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## **Between Subversiveness and Gemuetlichkeit: The Cultural Works of the American Nature Friends**

### **1. Prelude(s)**

The mastermind behind the founding of the *Naturfreunde* in Vienna in 1895 was Georg Schmiedl, a teacher close to the socialist movement. That very fact explains why the club never separated its outdoor functions from cultural aims: Open eyes, knowledge, and a critical approach to existing realities. As a Social Democrat and atheist Schmiedl found that going out into nature did not mean a pursuit of transcendental awe but an appreciation of the beauty of the landscape through rational understanding. A quarter-century later still Schmiedl emphasized the pedagogical impetus that had driven him in those founding years.<sup>1</sup>

The *Naturfreunde* were to develop into an international Labor organization for outdoor activities—within an ideological and functional network of unions, the (Socialist) Party, and other progressive organizations. This context was outlined by co-founder Karl Renner in his 1898 programmatic statement “Der Arbeiter als Naturfreund und Tourist“ (“The Worker as Nature Friend and Tourist“): Not only in depressing work-places and overcrowded slums could one find how cruel capitalism was, it was also obvious in the proletariat’s lack of access to the benefits of nature and culture.<sup>2</sup> Renner’s aim was to turn what used to be oppressed *working animals* into self-conscious and creative working *humans*. Among the club’s achievements he named promoting a knowledge of science (i.e. understanding the material world and its beauty), sociology (understanding how a capitalist society works and why it has to be changed), and culture (creating active minds who can undertake such an effort).

Political, social, cultural, and leisure-time activities he saw as complementary within the Labor movement. Not everyone agreed at first. In 1931, Renner—then already an ex-Chancellor of

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Schmiedl. “Welche Gedanken haben mich bei der Gründung unseres Vereins geleitet? (Rückblick und Ausblick)“ (1920); repr. in: Bruno Klaus Lampasiak/Leo Gruber/Manfred Pils (ed.). *Berg frei - Mensch frei - Welt frei! Eine Chronik der internationalen Naturfreunde Bewegung von den Anfängen der Arbeiterbewegung bis zum Zeitalter der Globalisierung (1895 - 2005)*. 2nd ed. Vienna: Naturfreunde Internationale, 2009. 198-199.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Renner. “Der Arbeiter als Naturfreund und Tourist“ (1898); repr. in: Lampasiak/Gruber/Pils (eds.). 200-201.

the Republic of Austria—reminisced about how back in 1895 party leaders had feared the project might distract workers from the more immediate economic and political struggles. But the integral role of free-time activities, including sports and education, had proved that the socialist movement did not suffer but rather gain “when the proletariat also addresses other, in particular scientific, cultural and intellectual interests.”<sup>3</sup>

Max Adler, a future leading Austromarxist intellectual and an early member of the *Naturfreunde*, stated that at its core socialism was not a workers’ movement “as such” but a cultural movement. What he meant was that getting workers active in educational matters would lead them closer to the socialist idea.<sup>4</sup> In the struggle for Labor’s hegemony as a political force culture could not be neglected, because liberal social reformers aimed at “civilizing” the workers’ lives without changing existing social structures—their intention was an integration into, not the transformation of the ruling system.

If the Party targeted political rights and the unions economic influence, a comprehensive network of progressive organizations covered other fields of the workers’ vital necessities, with the *Naturfreunde* as intermediaries between political and recreational interests.<sup>5</sup> This led to a somewhat “looser” ideological structure. Office-holders were required to be union and/or party members. Yet had the club required a full-fledged leftist consciousness to join in the first place, it would have been much less attractive in the target groups and less effective for the movement as such.

Hiking stood at the beginning of the *Naturfreunde*. As an activity it could easily be combined with political (demonstrations, propaganda) and cultural aims. Educational, physical, and social experiences merged in what came to be called “social hiking,” a synergy of both activating the body and the mind. As John Williams puts it: “Sport alone was not a solution, since the entire human being, not just the body, needed relief and redemption in order to become politically strong.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Dr. Karl Renner über die Naturfreunde“ (1931); repr. in: Lampasiak/Gruber/Pils (eds.). 202-203.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Günther Sandner. *Sozialdemokratie in Österreich. Von den Anfängen der Arbeiterbewegung zur modernen Sozialdemokratie*. Wien: Karl-Renner-Institut, 2011. 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Augustin Upmann/Uwe Rennspiess. “Organisationsgeschichte der deutschen Naturfreunde Bewegung bis 1933.“ In: Jochen Zimmer (ed). *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit: Die Naturfreunde. Zur Geschichte eines alternativen Verbandes in der Arbeiterkulturbewegung*. Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1984. 66-111. 91-94.

<sup>6</sup> John Alexander Williams. “Friends of Nature: The Culture of Working-Class Hiking.“ In: John Alexander Williams (ed). *Weimar Culture Revisited*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 199-225. 206.

