors.

¹ “20,000 Take Place in Demonstration at Capital City,” *San Antonio Express*, April 10, 1917.

Although the First World War marked a period of Anglo-American hostility toward Germans, the four decades prior to the Great War were marked by a flourishing German-Texan culture. As an expression of German *Kultur*, the Austin Saengerrunde was one of the foremost German organizations in Texas' capital city during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While it was joined by other Teutonic institutions such as the Sons of Hermann, the Austin Turnverein, the Austin Männerchor, and several beer gardens in town, the Austin Saengerrunde holds special significance as the only one of these institutions to survive into the 21st century. This is a remarkable achievement given the level of anti-German sentiment in Texas during the First and Second World War and the gradual acculturation of German immigrants. Its survival can largely be traced to a number of developments that occurred in the organization's first forty years of existence. Its name literally meaning "singing in the round," the Austin Saengerrunde grew out of and eventually outlived other German organizations in Austin, such as the Austin Männerchor and the Society Germania. This development meant that it was the only German singing society in Austin by the turn of the 20th century. The Saengerrunde also pioneered the popularization of the state Saengerfest and successfully integrated itself into the life of the town. Rather than serving as a secluded bastion of German culture, the Saengerrunde was ubiquitous at public events and musical performances in Gilded Age and Progressive Era Austin. Dynamic leadership during this period allowed the Saengerrunde to weather the storms of the 20th century and remain central to Austin social life. As a result of the groundwork laid in the first decades of its existence, this ethnic musical organization with origins in 19th century German cultural nationalism is now the oldest ethnic and musical institution in Austin, and continues to play a role in community life.

The Austin Saengerrunde was a relative newcomer when it was founded as a German singing club in 1879. Singing societies appeared during the first major wave of German immigration to Texas in the 1840s. In December 1844 the first group of German immigrants under the auspices of the *Verein zum Schutze deutscher Einwanderer in Texas* (Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas), more often referred to as the *Adelsverein*, arrived in Galveston. The *Adelsverein* was founded by a group of German noblemen in an effort to settle Germans in Texas as a money making scheme, as well as to alleviate their lands of alleged overcrowding. While the *Adelsverein* only lasted a few years and never turned a profit, it provided the impetus for a relatively large amount of German immigration to Texas in the antebellum period. Important centers of German-Texan culture, such as New Braunfels and Fredericksburg, were founded and settled by *Adelsverein* immigrants and other German settlers who followed.³ By 1850, as many as 5 percent of the white population in Texas had been born in Germany, although in the belt of counties running from Houston to the Hill Country in the west Germans were often a majority of the population.⁴ Shortly after their arrival, many newly founded German communities formed singing societies.

New Braunfels, Texas was initially settled in May 1845, and by the fall an informal singing club had formed. In 1850, the first German singing club in Texas was formally organized in New Braunfels as the *Gesangverein Germania*.⁵ In creating this and other *Sängerbunde*, German-Texans drew from popular musical forms in Germany with origins in the German

³ Louis E. Brister, "Adelsverein," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ufa01>), accessed May 01, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁴ Terry G. Jordan, "Germans," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/png02>), accessed May 05, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁵ Theodore Albrecht, "German Singing Societies in Texas," (PhD diss., North Texas State University, 1975), 22-23.

nationalist movement. According to Theodore Albrecht, German nationalists used the singing of patriotic and folk songs as a means of indirect political resistance to the Napoleonic Empire in the early 19th century. In the first decades of the 19th century, male singing groups, known as *Liedertafeln*, became extremely popular among middle-class German speakers in Switzerland and the German states.⁶ The *Liedertafeln* were joined by the *Turnverein* athletic movement in spreading the ideals of German nationalism. These popular cultural forms were transported to America with German immigrants, where they underwent a transformation in a new land.

Although Austin was on the periphery of the core belt of German settlement in antebellum Texas, a significant number of Germans moved to the city in the 1840s and 1850s. As was the case wherever German communities formed in the Lone Star State, Austin's German immigrants formed the Austin Männerchor singing club in 1852 or 1853. On October 15 and 16, 1853, members of the Männerchor braved what were essentially frontier conditions to travel to the first state-wide *Saengerfest* in New Braunfels, along with organizations from San Antonio, Sisterdale, and the New Braunfels Germania club. The second *Saengerfest* was held in San Antonio in May 1854. The Texas State Sängerbund, a state-wide organization of German singing clubs, was formed at this festival. Saengerfests continued through the 1850s, rotating between host sites until the advent of the Civil War.⁷

⁶ Ibid., 1-2.

