A Meadow of Prophecy

A long, long time ago in the history of our country-the year 1778 to be exact-our forefathers were amid the times that tried men’s souls. Washington in that year was saddened and perplexed, yet unafraid as he looked upon and felt the sufferings at Valley Forge. And had it not been for Martha Washington, Anthony Wayne and Lafayette, even the stout heart of the father of our country might have failed after the battle of Monmouth.

But the American revolution must succeed! A new member of the family of nations must be created. A new state destined to become the beacon of liberty throughout the world. All this has been made possible by the contributions of men and women from every clime. That is the Mosaic which makes American culture so fascinating in its entirety.

Now let us look back at the year 1778 on continental Europe. There, near the city of Berlin was born a lad christened Frederick Ludwig John-now known the world over as the father of gymnastics. Theology and languages attracted the boy at first, but as he grew to manhood the course of his life was changed by a series of events in the form of war. The iron heel of Napoleon was upon his native land; and, after the battle of Jen and defeat, Frederick John saw the morale of his people at lowest ebb. Something must be done to restore it, if at all possible.

John always believed in the motto “A Sound mind in a sound body”-and to that end he created a system of gymnastics to restore physical and moral powers. And so, Frederick John, at the age of 23, established his playgrounds at the Hassenheide on the outskirts of Berlin. This rugged and determine young man built better than he knew. For here was a Meadow of prophecy whose echoes in a generation would reach that new Hercules beyond the sea-that Hercules, the United State of America.

That lapse of time takes us into the roaring 40s-1848. Zachary Taylor, was about to enter the White House as president. The cholera epidemic with sudden fury took a heavy toll in American lives. In 1848 on the American River in California the sands of that little stream said “Open Sesame” and behold gold and more gold became the password. Caravans of covered wagons and whatnot answered to the call of Westward Ho!

But, events across the sea were full of meaning, too, because there in the land of Frederick John occurred a revolution instigated by the progressives who wished to get rid of the monarchy, the nobility and the Prussian nailed fist. Many of these enlightened revolutionists found refuge in America, among them Carl Schurz and Franz Sigel-both disciples of Frederick John and his Meadow of prophecy at Hassenhiede.

Carl Schurz proved to be a great American. From liblar on the Rhine he came. But before he reached America he fought for true liberalism in his own country. Exiled to France, to Switzerland, to England, back to France and again to England, he at long last reached Philadelphia and ultimately, Wisconsin. Orator, lawyer, soldier, journalist, US Sen., cabinet member and minister to Spain, Carl Schurz early adopted the cause of abolition. He would speak for hours in favor of women suffrage and the popular election of Senators. He covered himself with honor in the civil war, especially the second battle of Bull Run and in the battle of Gettysburg. There must be a union, one and inseparable.

“Above the bayonets, mixed and crossed men saw a gray, gigantic ghost receding through the battle cloud and heard across the Tempest loud the death cry of a nation lost.”

Such a man was Carl Schurz and such were the times in which he worked and wrought. His companions were like unto him, those liberals who believed in the divine right of people and not in the divine right of kings. Many of these good people settled in Cincinnati and of course with them went the principles of John and Schurz. There in 1848 they established the first Turnverein or Turner’s, at a place far removed from that Meadow of prophecy at Hassenheide.

It is now the year 1853. Stephen A Douglas, the Little giant of Illinois is in his heyday. Dark clouds appeared on the horizon between the North and South and in Dayton that spirit was manifested. But even so, the program of the Turner’s caught hold and as a result there was established in our city a chapter of the Turner’s Society and in reality a society of families. Please remember this was the year 1853.

Today at fifth and high streets Dayton Ohio one sees the words Turner’s hall, and if one but visits there one will meet one of the most affable and most gracious of men. I refer of course to Mr. Fred Olt who has been a devoted Turner for 59 years and who now is the executive secretary. Here in the old hometown the work of Frederick John carries on at the Turner’s and proud the organization is of its national membership of more than 40,000, not counting the children.

Dayton Turner’s, like all Turner’s believe in the memorable words of John Locke who said: “A sound mind in a sound body is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world; he that has these two, has little more to wish for, and he that wants either of them will be but little the better for anything else.”

Turnerism, briefly summarized means; liberty against all oppression; tolerance against all fanaticism; reason against all superstition; justice against all exploitation; free speech, free press, free assembly for the discussion of all questions, so that men and women may think unfettered and order their lives by the dictates of conscience, such is our ideal which we strive through a sound mind in a sound body.