In that sense the *Naturfreunde* greeting phrase “Berg frei“ combined the claim to open access to nature (“mountains are [to be] free“) and the elation following a hike up the mountain. In a similar way their logo united an iconography of solidarity (hands clasped), the yearning for a physical union with nature (the mountains), and the immediate beauty of nature (Alpine roses growing from the handshake) (fig. 1).<sup>7</sup>



fig. 1



fig. 2

Their particular role as a hiking and outdoor club was recreation, education, and the widening of the workers’ horizons. In John Williams’s words: “The Naturfreunde movement promoted a proletarian ‘turn to nature’ through hiking, with the goal of improving the working class’s physical, mental, and political strength.”<sup>8</sup> No wonder the header of the first members’ magazine published by the Vienna office (fig. 2) shows a well-dressed, self-confident hiker greeting the morning sun rising behind a mountain—welcoming a future free of material need and enjoying liberty and freedom.<sup>9</sup>

The *Naturfreunde* project appealed especially to skilled workers who knew well how education, cooperation, and political organization had helped them achieve in their own lives. In still moderate if tangible terms they had succeeded in gaining reduced working hours and slightly improved incomes (both prerequisites for leisure activities) and a basic knowledge, sociological and physical, of the world they lived in (the groundwork for cultural activities). For them collective and personal action added up to each other. It created an egalitarian feeling of commuality, and unlike the top-down methods of bourgeois education it was based on collective self-education.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gottfried Korff/Larry Peterson. “From Brotherly Handshake to Militant Clenched Fist: On Political Metaphors for the Worker's Hand“. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 42 (1992): 70-81.

<sup>8</sup> Williams. “Friends of Nature.“ 199.

<sup>9</sup> Critically Irma Nosedá. “Ein Bild des Naturfreundes.“ In: Zimmer (ed.). *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit*. 271-276.

Already Schmiedl had emphasized knowledge of an applicable kind—hence his focus on science and sociology. It also included technical information on how to hike, mountaineer, plan tours, apply first aid, read maps etc. What was intended was both a critique and a transformation of urban mass culture. Less practical, more abstract forms of knowledge were on the sideline. But at closer inspection the span of cultural activities ranged widely, although it mostly excluded the “art for art’s sake“ experiments at the time.<sup>10</sup>

“High art“ was of a more programmatic than practical impact. Increased cultural sophistication was part of proletarian emancipation. Like the working classes were excluded from political influence and nature, they were also excluded from the benefits of culture. The heritage of Schiller, Goethe, or Beethoven was not to be left to a bourgeois elite, as it elevates workers from their deprived cultural living conditions, improves their self-esteem, and prepares them for the class struggle. That is why the club’s publications included classical poetry as well as interpretative essays—such as on Schiller’s Alpine poems.<sup>11</sup>

By and large the popular element remained more prominent.<sup>12</sup> The acceptable cultural scope was relatively open, as long as it was not decadent and trivial anti-culture (“Unkultur“). As another way of the capitalist colonization of human interests the latter was seen as detrimental to becoming a full human being. Most of the *Naturfreunde* forefathers wanted to improve the workers’ reading capacities, and thus abhorred pulp fiction (“Schundliteratur“). Consequently, creating libraries became crucial within the Labor movement, including the clubhouses the *Naturfreunde* built for themselves in beautiful, initially mostly Alpine regions.<sup>13</sup> *Naturfreunde* also organized visits to theaters, talks on plays, or—mainly for their own enjoyment—lay stage productions. “Living images“ were a stage format which combined sports, social criticism, and the literary; they were also shown during meetings with other Labor organizations.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Günther Sandner. “Der Austromarxismus und die Wiener Moderne.” In: Andreas Fisahn/Thilo Scholle/Ridvan Ciftci (eds). *Marxismus als Sozialwissenschaft; Rechts- und Staatsverständnisse im Austromarxismus*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018. 111-124.

<sup>11</sup> R.V. “Alpenpoesie bei Schiller.“ *Der Naturfreund: Mitteilungen des Touristenverein "Die Naturfreunde“* 1901: 20-22.

<sup>12</sup> Günther Sandner. “Kultur als Gegennatur – Natur als Gegenkultur. Austromarxismus und Cultural Studies.“ In: Lutz Musner/Gotthart Wunberg/Christina Lutter (eds.). *Cultural Turn. Zur Geschichte der Kulturwissenschaften*. Wien: TuriaKant, 2001: 149-172. 158-160.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Günther Sandner. “Der Austromarxismus und die Wiener Moderne.“ In: Andreas Fisahn/Thilo Scholle/Ridvan Ciftci (eds.). *Marxismus als Sozialwissenschaft: Rechts- und Staatsverständnisse im Austromarxismus*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018. 111-124.

Singing was most common, instruments often accompanied hikes, bands and choirs were established. Their material was a mixture of working class and popular songs, with classical repertoire pieces added. Finely crafted visual artwork adorned the members' magazines, with a playful influence from art deco. Photography, an expensive hobby members could only afford because they cooperated closely, needed mutual assistance in both technical and aesthetic respects. Talks and lectures by members and guests ranged from excursions to scientific and political topics.