⁷ Theodore Albrecht, "German Singing Societies," in *The Handbook of Texas Music, Second Edition*, ed. by Laurie Jasinski, et al. (Denton, Tex.: The Texas State Historical Association, 2012), 237-238; Theodore Albrecht, "Texas State Sängerbund," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/xat01>), accessed May 02, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.; Albrecht, "German Singing Societies in Texas," 80.

Manfred Holck, an amateur historian of the Austin Saengerrunde, credits the Civil War with demoralizing and exhausting the Austin Männerchor.⁸ *Saengerfests* halted between 1861 and 1870, resuming in San Antonio in September of that year.⁹ Although Texas is typically considered to have sustained the least direct impact from the Civil War of any Confederate state, the years 1861-1865 were certainly traumatic for German-Texans. Many German-Texans were lukewarm Confederates at best, with many maintaining outright opposition to secession. Towns with large German populations such as San Antonio and Austin, along with the majority German counties in the Hill Country, turned in votes against secession in 1861.¹⁰ In a pattern that would resurface during other major wars, Anglo-Texans suspected Germans of disloyalty. Especially in the Hill Country, Germans found themselves targeted by Confederate and Texas state military forces and a number of atrocities took place.¹¹ Inflation, high taxes, and the Union blockade took their toll on many city-dwelling Germans who worked in white-collar jobs in the mercantile business.

Against this backdrop of disruption and ethnic suspicion, German *Kultur* organizations haltingly resumed their activities in the post-war period. In 1873 New Braunfels held the second post-war Saengerfest. In 1874, San Antonio again hosted the state Saengerfest, this time adding an orchestra. For the 1877 celebration, the Alamo City hosts enlarged the orchestra to nearly

⁸ Manfred Holck, *A Century of Singing "Das Deutsche Lied" Austin Saengerrunde 100th Anniversary 1879 February 8th 1979, a historical narrative*, (Austin: Austin Saengerrunde, 1979), 3-4.

⁹ Albrecht, "Texas State Sangerbund."

¹⁰ See Dale Baum, *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State during the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

¹¹ For more on conflict in the Hill Country during this period see Joe Baulch, "The Dogs of War Unleashed: The Devil Concealed in Men Unchained," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook* 73 (1997): 126-141.

forty musicians.¹² Where antebellum Saengerfests were rather informal gatherings, these increasingly elaborate events reflected Gilded Age tastes and a desire to move on from the war years.

At the 1877 Saengerfest, Austin was chosen as the next host. However, the Austin Männerchor postponed the event amid fears of yellow fever. During 1878 a yellow fever epidemic swept through the South, devastating Memphis and other cities. Fortunately, Austin was spared from the epidemic. In spite of the apparent sensibility of postponing the Saengerfest in the face of a record wave of yellow fever, the decision seems to have exposed a generational rift in the Austin German community. Holck states that “It cannot be just a coincident that at the same time, the younger men, this new generation, quietly rebelled for action and started their own group of singers, men and women.”¹³ On February 8, 1879, fifteen men met in the upstairs office of Charles F. Rumpel, a German-Texan stationary and bookseller on Congress Avenue, and formed the Austin Saengerrunde.¹⁴

The formation of this new singing club was a challenge to the Austin Mannerchor and a reflection of larger historical processes at work in 1870s Austin. On Christmas Day, 1871, Austin was connected to the American transportation network by the Houston and Central Texas Railway. The city was the westernmost terminus on the rail line, and experienced a boom period over the next five years. Austin’s population doubled to over 10,000 residents by 1875, gas street lamps were installed in 1874, and streetcar lines were established in 1875. In 1876, an elevated

¹² Albrecht, “Texas State Sangerbund.”

