

Anke Ortlepp. *„Auf denn, Ihr Schwestern!“: Deutschamerikanische Frauenvereine in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1844-1914.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 309 S. EUR 37.00, gebunden, ISBN 978-3-515-08405-5.



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At first glance, Anke Ortlepp's study of German-American women might seem to be of minimal interest: the study group is small, the location (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) of relatively little significance in American history. However, the focus of Ortlepp's discussion is the largest German community in the United States. In 1860, 75 percent of the population of Milwaukee was of German origin (p. 36). She is quick to point out that these immigrants made their community a "little Germany," calling Milwaukee a "German Athens on Lake Michigan," not the insular and isolated "ghettoized" immigrant world described by Oscar Handlin in *The Uprooted* (1951, pp. 36-37). The civic associations created by the women Ortlepp studies served to bridge the old and the new, preserving German culture and traditions for those well-settled in the United States, while easing the transition to a very different world for the newly arrived. Assimilation and preservation were the twin goals of these groups and this study of their efforts paints a strong portrait of the lives of Germans in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. Those two purposes were inherently at odds, however, and as assimilation or

acculturation progressed, the imperative to preserve a distinct German communal identity declined. Ortlepp traces this paradox of immigration history as she assesses the women's organizations that rose up and then faded away across the seventy years of her study.

The story of women's civic associations begins in the early 1840s with organizations that were created to ease the transition of the newly arrived immigrants. The groups did not limit themselves to finding housing and work for the newcomers, however. From the start, many civic associations were formed by both men and women and they had strong political motives. Such motives were especially important for those fleeing the failed *Vormärz* of 1848 who arrived in the region. These people did not leave their radical politics behind when they came to the United States. As political tensions grew through the 1850s and into the 1860s over slavery and states' rights, the German-American community was deeply involved, committed to the abolitionist cause. Women's groups turned their attention to raising funds to support German-American men fighting in the American

Civil War, and they continued these efforts into the 1870s, demonstrating their continued connection to their homeland, for those who fought in the wars leading to German unification. A point Ortlepp is careful to stress is that German women did not take a significant part in the women's rights and suffrage movements. They were interested, to be sure, but not as committed to gaining political rights and privileges for women as were Anglo-American women's groups. The women in this study were not focused on national political goals, but rather on local civic issues such as education, religion, cultural traditions, and social welfare.

Ortlepp's study builds gradually; each chapter lays out the context in which the women's groups would form, in the larger construct of both German and American current events and in terms of Milwaukee's history. This strategy results in some repetition, which is not helped by the repetitive story of the groups she then discusses. Ortlepp begins with the earliest women's organizations, which were confessional associations—in particular, German-Catholic women's groups concerned with encouraging domestic ideals and protecting public morality, *häusliches Glück* and *Versittlichung* (p. 49). This focus fits into the notions of the "cult of true womanhood" and community building cited by many scholars as causes for women's activism in the nineteenth century. She then goes on to describe various welfare organizations (religious and secular), education groups, labor and political activists, and finally benevolent associations or lodges.

With each group, the list of activities and the membership information is scanty. Ortlepp acknowledges several times that very few detailed records for these groups survive; they were short-lived to begin with and the groups were quite small. They operated in defined districts in the city, so their concerns focused most often on their neighborhoods' problems alone and thus did not attract a great deal of notice in the newspapers,

one of the sources Ortlepp uses most widely. Her other archival sources include parish records and the records of individual groups but, while she is able to give a general picture, she is not able to provide any great sense of "history from below" or of the women as individuals.

Many of the women's groups formed as auxiliaries to men's organizations and often worked primarily to aid their activities. The clearest examples of this are the women's groups that arose alongside the *Turnvereine* (pp. 98-131). These women's groups raised funds and provided support for the *Turnvereine*, as well as for other men's organizations, eschewing an independent existence or purpose centered on women's issues or concerns. The list of activities undertaken to raise funds by all the women's groups included lectures, literary readings, musical and dance performances, bazaars, picnics, and costumed balls. The stated purposes also remained the same: to raise money for the immediate needs of the community (building or renting schools, providing emergency unemployment assistance, aiding newcomers or those displaced by war, and so on) but also to create and preserve a sense of German community and heritage.

