

DIE FREIEN GEMEINDEN IN WISCONSIN

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If a tourist of today should wander two blocks from the main street of Sauk City, Wisconsin, and come upon a large wooden building standing at the edge of a shaded park, he might be curious about the name, *Freie Gemeinde*, on a small metal plate at the corner of the building. The old-fashioned bandstand in the center of the park implies community gatherings in the past. The tall pine trees suggest daytime picnics over a period of years. Inquiries into the significance of this building and the surrounding park will reveal that both are the property of the Free Congregation of Sauk City.¹ Park Hall was erected in 1884 by the *Freie Gemeinde* (since 1937 known as the Free Congregation) of Sauk City, an organization founded there in 1852 by German-American settlers, who brought with them from their fatherland this free thought movement (X, pp. 1, 15, 19; XI, pp. 169-72).

Among the German Forty-eighters who settled here and in other Wisconsin communities were members of Free Congregations formed in Germany after 1840 (V, pp. 9-10; IX, pp. 673-75).² From Burlington north to Sheboygan and across the state through Mayville to Bostwick Valley,³ there were in 1852 thirty similar societies of free-thinking Germans (I, December 1862, p. 91). But today Sauk City and Milwaukee are the only *Freien Gemeinden* which are still active.

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¹ The congregation was organized as the *Freie Gemeinde von Sauk County* because many of the members were farmers living near Honey Creek and Merrimac and in other directions. In 1861 Honey Creek built a hall of their own; in 1863 Merrimac dedicated their hall. Although there is no longer a congregation at Honey Creek, the hall is kept in good repair and the cemetery around it is maintained by a cemetery association. Mrs. Clara Runge says that Merrimac hall was sold to the Merrimac *Gesangverein* in 1878 (X, p. 13). The active group is now in Sauk City and is spoken of as the Free Congregation of Sauk City.

² The Germans who migrated to the United States after the 1848 Revolution failed, are usually referred to as the "Forty-eighters." Often they immigrated to escape political or religious persecution by the victorious reactionary forces. A. E. Zucker is editor of a book of essays by different historians, *The Forty-eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848* (New York, 1950).

³ In the passage cited from his reminiscences, Eduard Schröter lists the following *gemeinden* as active in 1852: Burlington, Calumet, Cedarburg, Fond du Lac, Germantown, Hermann, Howel's Road, Jefferson, Koskonony, Kilbourn Road, Madison, Manitowoc, Mayville, Mequon River, Milwaukee, New Holstein, Oshkosh, Plymouth, Polk-town, Racine, Schleisingerville, Sheboygan, Sheboygan Falls, Theresa, Town Rhine, Two Rivers, Watertown, Waterville, Waukesha, West Bend.

The history of the German Free Congregations (*Freien Gemeinden*), in Wisconsin began in Germany in 1840-46,⁴ when both Protestant and Catholic groups revolted against authoritarianism in church government and in theological dogma and withdrew from their orthodox churches to become independent groups (V, pp. 3-5; IX, pp. 672-73). Those members who came to the United States brought with them the principles of independence of the congregation and freedom of thought for the individual which became basic in the organizations formed in thirty Wisconsin communities.

The story of these independent-thinking societies belongs in the history of movements which have contributed to intellectual and religious liberalism in Wisconsin. Evidence of their rational philosophy and their democratic practices, which will be cited in this paper, show that nineteenth century science and humanism were strong influences upon the beliefs of the *Freien Gemeinden*. Although they did not unite with the Free Religious Association of the United States, they extended to them the hand of fellowship and sent observer-representatives to their conventions (I, March 1869, pp. 138-43; May 1869, p. 172; September 1870, p. 140).⁵

The purpose of this research is to discover and organize chronologically the available information about the *Freien Gemeinden* in Wisconsin so that their significance in the cultural history of the state may be apparent. This paper reports only the beginning of a continuing effort to discover more facts about the decline of the *Freien Gemeinden* in Wisconsin from thirty congregations in 1852 to the two surviving societies of 1964.

Since these Free Congregations are almost forgotten in Wisconsin, it may be appropriate to begin with some examples of their distinctive beliefs and practices. The constitutions of the two surviving societies, the resolutions passed when local congregations met in national convention to discuss and recommend, but not to legislate, the free thought magazine, *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben*, and reports of the national association, are some of the most useful sources for this information.