¹³ Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

bridge was built over the Colorado River, replacing a pontoon bridge dating from 1869. A second rail line, the International and Great Northern, reached Austin in 1876. Additionally, an 1872 election finally confirmed that Austin would remain the state capital in perpetuity. Although population growth and expansion leveled off somewhat by 1880, residents of the town were optimistic about Austin's future.¹⁵ The founding of the Austin Saengerrunde reflects this optimism, and in some ways can be seen as a manifestation of the forward-looking New South spirit. While the Civil War generation would be forever scarred by their experience, the young men of the New South greeted the advent of railroads, industry, and urbanization with enthusiasm.¹⁶

An examination of late 19th century membership in the Austin Saengerrunde reveals Holck's assertion of prevailing youthfulness to be correct. A survey of Saengerrunde members exposes the fact that the membership was mostly composed of men who did not live through the Civil War as adults. The first president of the Saengerrunde was Charles Ohrndorf. The 1881 edition of Morrison & Fourmy's Austin city directory lists Ohrndorf as a resident at the home of Mrs. Julia Ohrndorf, a widow. His occupation is not listed, indicating that he was likely a young man living with his mother.¹⁷ The first secretary of the organization, by contrast, was Charles F. Rumpel, owner of the stationary and bookstore where the Saengerrunde was founded. Rumpel

¹⁵ David C. Humphrey, "Austin, TX (Travis County)," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hda03>), accessed May 02, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

¹⁶ On the generational rift in the New South, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction, 15th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 26-28.

¹⁷ List of leadership: Holck, 24; occupation & residence from Morrison & Fourmy Directory Co.. *Morrison & Fourmy's General Directory of the City of Austin for 1881-1882*, Book, 1881, page 131; digital images, (<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph39151/> : accessed May 02, 2013), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.

was a native of Germany, having immigrated to the United States in 1869. In 1879 he was a relatively mature 36 years old.¹⁸ By 1881, the leadership of the Saengerrunde was even more youthful, with August Giesen assuming the position of Secretary and Hilmar Guenther serving as Treasurer.¹⁹ Giesen and Guenther both worked as bookkeepers at local businesses and both boarded at Mrs. F. Schenck's home.²⁰ Guenther was a 20 year old native of Germany in 1881, and although Giesen's age cannot be determined, his professional status and residence at a boarding house indicate that he was in all likelihood a younger man.²¹

The youthful makeup of the Saengerrunde extended beyond the leadership of the organization. A list of seventeen members from the June 20, 1885 meeting minutes contains fifteen members who could be identified in a city directory or census records.²² An undated photograph from the late 19th century, most likely the 1890s or around 1900, yields an additional twenty individuals identified as Saengerrunde members, nine of whom can be positively identified in a city directory or census records. Other sources yield two more names. This sample of 26 members reinforces the youthfulness of the organization. Of the 1885 members, the average age for the twelve members who could be identified was 26.7 years in 1880, one year after the organization's founding. The average age in 1880 of the members in the undated

¹⁸ 1900 U.S. Federal Census, Austin, Travis County, Texas, Ward 6, Enumeration District 90, page 8, Rumpel household, jpeg image, (Online: The Generations Network, Inc., 2009) [Digital scan of original records in the National Archives, Washington, DC], subscription database, <<http://www.ancestry.com/>>, accessed April 30, 2013.

¹⁹ *Morrison & Fourmy's*, 38.

²⁰ *Morrison & Fourmy's*, 86, 91.

²¹ 1880 U.S. Federal Census, Austin, Travis County, Texas, Home 66, Schenck household, jpeg image, (Online: The Generations Network, Inc., 2009) [Digital scan of original records in the National Archives, Washington, DC], subscription database, <<http://www.ancestry.com/>>, accessed April 30, 2013.

²² Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 24.

photograph, ten of whom could be identified, was 20.2 years. Because this photograph is likely from the 1890s or around 1900, many of these members were children at the time of the Saengerrunde's founding and joined as they entered adulthood. The Austin Saengerrunde in the late 19th century was an organization of young men with different outlooks and concerns than that of their parents or older neighbors and relatives in the Austin Männerchor.

In addition to being overwhelmingly a young man's club, the Austin Saengerrunde membership consisted of men tied to the emerging economic order. White collar, upper blue collar, service industry professionals and small manufacturers dominated the ranks of the Saengerrunde. A survey of the aforementioned membership lists yields a total of three bookkeepers, three saloon keepers or bartenders, manufacturers of boots and shoes, soap, and crockery, two salesmen, two newspaper editors, a gun and locksmith, a jeweler and watchmaker, a dry goods merchant, a book seller, a "junk store" proprietor, a book binder, a section foreman on the railroad, and one resident "at home."