The longest-lived of these organizations were those devoted to educational concerns. The groups sought to ensure instruction in German language and especially to provide quality education for girls as well as boys. Their efforts also included preserving German cultural traditions and heritage and many of their fund-raising affairs centered on German language performances and lectures. As the twentieth century began, it grew harder to preserve German language and culture due to the increasing assimilation of the German community. Few people did much more than speak German at home and the need or desire for formal education in reading and writing German lessened. Once that became the obvious trend, many of the education-oriented women's groups lost membership and faded away, in the same

way earlier issue-oriented groups dissolved as their rationale for organization disappeared.

Ortlepp finds a stronger voice when she turns her attention to political activism in her discussion of the *freie Gemeinde* (the rational or free-thinker religious movement of the late nineteenth century), socialism, and labor unionism. The one strongly identified figure in this study plays a central role here. Mathilde Anneke and her husband Fritz Anneke had fled Germany in the wake of 1848; she was a women's rights activist in Germany and continued her efforts by participating in the American women's suffrage movement. She was also very active in the socialist labor movement. Ortlepp calls for a detailed biography of Anneke, and it seems as if this discussion is a prelude to just such an effort (pp. 153-162, 180-182).

Left-wing activism, from labor unionism to communist political organization, is known for its broader goals. The women's groups that formed to support these efforts were less inclined to work for narrow local causes or women's issues. Instead, they supported the larger national goals of the working men's associations by raising funds and providing moral and material support. Their aims were focused on national workers' issues such as the right to unionize, bargain collectively, and strike. Women's labor unions were particularly interested in equal pay for equal work; the seamstresses' union took part in the strike year of 1886 alongside the Knights of Labor and other men's labor unions (pp. 215-234). These groups were well outside the realm of Ortlepp's original focus on community-building, German-centered, women's organizations.

The final groups Ortlepp studies are the sister organizations of fraternal lodges such as the *Hermanns-Söhne*. Fraternal lodges were more than simply sites of communal identity, despite the allure of secret rituals and strict membership requirements. For the women in the *Hermanns-Schwestern*, for example, lodge membership was a source of independence and security that ex-

tended the associational activities of the earlier organizations. Over time, lodges came to offer insurance for illness, disability, unemployment, and death, increasingly necessary in the growing economic uncertainty of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The strict standards of who was eligible for insurance indicates the element of continuing social and moral force that characterized the earliest women's organizations. However, Ortlepp notes that acculturation and assimilation into the new world were both the origin and the end result of the development of the lodges; membership set one apart based on ethnic origins and provided a place of cultural identity outside of everyday life. But the lodge system had no counterpart in Germany and instead followed the Anglo-American model of the Odd Fellow lodges and their female auxiliary, the Rebekahs. The very difference of this last study group is an odd ending for this study. Ortlepp builds from narrow, culturally-focused groups, gradually treating women's expanding interests in the political activism and radicalism of the socialist and communist groups, and then turns back with this concluding section to groups once again centered on more narrow, local, ethnic interests.

This book would be of primary interest to state and local historians while providing insight to those interested in the growing fields of the history of women's civic associations and immigration history. As noted earlier, the scarce source material and repetition mean that this book has limited depth for a real understanding of who these women were, how or why they acted, their social status, and the connections they may have shared. The graphs and tables in the appendix give a numerical representation of membership, as well as Ortlepp could discern. For those not familiar with the layout of Milwaukee, her references to the various district divisions would have been helped with a map of the city.

This is an interesting work for the light that it sheds on immigrant culture and on the tension

that inevitably developed between the ties to the homeland and the blending of the old and the new worlds. Ortlepp stops her study in 1914, avoiding the problematic issues of World War One and the ultimate test for Germans in their new land. The strength of this work is the attention it brings to women's activism and the role women took in shaping their communities. The twin aims of these women's groups, cultural preservation balanced by the desire for assimilation into the new world, are the primary focus of the work and Ortlepp succeeds in bringing this aspect of the transatlantic experience to the fore.

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