With few adaptations these Austrian practices made their ways into Germany and Switzerland in 1905. In 1910 the idea took hold in North America.<sup>14</sup> A first report from the New York local was published on September 18, 1910 in the club's journal *Der Naturfreund*. It stated these "overseas members saw themselves as an avant-garde, as pioneers whose noble task it was to open their co-workers' eyes to the beauty of their land, in a country characterized by a culture of plenty but also of wastefulness, which was fresh but also raw, where promises of social advancement were subverted by desperate living conditions, and where nature was unimaginably bountiful but in whose hectic money-making nobody really cared for such beauty."<sup>15</sup> It is remarkable how this text is schooled in dialectical modes of thinking, with a poetic tinge to this wording.

Into the contemporary American system of German-language working-class organizations the *Naturfreunde* fitted well. Their slots were hiking and leisure-time activities combined with cultural and political functions. The first secretary of the new local was Alexander Wiederseder. Coming from the Austro-Slovak city of Bratislava he had moved to New York, joined the fledgling club there, and moved on to the West Coast, where he became the first president of the new branch in San Francisco.<sup>16</sup> Both locals would be hubs for more American *Naturfreunde* locals to come.

Post-First World War conditions would drive the developments of the Austrian and German *Naturfreunde* in politically divergent directions, although cultural practices were not that

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<sup>14</sup> Klaus-Dieter Gross. "New York's Nature Friends: Their History, their Camps." *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 2.1 (2014).

<sup>15</sup> *Der Naturfreund: Mitteilungen des Touristenverein "Die Naturfreunde."* 1910: 250; translation in Gross. "New York's Nature Friends": 2.

<sup>16</sup> In many a publication, also by this author, the founding year of San Francisco was assumed to be 1913; yet sources rather hint at 1912.

different.<sup>17</sup> Under the special circumstances in the USA and as (mainly) an immigrants' club the American Nature Friends stuck to their traditional outdoor and cultural practices. The vast distances between New York and San Francisco and the regional Districts originating from them only became a problem when from the late 1920s onwards priorities began to change. These trends accelerated when after World War II the more politicized Eastern District was caught and killed off in the maelstrom of McCarthyism. California survived in a lively if rather nostalgic, apolitical way. Using New York and San Francisco as exemplary starting points for the East and the West, the following survey will line out these developments with a focus on cultural aspects.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. 1910 through Depression Years

Up to the 1930s Nature Friends across the nation felt as parts of a whole, as is ideally illustrated in the header of the first all-American magazine, *Der Tourist*. The symbolic handshake of the *Naturfreunde* logo was incorporated into an American landscape: East meets West (fig. 3).<sup>19</sup> The New York group had spread out into New York State and New Jersey, and more locals were



fig. 3

active in Philadelphia and the Mid-West. San Francisco had offspring in Oakland and Los Angeles; other groups, like Seattle, did not last long. By the end of the 1930s sixteen groups were active, and had outdoor camps and clubhouses which would become centers for the hiking and cultural life in the clubs.

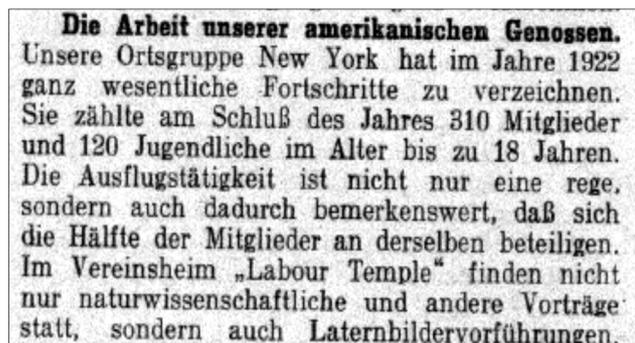
<sup>17</sup> For a survey see Günther Sandner. "Zwischen proletarischer Avantgarde und Wanderverein. Theoretische Diskurse und soziale Praxen der Naturfreundebeziehung in Österreich und Deutschland (1895-1933/34). Das Naturproblem aus der Sicht der ArbeiterInnenbewegung." *Zeitgeschichte* (1996): 306-318; for cultural debates within the early German Labor movement see Horst Groschopp. *Zwischen Bierabend und Bildungsverein. Zur Kulturarbeit der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung vor 1914*. Berlin/DDR: Dietz, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> I had access to three sources in particular: 1. The documents provided by the Nature Friends for Preserving Weis project (NFPW collection), which has accumulated materials around Camp Midvale (thanks to Karin Ahmed Adamietz), 2. The Andy Lanset and Chris Idzic interviews of the Camp Midvale Oral History Project in the 1980s (*Lanset/Idzic interviews*; thanks to Chris Idzic); 3. A host of copies on the Californian locals which I received during a visit at Heidelmann Lodge in 2012 (thanks to Phil Greer). The members' magazine *Der Naturfreund*, edited in Vienna, was accessed through *AustriaN Newspapers Online*. <http://anno.onb.ac.at/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Der Tourist: Zeitschrift für den Gau der Nordost- und den Gau der West-Staaten Amerika's*. 2 (1923): 1; for a compact interpretation see Gross. "New York's Nature Friends": 5.