Austin Saengerrunde members reflected an emerging middle-class, and shared many characteristics with club members throughout America. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of vigorous growth for fraternal organizations and widespread middle-class membership in clubs. The city of Austin was no exception to this phenomenon, boasting four Masonic lodges, six Odd Fellows lodges, four Knights of Honor lodges, an American Legion of Honor lodge, an Ancient Order United Workmen lodge, and a B'Nai Brith lodge. These were joined by the Travis County Medical Society, the Austin Typographical Union, the Travis County Fish and Game Protective Association, the Austin Gun Club, the Bull Creek Fishing Club, the

Austin Temperance Club, several women's clubs, including the Austin chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Austin Greys, a local militia unit.²³

Despite many similarities with Anglo-Texan fraternal societies and clubs, the Austin Saengerrunde also differed from its counterparts by representing the distinctive German *Liedertafel* tradition. The Saengerrunde drew from Austin's large ethnic German population, comprised of 757 German-born individuals in 1875.²⁴ Beyond the sizeable German born population, many other Austin resident's parents or grandparents had migrated from Germany at some point in the mid-19th century. Strong German migration continued in the post-Civil War decades, with around twice as many German immigrants between 1865 and 1890 as during the antebellum period.²⁵ The Austin Saengerrunde, along with several other organizations such as the Society Germania, the Sons of Hermann, and the Austin *Turnverein*, provided Germans with a chance to socialize, speak their native tongue, and reminisce about their homeland. These organizations also acted as business and community networks and mutual aid societies for their members. As time went on, they would also become politically active, mobilizing against anti-German causes such as temperance and Americanization programs. Thus the Austin Saengerrunde fulfilled several roles in the context of an immigrant community in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. It reflected the optimism and enthusiasm of an emerging class of young, white-collar, immigrant entrepreneurs in the New South, while simultaneously continuing the *Liedertafel* tradition and serving the social needs of an ethnic minority community.

²³ Morrison & Fourmy's, 34-39.

²⁴ Humphrey, "Austin, TX (Travis County)."

²⁵ Jordan, "Germans."

While the Austin Saengerrunde fulfilled a number of desires and needs within the German immigrant community, its immediate purpose was to salvage the 25th Anniversary Saengerfest that had been postponed by the Austin Männerchor. Originally scheduled for October 1878, the Saengerfest was rescheduled for April 15-17, 1879.²⁶ Although founded just two months before the scheduled dates for the Saengerfest, the Saengerrunde quickly and skillfully utilized its social and business connections in Austin to garner community support and financing for the Saengerfest.

Holck states that “In all the newspaper accounts of the 1879 Saengerfest only the Saengerrunde was mentioned and nowhere a word about the Austin Maennerchor.”²⁷ However, the centrality of the Austin Saengerrunde to the 1879 festival must be qualified. The Saengerrunde may have provided youthful energy and a driving force behind the 1879 festival but Saengerfest Central Committee leadership remained in the hands of older, more established members of Austin’s German community, certainly including members of the Austin Männerchor and likely the Society Germania as well. The president of the committee was Dr. Gustavus Weisselberg, a 54 year old Prussian-born physician. M. Stakemann was a Männerchor member and served as secretary. Well known businessman and Männerchor member Walter Tips was musical director for the festival, as well as employer for several Saengerrunde members.²⁸ Furthermore, newspaper accounts do mention the Austin Männerchor and the Society Germania as participants in the festivities, if not explicitly assigning principal leadership to any of the

²⁶ Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ “Saengerfest,” *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, April 16, 1879.

German singing clubs.²⁹ In a less triumphant passage that is probably closer to the truth, Holck concludes describes the effort of the entire Austin community in organizing the 1879 Saengerfest:

Though the small Saengerrunde appears to have been the driving force to master the monumental task of arranging the 1879 State Saengerfest with the building of a triumphal arch across Congress Avenue, the banquets, picnics, dances and concerts at the Millett Opera House, the imported orchestras from St. Louis and New Orleans, all the other singing groups in Austin, the people and merchants of Austin must have been a part of this event to make it the great musical success in Austin it was reported to have been.³⁰

Whichever organization provided the primary force behind the 1879 festival, its execution was considered to be a great success. The town's newspapers covered the event extensively, and a reported seven to eight thousand onlookers braved "a light shower and very threatening weather" on the evening of April 15, 1879 to greet the assembled *Liedertafeln* as they paraded by torchlight from the Millett Opera House to the Turnverein Hall. The Saengerfest parade passed under a triumphal arch erected at the foot of Congress Avenue to welcome the visitors to the City of the Violet Crown. The *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman* reported that "Every house was beautifully illuminated with lamps, candles, jets, transparencies or Chinese

²⁹ "Torchlight Procession – Order of March," *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, April 15, 1879.