Like all Free Congregations in Germany and the United States, the Wisconsin groups guarded the independence of the congregation and the individual. The local organization was the highest authority

⁴ The history of the movement in Germany and the causes of migration to the United States, written from the point of view of a Forty-eighter, may be found in Friedrich Schünemann-Pott's *Die Freie Gemeinde* (Philadelphia, 1861).

⁵ The executive committee of the *Bund* suggested cooperation between the two organizations through *Bund* members joining as individuals the Free Religious Association and through exchange of publications. The committee wrote to the F.R.A. in English and included an English translation of the *Bund* constitution to show the similarity of the aims of the two organizations. In May, 1870, Alexander Loos, secretary of the *Bund*, attended the Boston meeting of the F.R.A. See *Blätter* . . . XV:3 (September 1870) 38-40, for his report.

in church government and there were no specific beliefs which every member must accept. The Sauk City congregation made this statement in Article II, sections 4 and 5 of its constitution adopted in 1853:

There shall be no doctrine formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed or laid down, as by a church. We shall endeavor, however, to institute a self-sufficient philosophy in keeping with our ideals. We shall not profess atheism (theoretically), the denial or disbelief in the existence of a Supreme Being, but rather a practical atheism, namely: living so that we can interpret our Supreme Being as we desire and hold our own conception of immortality.

We shall not designate any member to function as a priest or a minister does in a church. We shall have no specified lecturer or teacher unless the congregation so decides.

Nowhere in the constitution of Sauk City is there mention of an authority higher than the congregation.

A national association of congregations, *Bund der freien Gemeinden von Nordamerika*, was formed in 1859, but its constitution adopted in that year and revised in 1876, protected the local organizations from domination by a national organization:

Regular conventions are to be held every third year. . . . No questions of principle are to be voted upon, yet the resolutions regarding them may be discussed and recommended to the further consideration of the single congregation. The resolutions of the convention regarding external matters of administration become binding only as soon as a majority of the members of the Association expressly ratify them. (I, March 1869, p. 140)

The Milwaukee constitution of 1949, section X, states the same principle of local autonomy:

Affiliation with kindred organizations having the same or similar ideological aims as those of our organization can only be accomplished by vote of members of the *Gemeinde*. Only the *Gemeinde* as parent organization is empowered to elect delegates to such an organization.

Milwaukee has kept in its constitution the principle of freedom of thought which has guided all Free Congregations since they were founded in Germany. Section II states the purpose of the Milwaukee *Freie Gemeinde*:

Conscious of the limitations of the human mind and aware of our dependence upon the forces known and unknown amid which our brief lives are spent, we seek nevertheless through education and dissemination of the truths of science to dispel ignorance and mysticism and destroy superstition, to create a wide and inclusive mental attitude which accepts the supremacy of human reason.

We endeavor to establish through observation and experience a system of philosophy wide as the world and embracing all men, which will attempt to ascertain man's relation to the universal forces about him, and place him in harmony with such forces mentally and physically.

Through knowledge of his common origin, his common end, and a realization of his common needs and tasks, to which we subscribe, men will eventually be able to make of this earth, which is our home, a place where ideals may grow, justice prevail, and where the good and true and beautiful may survive.

The emphasis upon this-worldliness, not other-worldliness, expressed in the last paragraph is in harmony with Sauk City's statement in its constitution (Article II, section 1) that the organization's aim is "to promote and cultivate the highest possible standards of ethics and morals in regard to all individual, social and business relationships" and with the *Bund* statement of 1876, "The highest good is earthly happiness through physical, mental and spiritual well-being."

The most complete statement of belief discovered in this research is that of the Plymouth *Gemeinde* (I, May 1870, pp. 173-74). It begins, "We place reason above revelation," and it continues in parallel phrases to contrast the dogma of Christianity with the principles of Free Thought: for faith they substitute knowledge; for two worlds, one whose existence is certain; for an autocratic removed-from-the-universe God, the rule of eternal universal law; for miracles, natural law; for God's providence, man's own providence; for predestination, fate; for man torn apart by strife between flesh and spirit, unified, harmonious man; for trust in God, self-reliance; for humility, consciousness of human dignity; for abstinence, moderate use of pleasures; for desire for reward, love of good for its own sake; for heaven in another world, heaven in this world (in the hearts, homes, societies, and states of mankind); for values in heaven, values here; for inexplicable mysteries, unsolved problems; for the Bible, the book of nature and history; for the pulpit, the speaker's platform; for the preacher, the speaker; for supernatural salvation of the soul, natural education of the spirit and heart; for prescribed rituals, free customs; for the Christian school, the humanist school.

