

Männerchor, Ernst Herzworm, and the 38–th Sangerfest in St. Louis

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Introduction

During the years 1824 to 1827, a German attorney named Gottfried Duden lived in, farmed, and studied the countryside of Missouri around Dutzow in Warren county, just west of St. Louis, in what is now often referred to as the Missouri Weinstrasse. He subsequently published a book about his experiences back in Germany that would quickly come to play a very influential role in emigration to America. *Bericht uber eine Reise nach den westlichen Staaten Nordamerika’s und einen mehrjahrigem Aufenthalt am Missouri* * was a promotional tour–de–force that prompted a massive rise in emigration of Germanic peoples from the 1830s. Numbers grew dramatically further after the failed 1848 revolutions in Germany and several neighboring countries and, excepting the years around the First World War, continued to be relatively strong for decades into the 20th century. And, of course, there was another wave after the Second World War that nucleated the American Aid Societies, leading ultimately to our present German Cultural Society. Today, at more than 40 million strong, German–Americans are among the largest ancestry groups in the United States, according to the US Census Bureau.

But I’m getting a little ahead of myself here. This piece is not actually about Duden, nor his Bericht, nor emigration *per se*, all of which are interesting topics perhaps for future examinations. It is rather about one of the distinct cultural revetments that swept–in with German arrivals and that further developed into a large, nationally–organized movement. I am referring here to the phenomenon of the male chorus. Along with many traditional organizations and activities like *Sport & Turnvereine*, *Schiesswettbewerbe*, *Volkstanzgruppen*, and *Blasskapellen*, ** came the *Mannerchor*. This was not the informal *Gemutlichkeit* variety of card–playing and beer garden singing, but rather consisted of organized and directed orchestral groups that gave formal performances and recitals. And, as with many of the other traditions just noted, festivals and friendly competitions geared around singing arose soon thereafter. This article introduces some of the history of the *Mannerchor* in America, ultimately coming to focus on a large event that took place in St. Louis, namely the 38–th Sangerfest (Fig. 1) and the contributions of one of its important directors, Ernst Herzworm.

Figure 1: Official banner of the North–American Sangerbund’s 38–th Sangerfest (postcard from author’s collection). It depicts the Greek Muse of song, Erato, and her cherubic attendants on a throne supporting a pendant of King Louis IX of France, namesake of St. Louis. This edifice is flanked by names of classic composers, as well as portraits of Franz Schubert (left) and Stephen Foster (right), reflecting the emphasis on music of both the Old Country and the New Homeland. A scroll at the top announces the festival. The staff at bottom is from the Richard Wagner opera “Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg”; which symbolizes the high level of singing skills to which *Mannerchor* aspired.



* The title translates roughly to The story of my trip to the western states of North America and my several–year stay in Missouri. See reference [1].

** These are clubs and activities respectively organized around soccer & gymnastics, rifle–shooting competitions, folk–dancing, and brass music.

Growth of Männerchor in America

By the 1840s, German–American Männerchor were springing–up all over the midwest and the east coast, with notable early groups in Cincinnati, Louisville, and Columbus and significant clusters of groups appearing in cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and St. Louis. There soon was a call to coordinate activities, including visiting performances among clubs, with some sort of larger structure that would organize Männerchor at a national level. In 1849, that vision was realized in the form of the newfound *North–American Sängerbund*. Chartered in Cincinnati, the Sängerbund organized a national singing festival, a Sängerbund, in that same year. A total of 5 societies attended, with singers numbering about 120. This was impressive in the days of horse and buggy and when rail travel was still relatively unusual.

A national Sängerbund would subsequently be held every year for more than a decade, mostly in various Ohio cities, until the existential crisis of the US Civil War erupted. Priorities changed immediately, of course, and singing was among the many activities that were set aside as men went off to fight. After 4 bloody years, the war's conclusion brought earnest attempts to return to normalcy. For many German–Americans, this meant that singing with the Männerchor would now blossom into a new era. National gatherings had already resumed by 1865, with 17 groups numbering about 300 singers meeting in Columbus, Ohio for the 13–th Sängerbund. But interest expanded briskly. The 1866 festival in Louisville swelled to 800 singers from 31 groups and the 1867 gathering in Indianapolis topped 1000 singers [2]. The growing logistics of moving and hosting such large groups prompted the Sängerbund thereafter to switch to a schedule of every other or even every third year for roughly the next 5 decades.



