The America Book

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THE LITTLE BOY RAISED his head from a color illustration of a young tow-headed fisherman about his own age perched on a rock beside a stream. The fisherman's feet were bare, and his faded overalls were fastened with a safety pin. Beside him was a rusty tin can, and he watched—with the frown of intense concentration—the shiny home-made float which dangled from the end of his home-made pole.

The little reader and the boy in the picture are more than 3,000 miles apart, but a book has brought them closer together. "I, too, like to fish. I would like to fish sometime with this boy, and in this brook," the child said, nodding at the picture. He spoke in German.

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AMERICAN BOYS AND GIRLS who recently made a gift of 20,000 copies of "The America Book for Youth" to children in Germany can hardly realize how great is their contribution toward a better understanding by German youngsters of the American way of life. There have been as many responses to the book almost, as there have been readers, and they vary with the reader's age. Some, like the little boy who felt a kinship with the 10-year-old fisherman, have merely a simple, friendly desire to know the boy or girl they see pictured—fishing, skiing or skating—doing something which is fun for all children. The older ones take a more mature interest, in a dozen different ways. But everywhere, the book has produced a common effect: "Thank you; we love it; we would like to have more."

The idea for "The America Book for Youth," which is printed in German with the title "Das Amerika Buch fuer die Jugend," originated with a well-known German newspaper editor, Horst Schmid von Dannowsky, who has long believed that there is a great lack of books to acquaint boys and girls in Germany with the life of people in other parts of the world. Mr. von Dannowsky was not interested in a book which was actually just a textbook on the history of the United States, nor did he want one showing the scenic beauties of America, or describing the American government, or literature, or natural resources. He thought German boys and girls needed a book which would tell about all of these things and in addition show how they are a part of the daily life of Americans. And he wanted such a book to be simple enough for boys and girls to understand.

When he told Information Services officers of the Office of the US High Commissioner about his idea, he found an instant, interested response. HICOG's Information Services Division, with the aid of the International Press and Publications Division of the Department of State, began the arduous task of preparing a vast fund of information to go into the book. Mr. von Dannowsky remained the driving force behind the tremendous editorial and rewrite job which he had inspired.

THE FIRST QUESTION to be decided by the German and American editors was: how much do our potential German readers know about America? It was agreed that they knew very little. American history, certainly, would be a dim hodge-podge of facts in most young German minds—a cursory knowledge, at best, of the American Revolution, colonization, the war between the states and a few names of great leaders, perhaps. In most cases, the young German's picture of daily life in the United States would be largely composed of odds and ends gleaned from films, especially the gangster and the German ones, from books about cowboys and Indians—particularly Karl May's—and from newspaper accounts of the latest publicity stunt, such as a flagpole sitting endurance contest or a dance marathon.

To provide in a single volume a good introduction to the history of the American government, folkways and literature, industry, commerce, culture, sports, religion, politics, and myriads of other information, simple enough to be easily understood by boys and girls from 10 to 18, informative and comprehensive enough to be worth the effort, entertaining enough to make reading a pleasure rather than a chore—that was the aim of the editors of "The America Book."

The finished product is just that. Articles on history, for instance, alternate with short stories; there are favorite American songs interspersed with excerpts from a

Typical of smiling recipients of "The America Book for Youth" is this group of German girls, who were made the happy owners of copies in a ceremony at Kuenzelsau, in Bavaria, April 4, 1951. (Photo by Lindenerger)
childhood classic such as "Tom Sawyer." There are dozens of illustrations and a host of statistics, charts, pictures, maps. The inside of the cover is a game played with a 10-plennig coin on a map of the United States.

TWENTY THOUSAND COPIES of the 500-page volume were published early last spring. Distribution began in March with the initial presentation by Mrs. John J. McCloy, wife of the US High Commissioner, to eight representatives of West German and Berlin youth organizations at her Bad Homburg home.*

Although virtually all the books were distributed in the American zone, 1,500 copies were sent to Berlin and 15 each to localities in the British Zone where there are US Information Centers or American reading rooms. Of the Berlin presentation, Professor Ernst Reuter, governing mayor, wrote: "Due to its manifold and interesting descriptions the 'Amerika Buch' is of great value to the Berlin youth, many of whom will surely get a more impressive idea of the United States by reading it. To get acquainted with the history and the people of a foreign country is certainly the basic condition for a good international understanding. We are greatly obliged to you for this gift..."

School libraries in the American zone received 5,500 books; youth organizations 4,000; each of 211 US resident officers was given 15 copies; 35 US Information Centers received 15 each; American book-mobiles were allocated 10 each; American reading rooms in the smaller localities each were given five; installations operated by the US Information Centers got 1,000, and presentations were also made to youth hostels, apprentice hostels, school newspapers, radio stations broadcasting youth programs, youth magazines and 200 winners of the ERP essay contest.


Horst Wieseback (left), representative of the students' newspaper, "Wetterauer Tintenfass," in Friedberg county, Hesse, and Else Blumenauer, member of its Schiller School students' self-government committee, receive copies from Resident Officer Ernest A. Knoblauch. (Photo by H. Schuessler)

Several children were able to win a copy of the book in contests arranged by resident officers. Always, presentation of the books was made a special occasion with the town mayor, school officials and American representatives taking part.

A refugee child from Silesia who earned a copy wrote: "We lost all our books; it is so wonderful to have this one."

Another said: "Thank you so much for the book. I have not read it all yet as my father is reading it, too. My sister always wants it when I do, so we have decided that since my father reads loudest, he will read it to us and no one will have to wait."

A 17-year-old high school editor, expressing his thanks, wrote: "When the book arrived, work on our paper was forgotten — my staff dropped everything to read it."

A Bavarian child said: "I showed my book to my teacher, and he wanted to borrow it. I hope he gives it back."

Adults were equally enthusiastic. Said a school principal: "All of our 250 children are reading the book with great interest. They are all so eager to have it, it is difficult to know to whom to give it."

A teacher wrote: "This is easily the best book I have seen about America. I prefer it to any of our official textbooks dealing with American life."

From a Bremen radio station came a letter which said in part: "Your 'America Book' will be the basis for uncounted youth broadcasts in the future."

OF PARTICULAR INTEREST is the fact that German and American writers and editors cooperated so fully and so successfully in production of "The America Book." The idea came from a German journalist; a great part of the raw material for the book was contributed by the archives of the US Feature Service; and German and American editors shared the work of preparation.

Said one US official in commenting upon the success of the book: "It is a source of the greatest satisfaction to us that there was not a single negative response to this project designed to promote mutual understanding between German and American children. The enthusiasm of adults increases our belief that such an understanding can and will be fully achieved in the years ahead."