The platform concludes:

This is our present general rule and plumb line. But there are no irrevocable conclusions of faith. We can make . . . in the future better rules and plumb lines . . . Each age is its own law-giver.

These principles of freedom of thought and democratic procedure are typical of the contribution which the German Free Congregations have made to the growth of rational philosophy and religious liberalism. But their contribution has received little recognition. The usual sources of information about Wisconsin history rarely mention them; only from their own publications and reports, in the German language, can facts be gathered to form the beginning of a history of the *Freien Gemeinden* in Wisconsin.

The first Free Congregation of Wisconsin was established at Painesville, south of Milwaukee. Some German Protestants from Wittenberg had settled in Oak Creek and Franklin townships. Displeased with the strict theology of their Lutheran pastor, they withdrew from the church and formed a Free Congregation, which first met at Buckholtz Tavern where today United States highway 41 meets Wisconsin 100. By 1851 they had incorporated with about 35 members and had been given an acre of land upon which to build a hall, which was completed in 1852. According to their report to the *Bund* in 1876, the membership in the 27 years of their history had increased to only 37, but their report explained that this seeming lack of growth was due to the fact that eight or ten families had moved to Minnesota,⁶ where they had joined other Free Thought societies (IV, p. 60).

The activities at Painesville listed in this report included bi-weekly lectures at ten o'clock Sunday morning, a *gesangverein*, the circulation of Free Thought literature such as the *Freidenker* (or the *Truthseeker* for those who did not read German), and pamphlets by Karl Heinzen. The members lived on farms eight or ten miles from the hall, but a Sunday school of 15 or 20 members was maintained.

According to this 1876 report, the first speaker at Painesville was Herr Rausch (1851–53). His short service was terminated when he forsook Free Thought and became a Lutheran pastor in Racine. Robert Glatz, a former Catholic priest in Hanau, Germany, was the next speaker until his death in 1856. After Glatz' death, Christian Schröter, a farmer living seven and a half miles from the hall, was speaker and the writer of the 1876 report.

In the sources examined for this research no more information about Painesville appears until the *Bund* report for 1899. After paying their dues for that year, Painesville withdrew from the *Bund*, giving as the reason that "they had always been alone and in the future would remain alone" (VII, p. 1). Occasional meetings were held until about 1905 (II, p. 2).

The name, Painesville,⁷ cannot be found on a modern map of Wisconsin, but it can be located in the *Historical Atlas of Wisconsin* (Milwaukee, 1878). The hall built in 1852 has been preserved because of the recommendation of Alexander Guth, an architect who surveyed and appraised historical buildings in Wisconsin in 1955. Following his recommendation, the Painesville Memorial Associa-

⁶ A number of Free Thinkers from the neighborhood of Milwaukee moved to Carver County, Minnesota about 1870. From Carver County, some moved on to Otter Tail County where their Free Thought cemetery, near Vergas, is located.

⁷ Painesville is not spelled consistently in maps and records. *The Historical Atlas of Wisconsin* (Milwaukee, 1878) spells it Paynesville.

tion was organized and through its work the hall was restored and a bronze commemorative tablet placed at the right of the door (III, p. 7).⁸

Today one may see the simple white colonial hall, 24 by 36 feet, surrounded by the cemetery and protected by a white fence. Inside are the original pews and pulpit, and a stove bearing the date 1848. On the walls, just as described in the 1876 report, are portraits of Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Humboldt, and Thomas Paine. Unfortunately, the original hand-glazed windows were destroyed by vandals. The Girl Scouts now meet in the basement, which was added in 1939 as support for the walls. The Girl Scouts leader, Mrs. Harvey Davitz, is in charge of the hall.