These figures are interesting, but it would be a mistake to boil this all down to just collegial singing performances and festival attendance numbers. The Männerchor phenomenon in the United States actually developed into something much more, namely a social structure having its own customs, traditions, and hierarchies. This was especially true in cities sufficiently populated with German–Americans to sport multiple clubs, rather than just one or two. Membership certainly depended, to some degree, on where one lived, since transportation was still very primitive by the standards we are accustomed to today. But, it was also a function of other factors, including where a man's family had come from in the Old Country, as well as how he made his living (e.g. laborer, professional, or businessman) and what his social and financial statuses were. For example, in St. Louis, the *Deutsch–Ungarischer Arbeiter Männerchor* (of which my maternal grandfather was a member) catered to the “working man” (the literal translation being the “German–Hungarian Workingman’s Chorus”), while the *Liederkranz Club* was comprised moreso of professionals and businessmen, counting among its members restaurateur Tony Faust, brewers August A. Busch Sr. and William Lemp, and grocer Herman Kroeger [3]. You could actually know a lot about a man from his Männerchor affiliation and, in fact, the question “Which Männerchor group do you belong to?” (asked invariably in German in those days) served much the same functionality as the question “Where did you go to high school?” does today. However, these Männerchor also had a great deal in common, including a keen sense of musical taste, from the great composers, to folk songs of the Old Country, to classics of the New Homeland. This musical unity was reflected in, for example, the North–American Sängerbund standard repertoire (Fig. 2), which included works by Beethoven and Wagner, volkslieder like *Muss I Denn*, and patriotic songs like *America* (My Country, 'Tis of Thee) and *The Star–Spangled Banner*.

Figure 2: First edition of the standard repertoire for Männerchor chapters of the North–American Sängerbund published in 1902 (author’s collection). The repertoire was sanctioned by the Sängerbund advisory board and separate staffs were published for different voices, this one being for bass singers. The stamp in the upper right corner indicates that this particular copy once belonged to the Chouteau Valley Männerchor, one of the many groups that once existed in St. Louis.

St. Louis was certainly among those cities in which the Männerchor phenomenon flourished to its fullest cultural extent. Duden's book [1] attracted early settlers, whose economic successes gave rise to something of a feedback loop that attracted evermore German immigrants. Most found ready employment in St. Louis' growing industrial and commercial bases, becoming permanent residents rather than passers-through. Many would join the ever-expanding collection of active Männerchor. Rippey's St. Louis Index [4] already listed 24 separate groups by 1888, among them the *Apollo Gesangverein* (1408 Salisbury, north St. Louis Hyde Park neighborhood), the *Chouteau Valley Männerchor* (2817 Chouteau Ave. in midtown; one of their songbooks is shown in Fig. 2), *Germania Sängerbund* (Broadway and Park Ave., downtown), *Harmonie Männerchor* (4820 North Broadway, north St. Louis near O'Fallon Park), the *Liederkrantz Club* (13th and Chouteau near Lafayette Square), the *Orpheus Sängerbund* (226 Market near the riverfront), the *North St. Louis Bundeschor* (1623 North 14th Street, old north St. Louis), *Rock Spring Sängerbund* (Manchester and Clayton Roads), *St. Louis Liedertafel* (3419 1/2 South Broadway at the Lemp Brewery), and the *Teutonia Gesangverein* (22nd and Benton, St. Louis Place). By 1912, Glaesser's Directory [5] had expanded this list to 39 active singing groups and clubs within the St. Louis area.

Although many of these clubs met and rehearsed at rented facilities, the more affluent ones were able to erect massive "temples of song" that rivaled the great halls raised by other building-minded societies, like the Masons, Odd Fellows, and Elks. This was probably nowhere more true than with the *Liederkrantz Club*, which owned and/or built several such structures. Fig. 3 shows perhaps their most well-known home, the New Liederkrantz Hall, which opened in 1907. Following the southwesterly expansion of St. Louis City that had already established itself by that time, the Club sold its original hall on 13th and Chouteau, moving about 3 miles further out to the corner of South Grand and Magnolia at the eastern edge of Tower Grove Park. The building, designed by the firm of Helfensteller, Hirsch, and Watson, fronted 120 feet on Grand Avenue, with a depth of almost 180 feet and was erected at a cost of \$100,000 [6]. (That sum translates to about \$3 million today.) It sported all the necessary facilities for the society's members, including bowling alleys, billiard parlors, banquet rooms, library, separate ladies' facilities with a private cafe, and of course, a 5,000 square foot concert hall and ballroom. ***



Figure 3: The *Liederkrantz Club* Hall at South Grand and Magnolia circa 1910 (image cropped from a postcard furnished by the Mary Alice Hansen Postcard Collection, courtesy of the Missouri State Archives).