## New York

As the first New York clubhouses on Long Island and on the banks of the Hudson catered to outdoor interests, the main place for members to meet was the city's Labor Temple.<sup>20</sup> Under one roof there were trade unions, educational and political institutions, cooperatives, and leisure clubs ("Vergnügungsvereine")—among those the *Naturfreunde*. The Temple also provided the platform for glee clubs, theater groups etc. Tenants were permitted to conduct their own cultural programs, including the scientific and slide lantern shows the *Naturfreunde* presented (Fig. 4).<sup>21</sup> It was also used by the junior section: "Meetings and lectures will be held during the winter on the first Saturday of every month in Room 8 of the New York Labor Temple, 243 E. 84th St; 8:00 p.m. sharp. – Folk Dances will take place on the first and third Friday of every month in Room 2 of the New York Labor Temple. – Evenings of Literature will be held twice a month. Notice of day and place in the 'New Yorker Volkszeitung'."<sup>22</sup>



**Die Arbeit unserer amerikanischen Genossen.**  
 Unsere Ortsgruppe New York hat im Jahre 1922 ganz wesentliche Fortschritte zu verzeichnen. Sie zählte am Schluß des Jahres 310 Mitglieder und 120 Jugendliche im Alter bis zu 18 Jahren. Die Ausflugstätigkeit ist nicht nur eine rege, sondern auch dadurch bemerkenswert, daß sich die Hälfte der Mitglieder an derselben beteiligen. Im Vereinsheim „Labour Temple“ finden nicht nur naturwissenschaftliche und andere Vorträge statt, sondern auch Laternbildervorführungen.

fig. 4

The NYVZ was the daily paper that served old-time immigrants and those newly arrived in the city. *Naturfreunde*, internationally and throughout the USA, once a month received the Vienna-based *Der Naturfreund*, which again and again reminded them that wherever they were they were nature lovers *and* labor sympathizers.<sup>23</sup> American contributions to the international periodical promoted the new home country. In addition to news from the locals, it presented illustrated texts describing the beauty of the land, the opportunities it provided, and gave geographical, ethnographic, and hiking information.<sup>24</sup> Its purpose was to keep up contacts with the home countries, to invite newcomers, to open the readers' horizons, and to emphasize the

<sup>20</sup> *New-Yorker Volkszeitung*. January 29, 1928. 13B; repr. from: Labor Newspaper Preservation Project, Universität Bremen. *Glimpses of the German-American Radical Press: Die Jubiläumsnummern der "New-Yorker Volkszeitung" 1888, 1903, 1928*. Ed. Dirk Hoerder and Thomas Weber. Bremen: Publications of the Labor Newspaper Preservation Project, 1985. 137.

<sup>21</sup> *Der Naturfreund* (1923): 46.

<sup>22</sup> *Der Tourist. Zeitschrift für den Gau der Nordost- und den Gau der West-Staaten Amerikas*. 1 (1924): 6.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. *Der Naturfreund* 1911: 278.

<sup>24</sup> For examples see appendix (pp. 48-49).

international character of the club. What was expected though was active participation, a preparedness to “meet under our banner for hard work and distraction.”<sup>25</sup>

Hiking was not among the favorite American pastimes at the time, so the newcomers had to rely on themselves. The idea was to stand together and practice collective self-education, find new tour destinations, organize outings, lay out their own trails, and ultimately build their own camps. All of this could easily be combined with other hobbies. Cultural work was not a coincidental but integral part of one’s life as a Nature Friend, and helped foster a sense of cohesion—sports, fun, learning, and politics going together. This defined what made a lover of nature a full-fledged *Naturfreund*.

In accordance with the philosophical materialism of its Austrian origins, the New York local would organize lectures on natural science and sociological matters. Other talks were used for advertizing and motivating purposes, like when in March 1911 in a well-attended public presentation (possibly with pictures) Wilhelm Gundlach introduced members and guests to the beauties of the region.<sup>26</sup> By the end of 1911 Alexander Wiedereder wrote about a four-day tour to the Catskills; he opened with a short outline of their history, then criticized the lack of appreciation for its beauty by the the rich and the idle, and gave a detailed account of the tour.<sup>27</sup> In 1912 the international magazine registered “a winter rich with presentations and lectures“ and „scientific talks and excursions“ (including factories!).<sup>28</sup> Politics in the narrow sense was a self-evident context and needed not much reinforcement; integration into the whole was more important than political particularities.

Photography proved highly effective both for lectures and in print. Still very expensive and difficult, it was affordable through cooperative efforts and needed the shared expertise of at least amateur specialists. Already in his earliest contribution to *Der Naturfreund* (in the very issue that announced the founding of the New



fig. 5

<sup>25</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1927: 38.

<sup>26</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1911: 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1911: 326-327.

<sup>28</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1912: 110-111 and 310-311.