Not long after Painesville organized, a Lutheran church in Milwaukee decided to declare its freedom from orthodoxy and invited Eduard Schröter, a Forty-eighter who had been lecturing in the East, to come to Milwaukee and organize them as a Free Congregation. While he served as speaker in Milwaukee (1851-53), Schröter established a Free Thought newspaper, *The Humanist*, and made missionary journeys lecturing in the state. When in 1853, he accepted the invitation to become speaker at Sauk City, he apparently left a vigorous group in Milwaukee. But soon after his departure, differences of opinion arose in this *gemeinde* which resulted in the group's disbanding in 1854 (XI, pp. 172-88; I, November 1856, pp. 78-80). Until 1867 there was no *Freie Gemeinde* at Milwaukee. Sauk City is, therefore, the older of the two surviving societies.

The Sauk City *Gemeinde* under Eduard Schröter as speaker grew from a few Free Thinkers gathered together by Carl Dürr to a society of 60 members in 1859, with a school and a library. By 1876 their activities included a women's society, a mixed chorus, and a theater society. The membership, which at that time included Honey Creek and Merrimac, has increased to 80 (IV, pp. 61-62; XII, p. 31). Later *Bund* reports show that membership continued to increase for the next 64 years: in 1918, 85 members; in 1923, 97; in 1940, 111.

Mrs. Clara Runge, a life-long member at Sauk City, wrote a history of the congregation for their 1940 Founders' Day celebration. In it she pays tribute to the quality of instruction in Schröter's

⁸ The inscription on the tablet reads:

The Painesville Memorial
Erected in 1852 as the
"First Free Christian Church
of the town of
Franklin and Oak Creek."

The chapel has been preserved
in its original condition for
its historical and architectural interest.
October 1939 The Painesville Memorial Association

Sunday afternoon classes and in his meetings for older students on Thursday evenings. "He always introduced the best German poems and required each pupil to memorize and recite a poem each Sunday." On Thursday evenings there were discussions of literature and of passages from the Old Testament. Both Schröter and Friedrich Schünemann-Pott, speaker at Philadelphia and an active national leader in the *Freien Gemeinden*, referred to themselves as humanists and considered humanism a religion (X, pp. 6-7).

During the twenty-four years since Mrs. Runge wrote her history, the membership of the Sauk City Congregation has been decreasing. President Ralph Marquardt says that at present the membership is about fifty, but that attendance at the monthly meetings is often only fifteen or twenty. Founders' Day, Thomas Paine's birthday, and the Spring Festival are still observed, but the quiet celebrations of the present are a sharp contrast to the days older members recall.

Miss Minnie Truckenbrodt, the oldest member of the Congregation, remembers that in her girlhood the Spring Festival was an all day and all night celebration, beginning with a band concert at ten o'clock Sunday morning and concluding with a dance that lasted until the early hours of Monday morning.

There was a speaker at eleven Sunday morning. During his lecture, the good cooks inside the hall were preparing chicken, beef, potatoes, beans, peas, carrots, lettuce, kraut-salad, and pies. Tables were filled several times for the noon feast. An afternoon of visiting and music followed, interrupted by coffee and cake in the dining room at three, or visits to refreshment stands in the park. At six o'clock, the women served a substantial supper, not a snack. About eight o'clock, a dance orchestra began to play in the lecture room on the main floor. Every one danced: children, young people, parents, grandparents. The floor was crowded for polkas, waltzes, and square dances. Downstairs beer was sold to the thirsty dancers. At midnight came another hot dinner, *not a lunch*, says Miss Truckenbrodt.

A large number of the members were farmers. They reasoned why not finish the night dancing? Why leave after midnight and get home for very little sleep before five o'clock milking? Why not dance on and go right to work when they got home? So that is what they did.

Such gayety was only one of the *Gemeinde* activities. There were plays, a *gesangverein*, declamation and debate programs, concerts, lectures, and a library of German books.

A few examples from the subjects of lectures which Mrs. Runge has listed show that Sauk City had serious intellectual interests: Eduard Schröter, "Schiller, His Work and His Death"; Dr. Herman

Lueders, "Bacteria, Their Relation to Agriculture"; Mrs. Hedwig Henrich-Wilhelmi, "The Modern Woman of Europe"; Rev. Howard Udell, "Henrich Ibsen's *Brandt*"; Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, "Negroes and their Rights." (X, pp. 20-26).