Typically, clubs' social functions also extended into the realm of dances, formal balls, and masquerade parties (especially Karneval a.k.a. Fasching during the period preceding the Lenten season), which, as "society events", were duly covered by newspapers of the day. A February 12, 1888 article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch recounted the almost 2,000 Karneval revelers that had descended upon the *Liederkrantz Club* the prior evening, giving detailed descriptions of individual ladies' costumes and noting the long lines of horse-drawn carriages up and down Chouteau Avenue that resulted in what was

*** For more Liederkrantz-specific history, see Michelle Heitmann's article in the Summer 2020 issue of the Rundschreiben [7].

probably one of the earliest traffic jams in St. Louis. For the *Orpheus Sangerbund* Faschingsball the following season, that same newspaper wrote on February 17, 1889:

At 10:30, Vollrath's Orchestra struck-up the Pappenheimer March and the grand entry took place... The costumes were remarkable, not only for their beauty, but also for their historical accuracy... Dancing was kept up until an early hour in the morning, and all departed greatly pleased with the entertainment.

There was another aspect, too. As is typical with almost all socially-structured and/or ethnic communities, marriage prospects had to be considered and perhaps even promoted within socially-acceptable norms. Mannerchor balls also served in this more subtle capacity for debutante and match-making purposes [8].

Other types of social functions were also common, with the old-style card party being a perennial favorite. Revelers tended to play "trick-taking" card games popular in the Old Country, like Pinochle, Fuchser, or Euchre, as well as Lotto, a "covering" type of game that was a forerunner to modern Bingo. Fig. 4 shows an admission ticket to a card party thrown by the *Herwegh Sangerbund* in 1923 at the German Freethinkers (*Freie Gemeinde*) Hall, a.k.a. the Dodier Hall, at 20th Street and Dodier in the St. Louis Place neighborhood. Note the ticket number of 894. As with the masquerade balls above, these gatherings were large, significant social events within the German-American community. They were important to attend, as well as to be seen attending. The practice of organizing social events around games (as opposed strictly to music and dancing) would diffuse into larger American culture and remains alive and well today, for example in the bingo and trivia nights held by numerous non-profit, civic, and church organizations. Note also that, except for the society's name, the entire ticket is printed in English, rather than German. In the years following the First World War, Mannerchor became evermore conscious of avoiding the fallout of ongoing anti-German sentiments.