³⁰ Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 14.

lanterns, and many were supplied with all, presenting a brilliance and splendor that was absolutely charming. The entire city seemed to have crowded on the Avenue and Pecan street ...” Following the procession, the singers ate at a banquet and listened to addresses by Prussian-born Mayor Jacob C. Degress, the aforementioned Dr. Gustavus Weisselberg, and Oscar Samostz, a prominent German-Texan druggist in Austin.³¹

The following day, April 16, Saengerfest participants rehearsed in the morning, then took an excursion to Mount Bonnell. The *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman* reported that “Those from the flat regions near the coast and above Dallas seemed to especially enjoy the ride up the river and the beautiful mountain scenery and lofty peaks ... right royally did they enjoy it.” In the evening, Millett’s Opera House hosted the Grand Concert of the Saengerfest, with orchestral music provided by the New Orleans National Orchestra of St. Louis. The *Daily Democratic Statesman* correspondent declared it to be “a rich musical treat and thrilling,” and maintained that “all that was done was good and different from everything ever seen or heard before.”³² The following day, Saengerbund delegates attended a business meeting at Germania Hall, a site that would come to be known as Scholz’s Garden. Following the business meeting, a huge barbecue took place at Pressler’s Garden, one of the city’s several beer gardens. Picnickers were addressed by Alexander W. Terrell, a State Senator, and Dr. Berthold Hadra, a German-Texan surgeon from San Antonio. The festivities concluded with a grand ball at Millett’s Opera House.³³

³¹ “Saengerfest – The Procession and the Banquet,” *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, April 16, 1879.

³² “Saengerfest – The Excursion and the Concert Yesterday,” *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, April 17, 1879.

³³ “Saengerfest of the Texas German Singing Associations,” *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, April 16, 1879.

The 1879 Saengerfest represented an acceleration of the trend toward opulence and grandiosity in Saengergund festivals. Looking back on the 1879 fest, the *Schulenburg Sticker* wrote that “Austin went a long way further in the direction of musical festivals and engaged the New Orleans National Orchestra of St. Louis for orchestra music and accompaniment. In this way the singing festivals began to assume a more different and simultaneously more pretentious and more expensive character...”³⁴ Festival organizers also skillfully orchestrated community support and involvement in the Saengerfest. Tickets were sold to the general public and the use of a St. Louis orchestra drew Anglo-Texan interest.

The successful incorporation of the non-German public into the 1879 Saengerfest marked the beginning of a trend that would characterize the Austin Saengerrunde for the next four decades. Between 1880 and 1918, Austin newspapers were filled with advertisements for concerts and dances sponsored or produced by the Saengerrunde. Often taking place at the Turner Hall, one of the opera houses, or a beer garden, these popular events ensured that the Saengerrunde was at the heart of musical and social life in Austin during this period. The Saengerrunde was also actively engaged with civic life. On May 8, 1890, the day after passage of a municipal bond to finance construction of a dam on the Colorado River, the *Austin Statesman* reported that “The Austin Saengerrunde and Prof. Besserer, elated over the election, called at the Statesman office last night and treated the editorial and composing room with a delightful serenade.”³⁵ At the same time, the organization maintained German traditions, such as the “continental Sunday.” This tradition entailed convivial beer drinking and socializing on Sunday

³⁴ “History of Saengerbund,” *The Schulenburg Sticker*, May 20, 1909.

³⁵ “Jubilee Notes,” *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, May 8, 1890.

afternoons, often accompanied by a concert given by the singers or a hired band. The German ethos of *Gemütlichkeit* appealed to many Austinites, whether Teutonic or Anglo, and the Saengerrunde and its sister organizations thrived in this period.