A further evidence of the intellectual interests of the Sauk City Congregation is the library, seldom used now, since most of the books are in German and only the older members read German with ease. A room off the balcony above the lecture room holds books, magazines, and pamphlets that contain valuable source material for a history of the *Freien Gemeinden* in Wisconsin.⁹

Since so few of the younger generations use the German language, Sauk City in 1937 adopted English for its meetings and records and translated its official name to the Free Congregation of Sauk City. In 1955, the group affiliated with the Unitarian Church and became the Free Congregation of Sauk City—Unitarian Fellowship.

The other surviving *Gemeinde*, Milwaukee, has kept its German name and uses the German language in its business meetings and most of its activities, although there is a discussion section conducted in English. Organized in 1867 with only nine members, the Milwaukee *Gemeinde* enrolled 250 members by 1868. By 1876 it had established a variety of activities: 26 lectures a year with an average attendance of 70 or 80; a Sunday school of 150 in which instruction in the catechism of humanism was given; debates, festivals, a women's society, a singing society, a reading section, and an organization to give assistance to the families of deceased members (II, July 1868, p. 12; IV, pp. 63-67).

Bund reports from 1900 to 1924, on file in the Free Congregation library of Sauk City, show fluctuations in number of members from 157 to 250. According to Walter Niederfeld, secretary, the present membership is 129. Although there are no young people's organizations or Sunday school classes, as in the years 1876-1924, the Milwaukee *Freie Gemeinde* is carrying on a variety of activities.

It rests upon a successful business organization because Jefferson Hall is a source of considerable income and an assurance of financial stability. The basement of the large brick building is leased to the operator of a well-patronized bowling alley. On the first floor are social rooms with kitchens which are rented every day between Easter and the middle of June. A bar on this floor

⁹ In the Sauk City Free Congregation library, there is rare material on the history of the *Freien Gemeinden* in the United States and in Germany. The Free Thought magazine, *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben*, (18 volumes) contains reports from local *gemeinden* in the United States and in Europe, the travel-letters written by Schöne-mann-Pott on his lecture tours through the East and Middle West, and articles about the principles of the *Freien Gemeinden*. The nearly complete files of *Bund* reports up to 1924 and over forty thin volumes of sermons preached in Germany to the Free Congregations 1840-50 are also valuable sources of historical information.

brings in more income. On the second floor is an auditorium where there is a concert nearly every Sunday. Here also are staged dramatic performances which continue a traditional *gemeinde* activity.

Discussion groups meet once a month, a German and an English group. The *Gesangvereinsektion*, which attended the International Song Festival in Germany in 1962, the *Damenchor*, and the *Frauenverein* are activities announced in the monthly magazine *Voice of Freedom* (carrying as its subtitle the former German name, *Das Freie Wort*). Secretary Niederfeld says that the group is much interested in politics and in all legislation for freedom of the individual citizen.

The advantage of being located in a city with a large German-American population is one explanation of the survival of the Milwaukee *Freie Gemeinde*. The ability of its executive board to adapt the financial organization of the society to meet requirements of modern tax laws, has made the operation of the hall profitable and insured Milwaukee against the financial problems which have been a factor in the disappearance of *Gemeinden* in so many smaller communities.

Among the five Wisconsin *Gemeinden* reporting to the *Bund* in 1876 were Bostwick Valley and Mayville, both of which became inactive early in this century. Neither used the name *gemeinde*: Bostwick Valley called itself the *Freidenker-Verein* and Mayville reported as *Der Freie Manner-Verein* (IV, pp. 67-68).

According to its report, Bostwick Valley was founded in 1869 and had just celebrated its seventh Founders' Day on June 11. It belonged to the *Provincial Verbande von Wisconsin* to which it made a yearly contribution of twenty dollars. On May 8, 1876, it had joined the *Bund* with a membership of 33.

Maxmillan Gross, the speaker, reported a library of 15 volumes, a school of about 12 students meeting three times a week under the instruction of the speaker, and a *gesangverein* in the process of organization. The speaker lectured twice each month. The group was free from debt, owned its hall, the furnishings, and the lot. The property was valued at \$700.00. Yearly contributions from the members amounted to about \$200.00.