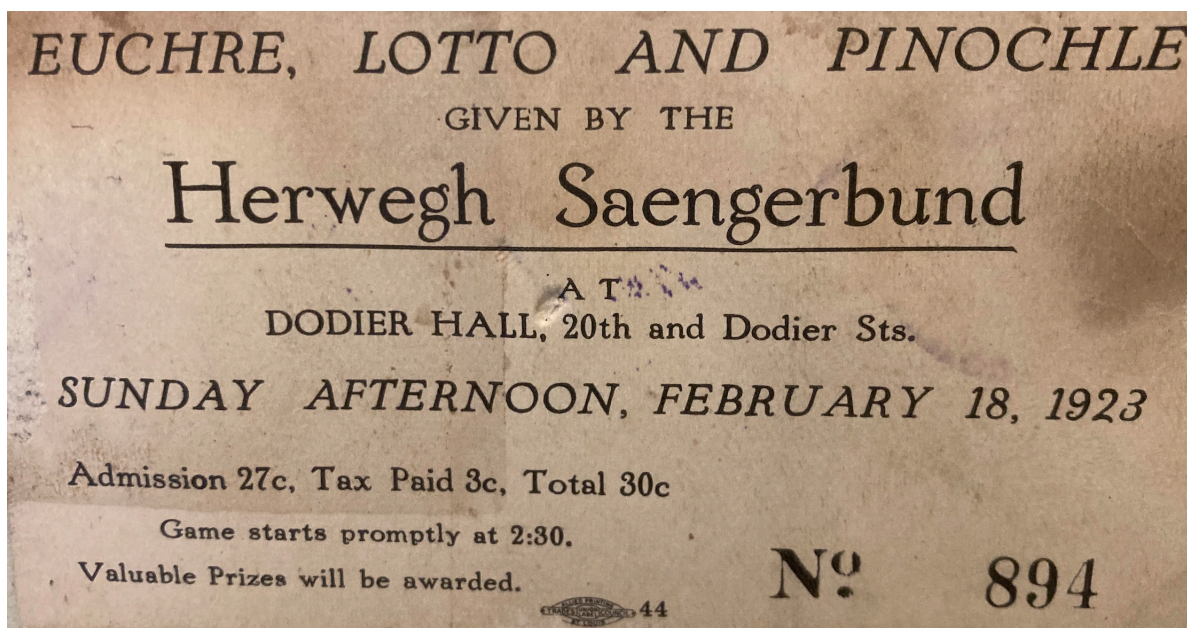


Figure 4: Admission ticket to a 1923 *Herwegh Sangerbund* card party (author's collection).

Ernst Herzwurm: Mannerchor Dirigent

Around this same time, one Ernst F. Herzwurm was completing his studies at the Aachen Conservatory and Cologne State University in Germany. Intending to leave for America, he made his way to the port of Antwerp, boarded the *SS Lapland*, and arrived in New York City in October of 1922. As an educated man, Herzwurm (Fig. 5) had little difficulty with passing then-mandatory immigration tests and had already arranged his final destination to central Kansas, specifically to a tiny hamlet called Belpre, where he had an uncle. However, by 1927, he was living in Edwardsville, Illinois, a small community a few dozen miles northeast of St. Louis. He had tacked-up a shingle as a piano teacher, operating out of a small studio at 117 1/2 Purcell, being one of six professional music instructors listed in Polk's Edwardsville City Directory [9]. Earning a living in music has never been considered especially easy, or even necessarily secure. Then, as now, it usually meant cultivating a large and stable clientele of paying students to augment whatever professional income one might make. In the meantime, Ernst had met and married his wife Helen, and they would soon start a family. Nearby St. Louis seemed to offer much more opportunity for the young couple.



Figure 5: Ernst Herzworm at about 36 years old, circa 1934 (image from Ref [2], author's collection).

Ernst and Helen eventually set-up housekeeping in a \$62.50 per month apartment on Harter Avenue in Richmond Heights, an inner-ring suburb of St. Louis, with their infant son Ernest. The 1930 US Census lists Herzworm's profession as a teacher of both piano and organ, but he also gave other lessons, especially in voice. Because he spoke English, he could cater both to established St. Louis society, as well as to the more affluent German immigrants who desired first-rate professional instruction for their children. A piano was a relatively expensive musical instrument to own in those days and proficiency of voice and key was one hallmark of a cultured *Ausbildung*. Polite society still considered such cultivation to be especially important for the eligible young lady of the household, a point personified by a scene in the 1944 MGM movie *Meet Me in St. Louis*, with Lucille Bremer at the piano and Judy Garland singing in the parlor of their home prior to the opening of the 1904 World's Fair.

Besides teaching and performance fees, there were various other ways a professional musician might augment income, including arranging and transcribing music. (This generally had to be done by a union-affiliated musician, who in St. Louis would have been a member of the American Federation of Musicians Local 2.) However, in those Männerchor heydays, there was yet one other avenue open to certain qualified music professionals, that of chorus director. The director's position was a technically demanding job and groups were extremely eager to have educated music men at their helms. Of course, since singing was both in English and in German, bilingual ability was also a must.

In April of 1931, the longtime musical director of the *Liederkrantz Club*, Hugo Anschuetz, passed away unexpectedly at the age of 51. The Sunday edition of the May 3 Post-Dispatch estimated that 2,000 people had gathered at the St. Louis German House on Lafayette Avenue to pay their respects. With banners of 40 Männerchor clubs surrounding the casket, eulogies were delivered by a passel of dignitaries, including the German Counsel Georg Ahrens and the North American Sängerbund president Fred Nuetzel. A combined chorus of over 200 sang Schubert's *Sanctus*. With Anschuetz' passing, the *Liederkrantz* had big shoes to fill, especially as it and the other Männerchor would soon start preparing for the next national Sängerbund to be held in St. Louis. After some consideration, Ernst Herzworm got the nod as the new dirigent (conductor) of the *Liederkrantz* and would go on to make his debut at the 1932 spring *Liederkrantz* concert held at the Grand and Magnolia building (Fig. 3).