York local) Wiederseder introduced the Niagara Falls, the first middle-distance tour the New Yorkers had realized. It was accompanied by three photos (Fig. 5).<sup>29</sup> Six months later a photo-section met at the Labor Temple on a permanent basis.<sup>30</sup> Wiederseder planned a European tour on American National Parks.<sup>31</sup> In good *Naturfreunde* fashion he moved on to San Francisco. From there he continued to give his European and American comrades illustrated recommendations on where to hike back in the East, including the Catskills, Niagara, the Hudson Valley (with three images of the Palisades), and then—closer (if not close) to his new home region—Yellowstone.<sup>32</sup>

From the start, the local developed a comprehensive festive culture, for its members, to promote the club, and to make money for projects pending—mainly for the clubhouses. Among the regular celebrations were the “Stiftungsfests“ (anniversaries), like the one staged in 1915 at the Labor Temple as an “international fair,” the gains of which went to building projects.<sup>33</sup> Most such events were close to what members had known in Europe—such as Forest and Wine Festivals (*Waldfest, Weinlesefest*). Festivities with a religious background were infrequent. Events like Thanksgiving or Solstice, well-known on both sides of the Atlantic, were easily included. A festival mood even characterized the May Day parades which conjoined collective hiking and solidarity in action.

Practically all sources on outdoor life mention how singing and hiking went together. For the first anniversary the Newark Socialist Glee Club contributed the music.<sup>34</sup> On all levels songs united people in having a good time. Songbooks brought over from the old countries were opened at the campfires, and as a rule instruments such as guitars, accordions, and violins accompanied the vocal parts. The repertoire frequently were pieces from the German Youth movement and/or proletarian sources. There was a nostalgic function in this as progressive German-Austrian traditions were remembered. Away from hikes, the local soon created a singing and an instrumental section. These then became the precondition for more ambitious uses of music.

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<sup>29</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1910: 245-246.

<sup>30</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1911: 278.

<sup>31</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1921: 78.

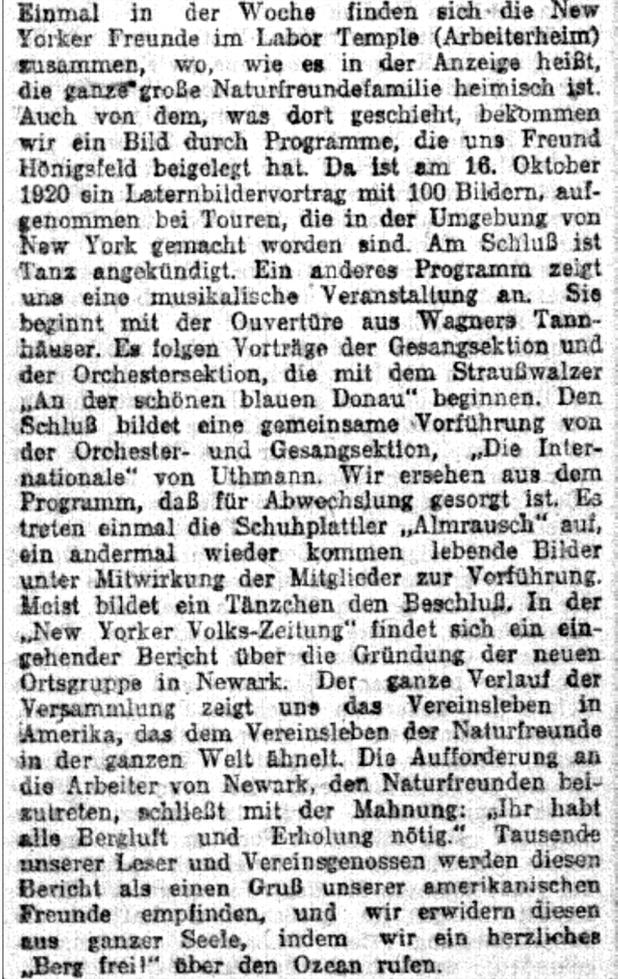
<sup>32</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1914: 177-179.

<sup>33</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1916: 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1911: 333.

The second anniversary at New York featured “Burghardt’s Wiener Kapelle.“ That the band played well into the morning hours would suggest their musical material was more than just that of the high-brow concert hall; the question is in how far it was based on the Vienna music the band’s name promised. Once more, the earnings went into building resources.<sup>35</sup>

A few years later, when New York had just opened its new Camp Midvale and a Newark local had been established, this is how *Der Naturfreund* describes two weekly meetings at the Labor Temple (Fig. 6): One was a show of a hundred lantern slides from tours in the environs of New York, with subsequent dancing. The second program was even more cross-over: It opened with Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser Overture*, was followed by songs (unnamed), after which the orchestra section played Strauss’s waltz “An der schönen blauen Donau,“ and finally everyone joined together for [Gustav Adolf] Uthmann’s version of *Die Internationale*; interspersed we find Schuhplattler performances and “living images“; the evening petered out as a communal dance: Nostalgia here joins leftist lore, Austrian dance traditions meet dramatized comments on present day problems, and classical and popular formats unite into one whole. In commenting, the editor lets the readers know how similar such events were to those of *Naturfreunde* all across the world.<sup>36</sup>