Especially important to the Saengerrunde's success and long term survival were the activities of one particular member. Carl William Besserer, "one of the most prominent musicians and educators during the early days of Austin's history," was a founding member of the Austin Saengerrunde. He served as choir director for the organization and made a living as a professional musician and music teacher. Besserer was ubiquitous in the Austin music scene, directing a number of bands, including the State Military Band in 1911. Advertisements for Sunday afternoon concerts at Scholz's Garden, owned by Besserer's father-in-law August Scholz, frequently mentioned that music would be provided by Besserer's band. In the 1890s, Besserer's band provided entertainment aboard the *Ben Hur* riverboat on Lake Austin.³⁶ Besserer was also a founder of the Austin Symphony Orchestra and directed the Austin High School orchestra as well as the Austin Municipal Orchestra.³⁷

Despite the Saengerrunde's prominent place in Austin community life, the struggle over prohibition marked a significant challenge to German *Kultur* in Texas. The German "continental Sunday" tradition flouted conservative Anglo-Protestant norms regarding the Sabbath, and beer gardens were centers of German-Texan community life. The 1876 Texas state constitution contained a local-option clause, and the "dry" movement initially worked at the county level to

³⁶ Clayton T. Shorkey and Laurie E. Jasinski, "Besserer, Carl William," *The Handbook of Texas Music, Second Edition* (Denton, Tex.: The Texas State Historical Association, 2012), 49.

³⁷ "Old King Carl, Part 3: Carl William Besserer, Founder of the Modern Austin Music Scene," Richard Zelade, accessed May 3, 2013, <http://richardzelade.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/old-king-carl-part-3-carl-william-besserer-founder-of-the-modern-austin-music-scene/>.

ban the sale or manufacture of alcohol. Particularly strong in the rural counties of North Texas, the “drys” managed to garner enough support for a prohibition referendum on August 4, 1887.³⁸ German *Vereine* stridently opposed the prohibition law and held numerous rallies throughout the state to drum up “wet” support. In Austin, Besserer’s band played at “wet” rallies.³⁹ When Texans went to the polls, prohibition suffered a crushing defeat. Out of nearly 350,000 votes cast, prohibition garnered the support of only 130,000 Texans and lost by over 90,000 votes.⁴⁰

Although prohibition was turned back in the 1880s, German drinking culture continued to face attack from the “drys.” By 1895, fifty-three of 239 counties in Texas were dry, and another seventy-nine counties were partly dry under local option. In 1908 and 1911, prohibition referendums were narrowly defeated, and prohibition played a significant role in state politics throughout the period.⁴¹ Anti-prohibition forces responded to the Anti-Saloon League’s campaign by pouring money into the coffers of “wet” politicians. The Texas Brewers Association, the Anti-Statewide Prohibition Organization of Texas, and the Wholesale Liquor Dealers Association worked together to promote the “wet” cause. Despite money from the liquor and brewing industries, “drys” continued to gain ground. By the 1910 election, a majority of the state’s Congressmen and Senators were in favor of prohibition. Despite these gains, Oscar B. Colquitt, an anti-prohibitionist, won election to the Governor’s office in 1910. Colquitt was a key ally for

³⁸ Matthew D. Tippens, *Turning Germans into Texans: World War I and the Assimilation and Survival of German Culture in Texas, 1900-1930* (Kleingarten Press, 2010), 33-35.

³⁹ “Old King Carl, Part 3.”

⁴⁰ Tippens, *Turning Germans into Texans*, 35.

⁴¹ K. Austin Kerr, "Prohibition," Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/vap01>), accessed May 04, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

the German *Vereine*, and supposedly enjoyed membership in the Austin Saengerrunde.⁴² Addressing the singers at the 1911 state Saengerfest in Austin, Colquitt stated that “Some of my enemies have chided me because of the friendship of the German-Americans for me. But I am your friend and I am glad of it. I am proud of you, for you are good people.”⁴³ Although German-Texans had Colquitt’s friendship, German *Kultur* continued to face the threat of prohibitionism until the First World War.

During the 1890s and early 20th century, the Austin Saengerrunde gradually came to be one of the principal German-Texan cultural institutions. The apparent last instance of participation of the Austin Männerchor at a state Saengerfest was in 1891.⁴⁴ By 1918, only the Austin Saengerrunde and the Sons of Hermann represented German-Texans in Austin’s “loyalty parade.” The generational break between the Austin Männerchor and the Society Germania led to the gradual dying out of those organizations, leaving the Saengerrunde as the only remaining singing club in Austin. At the same time that German clubs were going extinct, many of the beer gardens that served as important centers of German community life closed down. Around the turn of the century, Turner Hall closed, eventually passing into the hands of the Scottish Rite Masons. Bulian’s Garden was destroyed in the 1900 flood caused by the failing of the Austin dam. Pressler’s Garden shut down by 1910 due to expansion of the city.⁴⁵ In addition to the loss of these institutions, German migration to Texas slowed during this period, and the German

⁴² Holck, 19.