Later *Bund* reports found in the Sauk City library show that in 1914 Bostwick Valley had only 20 members, a library of 29 volumes, and property valued at \$4000.00. Two years later, the president of the *Bund* reported that Bostwick Valley had been dissolved on June 25, 1916, because of lack of financial support. He added that a few members from West Salem and La Crosse had joined the *Bund* as individuals.

Inquiries by the writer of this paper in April, 1963, resulted in locating among the older citizens of West Salem a few persons who remembered that in their youth the Free Thinkers of Bostwick Valley were an active group. Some had attended the summer school conducted by the Free Thinkers in order to study German. Alfred Hemker, son of the president of the group in its last years, recalled lively social affairs; at one of the dances held in the basement of the hall he had met his wife. The brick hall, mentioned in *Bund* reports, is still standing in Bostwick Valley, but it has been purchased by Barre Mills for use as the town hall.

The last of the five Wisconsin groups reporting at the 1876 convention was Mayville. According to a letter written by the secretary, Charles Ruedebusch in 1868, Mayville had been organized in 1863 (II, August 1868, p. 32). The *Bund* report of 1876 is very brief, not signed by an officer of the society, and reads as if the *Bund* office were speaking. After the statement that Mayville *Freie Männer-Verein* of Dodge County joined the *Bund* in 1870 (after it had been organized several years) and that their principal activity had been the undertaking of a German school, which had now been incorporated with the public school, comes the statement that no specific statistics or other announcements about themselves have been received "in spite of our requests." The report concludes, "The spiritual growth of the members is directed by the lectures of a traveling speaker" (IV, p. 71).

In *The Mayville Story*, a booklet issued in 1947 to commemorate the centennial of the city, a few historical sketches written by Mayville citizens mention German organizations but do not connect them with the Society of Free Men. Mrs. Otilie Ruedebusch tells of *Die Freie Deutsche Schule*, which taught both German and English. It was built in 1871 because there was no public school, but when a public school was built in 1876, the German school was discontinued and the building given to the Turners, who enlarged it and used it as a social center until 1946 when they sold it to the Masons.

Mrs. Charles Schumann in "A Walk Through Mayville Fifty Years Ago," tells of a *Frauenverein* and a *Männerchor*, but does not connect them with a Free Thought group. Mr. John Husting, attorney at Cedarburg, in a letter of September 13, 1963, says that his mother, who came to Mayville in 1893 at the age of 14, has no knowledge of a Free Thought group at that time. "The Turner was for many years the center of Mayville's culture: plays, musical affairs, gymnastic exhibitions. It is not known whether the Free Thinker group helped or not."

From the evidence available at present, we can be sure a Mayville *Freie Männer-Verein* did exist for a few years after 1870, the year they joined the *Bund*. The sale of the schoolhouse might indi-

cate their decision to unite with the Turners in the German activities of that organization.

In several little communities near Milwaukee, Free Thought groups at one time were active. In the case of Thiensville, there are interesting legends reported by a *Milwaukee Journal* feature writer (October 13, 1940). According to this story, Thiensville was a "godless city," the "Paris of Wisconsin;" the town managed to keep out churches until 1919 when a Catholic church was finally established. Older citizens of Thiensville, children of Free Thinkers, and in some cases Free Thinkers themselves, agreed upon being interviewed that they had never heard of any active opposition to the organization of churches. "We just felt we didn't need churches, and we wanted to be left alone," was the way one woman put it.

Paul Seiffert is a retired pharmacist, whose grandfather Baron von Seiffert came from Saxony in 1845 and hung on the door of his log cabin the coat of arms given his family in 1716 for their service to the state. Mr. Seiffert was willing to talk about his childhood in a family of Free Thinkers. When as a young boy he asked his father's permission to attend a church Sunday school with one of his friends, the answer was, "No. When you are twenty-one and old enough to make your own decisions, you may decide for yourself."

Although Mr. Seiffert does not remember that any direct instruction in principles of Free Thought was given the children in the home, he does recall the Sunday walks with his maternal grandfather Von Barkenhauser, who would take Paul and his sister to the woods and teach them to recognize different trees and flowers. He was certain that in his boyhood there was no formally organized *gemeinde* but there were a singing group and informal social activities for the Free Thinkers. Others interviewed were in definite agreement on this point.