The 38-th Sängerbund in St. Louis

Planning a national Sängerbund presented the same kinds of logistical problems as something like the Olympic Games do today in that thousands of people had to be transported, housed, ferried to venues, and fed. The prior 37-th Sängerbund, held in Detroit in 1930, had drawn more than 4000 active participants from 110 Männerchor clubs [2], not to mention their families and many thousands of paying concert-goers who attended. The 38-th Sängerbund slated for 1934 in St. Louis was expected to top those figures. The national gathering had not actually been held in St. Louis for more than 30 years, when the 31-st Sängerbund in 1903 was among the "warm-up" events preceding the gigantic Louisiana Purchase Exposition, a.k.a. the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. (The 31-st festival was actually held in the not-yet-completed Palace of Liberal Arts on the fairgrounds at the east end of Forest Park.) A suitable venue would be needed here, but the established stand-by was the old St. Louis Coliseum at Washington and Jefferson Avenues and it had seen better days, not to mention the significant logistical headaches it posed. On the other hand, the St. Louis Arena bordering the south edge of Forest Park had just been completed in 1929, and, with a capacity of more than 14,000, it would fit the bill. The Sängerbund organizers secured the Arena for the main 3 days of concert activity scheduled for May 31 through June 2, 1934 (Fig. 6).

Ernst Herzworm's reputation had grown considerably since becoming the *Liederkrantz* director only a few years prior and he was invited to serve as a member of the musical advisory board for the 38-th Sängerbund, which he accepted. In fact, Herzworm and fellow board member Karl Reckzeh from Chicago were further tapped as the head choral conductors for the festival (Fig. 6), with Herzworm slated to direct the gigantic *Empfangs Konzert* (reception concert) on opening night [2]. In its May 29, 1934 issue, the Post-Dispatch predicted the attendance for the 38-th Sängerbund at over 10,000. This would include a massed chorus of 4000 singers, a combined chorus of 2000 children drawn from St. Louis catholic and public

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Figure 6: The North–American Sängerbund ran this advertisement in the St. Louis newspapers promoting the upcoming 38–th Sängerfest. The festival’s venue, the St. Louis Arena, appears in the background (lower right). At this time, the Arena still sported its grand entrance towers, which would later be damaged in a 1959 tornado and subsequently removed.

school glee clubs, as well as noted soloists Helen Traubel and Frederick Jagel of the New York Metropolitan Opera, and recently–retired New York Symphony Orchestra conductor Walter Damrosch directing the musical accompaniment of 76 pieces [2]. The allegorical banner designed for the festival (Fig. 1) hinted at the program and, on opening night, Ernst Herzwurm presided over a massive vocal interpretation of the works of Beethoven, Wagner, Schubert, and Foster [2]. The concert, which began promptly at 8:15 PM, sported such a power–packed schedule that the program announced that no encores would be given. Helen Traubel was accompanied by Damrosch’s orchestra and Herzwurm also directed the Ladies Auxiliary Chorus, which sang several selections from Max Reger near the end of the evening. The closing piece was Psalm 150, in which Herzwurm conducted the entire ensemble. Thomas Sherman, who was covering the festival for the Post–Dispatch, wrote the following day that:

...the singing was remarkable for its solidity, coherence, unity, and the balance between the four sections of basses and tenors...Mr. Herzwurm, by an illuminating distribution of emphasis and careful regulation of the dynamics made the interpretation very expressive.

Ernst Herzwurm’s magnum opus had been a success, even with the critics.

The festival would continue for several days, but Herzwurm could now relax to some degree and enjoy the rest of the shows. Directorial responsibilities for the full–scale evening concerts would now shift to Herzwurm’s Chicago counterpart, Karl Reckzeh. The smaller matinees would feature individual groups led by their own conductors, including the Catholic and Evangelical Church choirs, the McBride High School Glee Club, the *Akron Liedertafel*, and the United Singers of Chicago. Well–wishes for the success of the 38–th Sängerfest had rolled in from all corners, everyone from local dignitaries, like St. Louis Mayor Bernard Dickmann, all the way to the German Reichspräsident Paul von Hindenburg and the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Reprinting these greetings ran to 13 pages in the souvenir program that commemorated the event [2]. These well–wishes were born out and, by any measure, the festival had been a smashing success. The Sunday edition of the Post–Dispatch for June 3, 1934 reported an attendance of 7500 for the closing concert the prior evening and said all that remained was the delegates’ meeting at the Jefferson Hotel to select new national officers and to open preliminary discussions for the next festival. The 38–th Sängerfest was now in the history books.