⁴³ “Song Wins Him Pardon,” *Austin Statesman*, May 24, 1911.

⁴⁴ Oscar Haas, *A Chronological History of the Singers of German Songs in Texas* (New Braunfels, Tex.: New Braunfels Zeitung, 1948), 28.

⁴⁵ Rachel Feit, “Gardens of Eden: How Austin Used to Celebrate,” *The Austin Chronicle*, January 26, 2001, accessed May 3, 2013, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/food/2001-01-26/80303/>.

population of the state became less significant, falling from 6.2 percent in 1900 to 5.6 percent in 1910.⁴⁶ However, during this period of receding German influence the Austin Saengerrunde swelled to its largest historic membership, increasing from 167 members in 1907 to a high of approximately 375 members from 1912 to 1914.⁴⁷

With the increase in membership, the Saengerrunde began to look for an appropriate venue for meetings, practices, and social life. Throughout its life, the club had used a variety of venues for its activities while never owning its own property. The 1881 city directory listed the Turner Hall as the Saengerrunde's place of meeting, and Scholz's Garden was also used at times.⁴⁸ By 1901, the Saengerrunde conducted its business at Scholz's Garden, probably due to the size of the facility and the closing of other locations. In 1904 the Saengerrunde entered into an agreement with the Lemp Brewery of St. Louis, who owned Scholz's Garden at the time, to purchase the property, which included a hall, bar, beer garden, and bowling alley. The property was finally acquired in 1908, thus giving the Austin Saengerrunde a permanent home that it still owns and occupies today. This initiative is credited with spurring the club's remarkable growth prior to the First World War.⁴⁹

With a growing membership, the issue of a state charter in 1903, the acquisition of a permanent property, and the fading of other German organizations, the Austin Saengerrunde became the most prominent representative of German culture in the city by the time war broke

⁴⁶ Tippens, *Turning Germans Into Texans*, 61.

⁴⁷ Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 17.

⁴⁸ *Morrison & Fourmy's*, 38.

⁴⁹ Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 14-17.

out in Europe. Many German-Texans were initially supportive of the German war effort, and even held donation drives to support the German and Austrian Red Crosses. Teutonic pride gradually tempered as the United States' position toward Germany began to shift. Texas especially became a focal point for fear-mongering about Imperial Germany. The infamous Zimmermann telegram promised to restore the American Southwest, including Texas, to Mexico if she would make war on the United States in alliance with Germany. Cross-border violence spilling over from the Mexican Revolution had already led to a military mobilization in Texas, and fears of raids or an invasion from the Rio Grande were stoked by newspaper editors and government propagandists.

When the United States entered into military conflict with the Central Powers in the spring of 1917, federal, state, and local governments waged a simultaneous campaign against German culture on the home front. All forms of German culture were demonized during 1917-1918. In Texas this effort was carried out by a variety of patriotic organizations and by state and local Councils of Defense, an organization formed in 1916 as part of the national preparedness campaign. Austin was no different from the rest of the state in turning on its German population. One German-Texan was beaten after making derogatory statements about the Red Cross. The Austin CCD commented on the matter, stating that "they should have beat him to death." This organization concluded that "if we are not to handle the unpatriotic pro-Germans without gloves ... we had as well close shop and wait til the end of the war."⁵⁰ Mob violence was also accompanied by intimidation, often spurred by perceived reluctance in supporting Liberty Bond sales or Red Cross fundraising drives. The Austin CCD complained of a

⁵⁰ Austin CCD, quoted in Tippens, *Turning Germans Into Texans*, 111.

well-to-do German farmer who spent “not one damn cent” on Liberty Bonds, and decreed that “If a man is able to help this government and does not do so within the full limit of his ability, he can profess his Americanism all day long but he will never make me believe he is a loyal American.”⁵¹ Jane Y. McCallum, an Austin clubwoman and suffragist, helped to paint a German-Texan lawyer’s office yellow when he failed to participate in the Third Liberty Loan drive.⁵²