When it came to marriages and funerals, the Free Thinkers never had a minister. A justice of the peace or a leader in the Free Thought group officiated at marriages. Funerals were non-religious with one of the Free Thinkers speaking briefly. One man requested that his friends take a walk in the woods instead of giving him any funeral ceremony.

A bit of information about Mequon and three other vanished *gemeinden* comes in a letter from an unnamed correspondent to the *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* (I, November 1856, pp. 79-80). He writes that there has been no *gemeinde* at Milwaukee since 1856, but that there are *gemeinden* at Kilbourn Road and Cedarburg, and the ruins of one at Howel's Road, and that there is a report that a *gemeinde* may be organized at Mequon. This correspondent concludes that "there is a field here and there in the Milwaukee

neighborhood, but the spiritual power and the outward means are entirely lacking."

Cedarburg, Howel's Road, Kilbourn Road, and Mequon are among those communities listed by Schröter in 1862 when he was lamenting the diminishing interest in Free Thought: "Where except on the banks of the Wisconsin River in Sauk and Dane Counties is there a trace of the many victories of enlightenment?" (I, December 1862, p. 91)

Schröter's lament over the retreat of the "forces of enlightenment" was prophetic. Fourteen years later only four Wisconsin groups reported to the *Bund*: Painesville, Sauk City, Milwaukee, Bostwick Valley. As we have seen, the lack of a report from Mayville was noted by the *Bund* office. During and after the 1876 *Bund* convention, the organization by Karl Heinzen of a *Bund der Radikalen* disrupted the *Bund der Freien Gemeinden und Freidenker-Verein*, and it was not reorganized until 1897 (V, pp. 11-12). In 1900 only Bostwick Valley, Milwaukee, and Sauk City reported, and Painesville withdrew "to be alone." In 1916 Bostwick Valley disbanded because of lack of financial support. In succeeding reports only Milwaukee and Sauk City represent Wisconsin. Today these two societies go their separate ways. Milwaukee belongs to the American Rationalist Association; Sauk City is affiliated with the Unitarians.

A variety of reasons may be logically conjectured for the diminished membership of the *Freien Gemeinden* in Wisconsin: marriage of children of *gemeinden* families with children of orthodox families; loss of interest in German language and culture by the second and third generations of German-Americans; lack of enough leadership and money to keep the movement alive; the growing liberalism in some orthodox churches which gave less ground for objection to their principles.

In summary, it may be said that the illustrations of the beliefs and practices of the *Freien Gemeinden* in Wisconsin presented in this paper, show these contributions to the cultural history of Wisconsin:

1. In a period of conflict between orthodox religion and science, they were among the first to demand that religion should be in harmony with the developing scientific knowledge.

2. They believed in the right of the individual to search for truth wherever he found it whether or not the results agreed with traditional beliefs.

3. In their ideal of using new knowledge of nature and man to make this world a better place for human beings, they were among the nineteenth century humanists who anticipated the "social gospel" of the twentieth century churches.

4. These men and women were among the earnest intellectuals of the state for while enduring the hardships of pioneer life, they took time and energy to nourish the life of the mind by listening to lectures on philosophy and literature, by establishing libraries, by organizing groups to perform in drama and in vocal and instrumental music.

In taking stock of its cultural heritage, Wisconsin should recognize the contribution made by the *Freien Gemeinden*. Two practical means of recognition would be the effort to preserve such of their records as are not already lost and the commemoration by appropriate historical markers of the buildings and communities connected with their history.¹⁰ The Painesville Memorial is an example of what should be done for the hall in Bostwick Valley and for all places where these independent-thinking pioneers gathered to keep alive the best of the heritage of the Old World culture and to add to it the new knowledge of the nineteenth century.

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¹⁰ See unpublished manuscript "A Partial Bibliography of Material on the *Freien Gemeinden* in the Library of the Free Congregation of Sauk City," prepared by Berenice Cooper, in manuscript department of the Library of the Wisconsin Historical Society. Milwaukee County has a collection of material on the *Freien Gemeinden*, assembled by Theodore Mueller, retired librarian.