Einmal in der Woche finden sich die New Yorker Freunde im Labor Temple (Arbeiterheim) zusammen, wo, wie es in der Anzeige heißt, die ganze große Naturfreundefamilie heimisch ist. Auch von dem, was dort geschieht, bekommen wir ein Bild durch Programme, die uns Freund Hönigsfeld beigelegt hat. Da ist am 16. Oktober 1920 ein Laternbildervortrag mit 100 Bildern, aufgenommen bei Touren, die in der Umgebung von New York gemacht worden sind. Am Schluß ist Tanz angekündigt. Ein anderes Programm zeigt uns eine musikalische Veranstaltung an. Sie beginnt mit der Ouvertüre aus Wagners Tannhäuser. Es folgen Vorträge der Gesangsektion und der Orchestersektion, die mit dem Straußwalzer „An der schönen blauen Donau“ beginnen. Den Schluß bildet eine gemeinsame Vorführung von der Orchester- und Gesangsektion, „Die Internationale“ von Uthmann. Wir ersehen aus dem Programm, daß für Abwechslung gesorgt ist. Es treten einmal die Schuhplattler „Almrausch“ auf, ein andermal wieder kommen lebende Bilder unter Mitwirkung der Mitglieder zur Vorführung. Meist bildet ein Tänzchen den Beschluß. In der „New Yorker Volks-Zeitung“ findet sich ein eingehender Bericht über die Gründung der neuen Ortsgruppe in Newark. Der ganze Verlauf der Versammlung zeigt uns das Vereinsleben in Amerika, das dem Vereinsleben der Naturfreunde in der ganzen Welt ähnelt. Die Aufforderung an die Arbeiter von Newark, den Naturfreunden beizutreten, schließt mit der Mahnung: „Ihr habt alle Bergluft und Erholung nötig.“ Tausende unserer Leser und Vereinsgenossen werden diesen Bericht als einen Gruß unserer amerikanischen Freunde empfinden, und wir erwidern diesen aus ganzer Seele, indem wir ein herzliches „Berg frei!“ über den Ozean rufen.

fig. 6

Another important feature of *Naturfreunde* life was a comprehensive access to written materials, from guidebooks through technical brochures to the literary and dramatic arts.

<sup>35</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1913: 85.

<sup>36</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1921: 15-16.

Already in 1916 the club set aside money for its own library.<sup>37</sup> In the club's publications, there were poems of various length, in German (often from established sources) as well as English (often by younger members). Even a 1923 complaint about elders not teaching the young properly about nature was turned into verse—somewhat clumsily if quite emotional (Fig. 7).<sup>38</sup> More rigid was a 1924 poem, a young girl's rage about „this civilization“ (Fig. 8).<sup>39</sup> Metaphorically setting movement in nature against modern transportation and in quite angry language, it reflects a more modernist literary influence, which in its despair was probably positioned rather on the fringes of the Nature Friends' ideology.

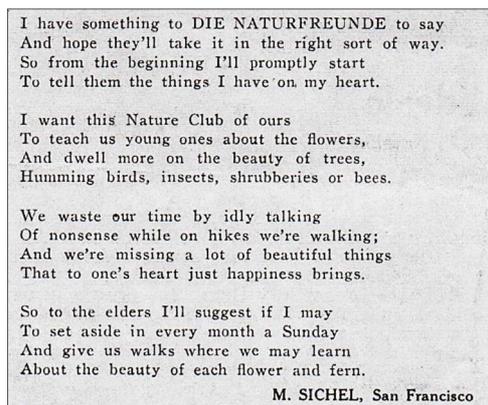


fig. 7

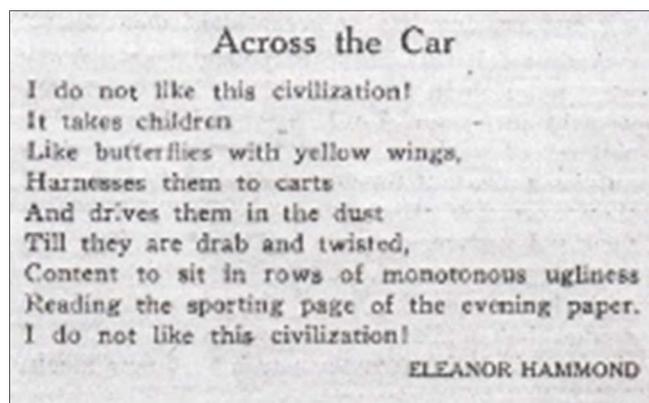


fig. 8

### *New York Camps*

One advantage the new American locals had over their European compeers was that even relatively close to metropolitan areas land was easily available. Already as part of their founding set-up locals devised plans for clubhouses and camps. From the 1920s onwards cars helped to find building lots at favorite destinations—far but not too far from the metropolis. Many members being craftsmen, in a collaborative spirit they planned and realized their dreams of hubs in the countryside. These *Naturfreundehäuser* provided breathing space as well as a sense of solidarity and a way to live old traditions. They could be used for one-day excursions, longer weekends, or full vacations with comrades.