The Austin Saengerrunde was dramatically affected by these activities. Christian Klaerner, a German-born Saengerrunde member, was investigated and removed from his position as the state librarian, even though no proof of his disloyalty could be found. The mayor of Austin banned the performance of German music at municipal concerts.⁵³ The last large public concert given by the Saengerrunde took place in April 1915 at the University of Texas Auditorium.⁵⁴ The last state Saengerfest before the war was celebrated in 1916 in San Antonio, and no Saengerfests took place during the war.⁵⁵ Driven underground by anti-German hysteria, the Austin Saengerrunde suffered a drop in membership and an end to its usually busy social calendar. In deference to public sentiment, the New Year’s ball for 1918 was cancelled.⁵⁶

German-Texans such as Judge Kleberg attempted to demonstrate their loyalty and mitigate the worst effects of the anti-German hysteria. Despite their best efforts, the Texas state

⁵¹ Ibid., 114.

⁵² Janet G. Humphrey, *A Texas Suffragist: Diaries and Writings of Jane Y. McCallum* (Austin: Ellen C. Temple, 1988), 112.

⁵³ Tippens, *Turning Germans Into Texans*, 123-125.

⁵⁴ Holck, 16.

⁵⁵ Oscar Haas, *A Chronological History of the Singers of German Songs in Texas*, 42.

⁵⁶ Holck, *Das Deutsche Lied*, 18.

legislature mounted a concerted assault on German culture. Linking anti-prohibitionism with support for the Kaiser, the “drys” finally prevailed as Texas enacted prohibition in 1918. Saengerrunde ownership of Scholz’s Garden is likely the only thing that kept the establishment afloat until Texas repealed prohibition in 1935. In 1918 the state legislature also banned the use of German in school instruction, including German language courses. German *Vereine* were frequently targeted for investigation for conducting meetings in German.⁵⁷

By the end of the Great War, the Austin Saengerrunde was damaged but continued to survive. Elements of German *Kultur* gradually reasserted themselves in Austin and throughout the state. However, recovery from the anti-German hysteria of 1917-1918 was not an immediate process. The first state Saengerfest after the war was held in Austin on May 14 and 15, 1922, fully three and a half years after the Armistice.⁵⁸ Germans throughout Texas faced widespread intimidation by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and German cultural activities resumed haltingly. After the 1922 Saengerfest, another festival did not take place until 1927 in Houston.⁵⁹ In the interwar years, the Austin Saengerrunde gradually reasserted itself into the social life of Austin, until the outbreak of the Second World War again drove it largely underground.

The Austin Saengerrunde faced its gravest threat during the great wars of the 20th century and survived. Theodore Albrecht ruefully concluded in 1975 that “Since 1920, the German singing societies in Texas have been on the decline, and their days as viable musical

⁵⁷ Tippens, *Turning Germans Into Texans*, 158, 164.

⁵⁸ Haas, *A Chronological History of the Singers of German Songs in Texas*, 43-44.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

organizations are numbered as old members die off without replacement.”⁶⁰ Almost forty years later, the Austin Saengerrunde remains ensconced in its clubhouse at the rear of Scholz Garten in downtown Austin, Texas. Its members continue to carry on the traditions of German song and *Gemütlichkeit*. Despite this apparent continuity, the Austin Saengerrunde largely exists today due to a number of contingent developments in its first four decades of existence. In its beginning as a youth movement within older, more established clubs, the Saengerrunde became the new face of German culture in Austin. Deprived of youthful members, other organizations gradually died off and the Saengerrunde became the only singing club in Texas’ capital city. The club successfully integrated itself into the social fabric of Austin, a fact that may help explain its survival in the face of intense pressure during the First World War. The Saengerrunde was an inherently creolized organization, simultaneously a safeguard for German culture in Austin and an expression of entrepreneurial immigrant ambitions in the atmosphere of the New South. Carl W. Besserer and other prominent members of the Saengerrunde lent it an air of respectability and civic-mindedness at a time when any manifestation of German culture was considered suspicious. Finally, the forward-looking decision to purchase the Scholz’s Garden property gave the Saengerrunde a permanent place in Austin life. Had this purchase not taken place, the club likely might have been forced to disband during the First World War due to blacklisting and refusal of facilities by Anglo-Texan property owners. At the same time, Texas’ oldest bar might also have ceased to exist during the years of prohibition and anti-Germanism. Fortunately for Austin and for Texans of German heritage, the Austin Saengerrunde has proven to be durable and resilient, and will doubtless continue *Das Deutsche Lied* for decades to come.

⁶⁰ Albrecht, “German Singing Societies in Texas,” abstract.

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