

GERMAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

Chicago's Immigrants

"The Windy City" - this nickname of the largest metropolitan center of America's Old Northwest stands for more than just Chicago's most typical geophysical characteristic. Incorporated in 1837 as a city of 4,170 frontier settlers, Chicago emerged almost overnight as the big industrial and commercial center that it has been ever since. Its location at the mouth of the Chicago River, opening the door to the Mississippi Valley and Lake Michigan, connecting the city with the East, made it the ideal place for any entrepreneur with any sense of adventure and economic ambition. "Boosterism", as the Chicagoans liked to call this peculiar spirit, came to be the most particular feature of the city's development. The coming of the railroad in the 1840s gave the final kick-off to her spectacular rise into the biggest economic center next to New York by the turn of the century. Even the Great Fire caused by Mrs. O'Leary's legendary cow in 1871 couldn't keep Chicago's population figure from sweeping from 30,000 in 1850 to over one million forty years later. Her highly diversified industry and her unique commercial location attracted great masses of immigrants, among whom the Germans constituted the largest group. In fact, Chicago came to be the "Mecca" of German immigrants with every third citizen being either German or an offspring of German immigrants by 1900.

As the dominant immigrant group, the Germans played a prominent role in the economic and cultural history of Chicago. As a rule, those who came before 1880 were trained in Germany. Most of them were artisans or skilled workers but the proportion of semi- or unskilled workers willing to take whatever job was offered increased in the last decades of the 19th century.

Though climbing the economic ladder faster than most other immigrant group, this fact didn't prevent them from taking the lead in the city's labor movement. As Chicago's industry rapidly advanced to a higher technological state, many of those who had come as carpenters, bakers, shoe makers or cigar makers expecting to make a better living in their new homeland, found themselves confronted with the same problems as those at home. Industrialization undermined the freedom and status they had enjoyed as independent artisans, machines threatened their jobs and their wages.

German trade unions, already founded in the 1850s, were a strong element not only in leading Chicago's labor movement but also in shaping a vivid and diverse working-class culture. Besides the multitude of lodges and compatriotic societies, there were dozens of union and non-union local singing societies, benefit and Turner societies, shooting and reading clubs, all of which had a great share in adding an often unmentioned but very important side of German working class culture to the stormy life in the "Windy City".

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