Epilogue

Ernst Herzwurm would go on at various times to direct not only the *Liederkrantz*, but also the *Harmonie Männerchor*, the *Apollo Chorus*, and the *Bäckermeister Gesangverein* (Master Bakers' Union Chorus). He and his wife Helen would ultimately have 6 children, 3 each of boys and girls, and live a comfortable life in the Holly Hills neighborhood of south St. Louis City near Carondelet Park. Ernst died in 1964 and Helen followed in 1992.

Singing societies remained strong in St. Louis for many decades after the 38–th Sangerfest, but by the 1970s they were experiencing the kinds of membership pressures that inevitably arise as the social landscape evolves. Some groups disbanded, while others joined forces. Today's *Deutscher Mannerchor* was born out of the 1986 merger of 4 independent organizations [10], the *Eden Club Mannerchor* founded in 1928, *Harmonie Mannerchor* founded in 1885, the *Swiss Singers* founded separately as the *Schweitzer Mannerchor* in 1872 and *Schweitzer Damenchor* in 1907, and finally the *Schwaben Sangerbund* founded in 1903 (Fig. 7), to which my maternal grandfather Nick Holzinger belonged. Led by longtime president Klemens Wolf, they are still singing. Norman Cleeland is still at the helm of the *Liederkrantz Club*, which has the distinction of being the oldest extant society (from 1870) in St. Louis [10] and which recently welcomed members of the ladies' chorus of the German Cultural Society into its ranks.



Figure 7: Membership badge of the Schwaben singing society, founded in 1903 (author's collection). Like the *Liederkrantz*, the Schwaben owned their own hall, acquired in 1915, at 3514 South Jefferson, just a block north of the present German Cultural Society hall. That building would be their home until they combined with 3 other organizations in 1986 to form the *Deutscher Mannerchor*.

The venues I have mentioned in this article have generally not fared as well. While the Schwaben Hall (Fig. 7) is still standing, others are gone. The New Liederkrantz Hall on South Grand (Fig. 3), which had since been a Masonic building for some decades, was torn down in 1963. The St. Louis Arena (Fig. 6) had a long and storied history as a sports venue. I fondly remember my father taking my brother and I to many St. Louis Steamers' soccer games there as kids, long after the voices of the 38–th Sangerfest had faded. It was torn down by a spectacular implosion in 1999 and a passel of smaller commercial buildings now stands in its place. The demise of the Dodier Hall (Fig. 4) in north St. Louis is much more tragic. Vacant and later abandoned, it was left to gradually deteriorate for decades, partially collapsing in 2013, until it was finally destroyed by a suspicious fire in 2021.

Germans first arrived in America in 1683 [10] and Americans of Germanic heritage have contributed enormously to the cultural, commercial, and intellectual developments that have built our country into what it is today. There has always been an element of conscious assimilation, perhaps somewhat more than with other large immigrant groups, like the Italians and the Irish, because of the long shadows of two World Wars. Today, many people of German descent might only have a vague awareness of their heritage or fuzzy memories of their grandparents or great–parents speaking or singing in German, playing Fuchser, or talking about the Old Country. There is a good chance that some of these same ancestors once belonged to a Mannerchor group. Today's growing collection of genealogical organizations and resources, including online tools, open–up many opportunities for researching these ancestral connections and the many contributions these people made to American life.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to recognize the late Karl Kasper for gifts of several historical Mannerchor–related artifacts, including the *Liederbuch* in Fig. 2. This book belonged to the *Chouteau Valley Mannerchor* that Kasper once directed and for which he was, in fact, the director–of–record at the 38–th Sangerfest [2]. Like Ernst Herzwurm, Kasper was prolific in that he ultimately conducted many of the various St. Louis groups at one time or another throughout his career, including the *Backermeister Gesangverein* and the *Eden Club Mannerchor*.

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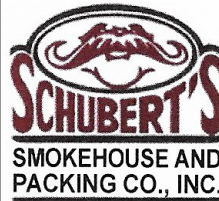


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