<sup>37</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1916: 119.

<sup>38</sup> This poem introduces N.F. [Nature Friend?]. "A Mere Suggestion". *Der Tourist*. 1 (1923): 8.

<sup>39</sup> Eleanor Hammond. "Across the Car". *Der Tourist*. 1 (1924): 8.

The first permanent property of the New York local, later becoming a local in its own right, was Camp Midvale, whose original name was “Camp Community.” In addition to sports opportunities there was space for campfires, for singing and dancing, for lectures and libraries. Cooking together was fun, and so was eating; as it happened, in legally dry times you could have the beer you were used to in the old countries. The wall painting was reminiscent of Alpine patterns; the technologies used were American. Midvale at the time was certainly a characteristic example of a crossover of German-Austrian and American cultures.

Other camps and clubhouses were to follow, and although they were not as big as Midvale, their sizes would have astonished European visitors. Philadelphia had a home New York members frequently visited for a change, and so had Chicago.<sup>40</sup> Skiing huts expanded across the Catskills.<sup>41</sup> The club life there was not unlike that of Midvale.

### ***Structural changess***

The organization was expanding. By the mid-1920s international *Naturfreunde* membership exceeded 200.000. But still the Vienna Office administered the club in a centralized way. Members, including those in the USA, were directly affiliated with it as individuals organized in local groups. In Germany (which had overtaken Austria in membership) and elsewhere such centralization was challenged, for practical and administrative reasons. National organizations came into being, and also the American Nature Friends solidified their organizational structure. New York now was both a local (made up of neighborhood and language groups) and a coordinating body (“Gau“ or “District“) for the East and Mid-West. Such a smaller-scale structure enhanced regional cohesion and made possible more independence from Europe and even from the Californian clubs.

Almost imperceptively, politics turned out to be a major field where East and West began to diverge. 1920s *Naturfreunde* international publications give the impression that apart from an ingrained social-democratic self-awareness day-to-day politics was mostly left to the parliamentary parties. Yet even before Black Friday the Eastern District seemed to be moving

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<sup>40</sup> For the latter cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. “Elements of a Pictorial History of the Nature Friends in Chicago.“ *NaturFreundeGeschichte/ NatureFriendsHistory* 1.2 (2013).

<sup>41</sup> Gross. “New York’s Nature Friends“.

in a more actively politicized direction. One wonders whether the European editors of *Der Naturfreund* realized this when they reprinted a text like the following one from the American *Der Tourist*: Celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the New York local in 1925, the article proudly presented weekly lectures on scientific topics, a choir, a music and a photo section—all close to contemporary European practices. But then it is striking how explicitly it emphasized the working-class origins and leftist tasks of the club: “Not an addiction to sports or lone wolf attitudes have shown us the way but the needs of the class brothers and sisters fighting for their liberation.”<sup>42</sup>

### *San Francisco*

The San Francisco local came less than two years after New York. The three Californian groups active today have since developed their own historical narratives, and there is little awareness of a leftist past shared with other parts of the USA. Yet originally there had been a lot of trans-continental interaction. One exemplary case is Alexander Wiederseder, already mentioned, who after New York and shortly Chicago became formative for San Francisco. He, with a few others, can stand for the role photography played in the cultural life of the new branch.

Already the first general meeting of the local planned to present visual images for its second anniversary on March 1, 2013.<sup>43</sup> This turned out to be a slide show on one of the destinations for multi-day tours, Yosemite Valley.<sup>44</sup> Yosemite would also be the topic for a 1914 essay published in *Der Naturfreund*; the seven images illustrating Wilhelm Heidelmann’s “Das Yosemiteal” were probably taken during one of these vacation trips.<sup>45</sup> Amandus Motander, another highly respected early leader, in 1915 sent to Vienna a text on the Golden Gate; his pictures of the more artful type give proof of a visual aesthetic beyond touristic aspirations.<sup>46</sup> Other grand hikes, such as to Kings Canyon, Zion, and the Grand Canyon found their way into

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<sup>42</sup> “Zum 15jährigen Bestehen der Ortsgruppe New York.“ *Der Naturfreund* 1925: 190 [“Nicht Sportfexerei oder Eigenbrötelei wiesen uns den Weg, sondern die Bedürfnisse der für ihre Befreiung kämpfenden Arbeitsbrüder und -schwestern“].

<sup>43</sup> “Gründungs- und Tätigkeitsbericht der OG SF“ (handwritten; Greer collection).

<sup>44</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1913: 318.

<sup>45</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1914: 223-228.