The American Turner’s are a federation of Turner societies in the United States, organized to promote physical education and to disseminate rational ideas in order to advance health, happiness and prosperity and the progress of mankind. The principles of Frederick John are taught at the Dayton Turner’s by Max Grob and Louis Weisman. Mr. Grob is instructor for adults and juniors, and Mr. Weisman, his aide, teaches the children. It is interesting to know that the Normal College of the American Turner’s at Indianapolis is now a part of the University of Indiana. As a matter of fact, a list of the heads of health and physical education departments in the major cities of the United States reads almost like a list of Turner Normal College Alumni. Uncle Sam, too, puts his approval on Turnerism since the morning sitting up exercises in the Army are patterned after the Turner program. And the Turner women’s auxiliaries are the best in the country.

But now let us turn back the pages of Dayton history to see what the disciples of Hassenheide have accomplished in the field of recreation and play. In this field the Turner’s have wisely frowned upon any athletic event which involves terrific strain or danger. Apollo threw the quoit which slew Hyacinthus. Leander swam the hallesport and the discus thrower has been immortalized in painting and in sculpture.

But the Turner’s replaced the discus with hurl ball which is flung like the discus but without attending hazards. At the hurdles and the dashes they never had superiors as teams. And the hop-step-and jump continues a prize event in the Olympic games.

There is the triple standing broad jump and the 16 pound shot, tossed by both the right and left hands with the average taken as the mark. There are mass drills and tactics, calisthenics and formations. All the acme of precision beauty and rhythm.

On the Atlantic seaboard their long has been practiced the fine art of fencing. This has always been a part of the Turner plan and it was the Turner’s and the YMCA who introduced fencing to West Point. There on the lordly Hudson echo the words en garde, play, step back and Parry! And once again come adventurous memories of Dumas and Monte Christo, Sir Walter Scott and Ivanhoe and Sabatini and Capt. blood. The Turner’s saw in fencing the possibility of excellent coordination, dexterity, grace and rhythm. Some few years ago one of our fellow Daytonians graduated from West Point. His name Tommy Sands and an expert at fencing he was, and that be it said, he had a Turner background with Jacob Weidner, his grandfather and Florence John Sand, his mother. But let us not forget those other great Turner fencers Dr. Bucher and John Fray.

So without doubt the gymnastic movement begun, and a meadow of prophecy has developed into a program of wholesome recreation and play. Just the program to perpetuate the words “A sound mind in a sound body.”

The Turner program involves the competitive spirit so dear to the hearts of Americans. Hence the Dayton Turner’s have competed the country over against related organizations. They have been at Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Louisville, Cleveland, Buffalo and St. Louis and in our own city they have delighted thousands at Highland Park, Memorial Hall, the soldiers home and the University Stadium. And at the fairground they gave perfect cooperation to the police and firemen’s field day. No matter where their travels have taken them their percentage has always been near the top.

Now I would take you back to St. Louis in 1897. Team after team was surpassed by our Dayton Turner’s with only the two St. Louis teams gaining a higher percentage. Dayton really competed out of its ranking but Mr. Herzog, the Dayton Turner, knew his combination.

Among the stalwarts on that team were Al Wetecamp, Ed Sauer, William Cramer, Jack Davey, and Edward Weyrich. Eight members of the Roehm family always attracted attention especially the judge who was one of the greatest athletes in the history of our city. Others in the Turner list included the Olt brothers, Roy Fitzgerald, Charles Roth, and Wilbur click. And we must hasten to add the names of Schneider, long, Schantz, Anspon, Klugel, Eliphiant, Schmidt, and Sensel.

So out at fifth and high streets is Turner Hall a perpetuity of that meadow of prophecy at Hassenheide. And so it is the country over and ever has been since 1848. “A strong mind in a strong body” is their motto and in American practice it has rendered worthy service. In 1861 the bodyguard of Lincoln at inauguration was made up of Turners and frequently during the war they were the president’s protectors.

Believing in the US as a democracy in a Republic, established upon the principles of freedom and equality, dedicated to justice and humanity, the Turner’s recognize in harmonious education of body and mind. The most important factor to preserve and perfect such a democracy. Therefore, they seek to train the citizen for the efficient discharge of all his duties toward the community, also showing him how to live his own life in a wholesome rational way with happiness as its proper goal. The philosophy of life may well have an epilogue in the lives of Silas Perkins:

“I want to live and work and plan with the great crowd surging by to mingle with the common man no better or worse than I.”

Robert Worst 1947