<sup>46</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1915: 8-10.

the international organ.<sup>47</sup> The uses of photography would continue over the years. In 1927 the San Francisco local was proud of a photo section with its own darkroom.<sup>48</sup>

Of an explicitly cultural orientation the San Francisco *Naturfreunde* were from their very start. Many a member came through the *Arbeiter Bildungsverein* (Workers' Educational Club), which joined in with the *Sozialistischer Männerchor* (Socialist Men's Choir) for galas and theater outings.<sup>49</sup> Unquestioningly their ideology lay in the progressive camp, as is formulated on the title page of a 1922 brochure celebrating the 10th anniversary of the San Francisco local.<sup>50</sup> Fifteen years later Paul Schnier, in a hand-made, beautifully decorated little publication, re-emphasized this point:

Let us also continue to cultivate that international solidarity with our members everywhere in this country and abroad, which is so congenial to the cosmopolitan spirit of San Francisco. Above all, let us remain the club of the workingman, where he can feel at home and express without embarrassment his joys and sorrows, his hopes and fears, beliefs, ambitions and ideals.<sup>51</sup>

The aim of the *Naturfreunde*, according to Schnier, is to “hike and strive, by observation and study”—i.e. the classical values of social hiking. In a similar way the original Nature Friends' values are summed up in a poetic notice addressed in English at young members:

Pay your dues regularly,  
attend our hikes frequently,  
learn to sing occasionally,  
show yourself laboriously,  
to your associates be friendly,  
and always think progressively.<sup>52</sup>

What the Labor Temple was to New York, California Hall was to San Francisco.<sup>53</sup> Located in the German segment of the Tenderloin, it was called Teutonic Rathaus and served the *Naturfreunde* for lectures as well as for festive dance and entertainment evenings, sometimes

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. appendix.

<sup>48</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1927: 76-77.

<sup>49</sup> Where no other references are given, the information is gleaned from Erich Fink. “History of the San Francisco Branch of the *Naturfreunde*” (San Francisco, about 2008), and Erich Fink. *California Nature Friends: Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles*. Oakland: Oakland Nature Friends, 1986 (non-paginated).

<sup>50</sup> Title page reprinted in Gross. “The Split”: 5.

<sup>51</sup> Page repr. in Gross. “The Split”: 6.

<sup>52</sup> Fink. *California Nature Friends* [21].

<sup>53</sup> Business and smaller meetings of the San Francisco local continued to be held at the ABV Clubhouse (or Equality and later Albion Hall) until the 1970s.

including plays by members of two hours length. This is how Californian Nature Friends historian Erich Fink describes the 1923 “stiftung[s]fest“ there:

The 10th Anniversary program is entitled: ‘Kuenstlerkonzert, Theater und Ball.’ [Artists’ concert, theater and ball]. Members put on their own stage play in German; members performed songs by Schubert, violin Chopin solos by a member, a quartet played a Gypsy zither piece, a group sang ‘La Notte Stellata’ and so it went.<sup>54</sup>

Such meetings needed the full concentration not only of the participants but also of the audience. The event is strikingly different from what the New Yorkers had staged in 1921 (cf. Fig. 6). Even if produced largely by amateurs, this is educated, highbrow culture, with no references to one’s working-class origins or to the music practiced at the campfire or when hiking. It was rather a celebration of how culturally advanced the club was. If this is a participant’s culture it is one of a rather refined kind.

Certainly such events do not reflect the full picture. Other documents refer to the more down-to-earth uses and joys of singing and playing instruments. Music groups met regularly, and repeatedly there were festivals with music, dancing, and vaudeville productions (including a spectacular installation “skiing on stage“). Even the “Maifest“ was not so much a Labor event as a spring fest.

In spite of the 1937 quotations from Schnier, in the Thirties the cultural work of the San Francisco local began to move away from its Labor origins, not so much on purpose, it seems, but by taking autochthonous activities to be more rewarding. It thus left behind one aspect of its heritage and identity (its roots in the Labor movement) to more strongly identify with Austro-German traditions, as the latter helped to define the club’s community more visibly in an ever more Americanized environment. Proving the growing depoliticization in then contemporary California, Hans Wittich, of New York, with his climbing companion Otto Stegmeier came to the West to present a slide show on “New York City - rich and poor“ and found meagre audiences, although other club events attracted hundreds and thousands of visitors.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fink. “History of the San Francisco Branch“: 5.

<sup>55</sup> Lanset/Idzic interview.

## *Muir Woods*

By and by the cultural life of the San Francisco local moved across the Golden Gate into the Mill Valley area. Already in the second year of the local *Der Naturfreund* proudly introduced its readers to the first Nature Friends Home in the USA: Muir Woods.<sup>56</sup> Just two years later it would be expanded<sup>57</sup> to become a home for traditional German and Austrian culture. Its first dancing platform was built in 1914—for maifests, sommerfests etc. The library contained the songbooks used by the European *Naturfreunde*. Songs combined German and American elements, with the German element predominant. All year round and even during Prohibition beer was plenty—adverts were quite explicit about this. Good food and tasty drinks have remained major attractions ever since.

The first Muir Woods building would soon take on Swiss chalet style, and a striking visual program was realized. Murals combining Alpine and Sierra Nevada vistas (thereby modifying its nostalgic impact) were painted as early as in 1915 (Fig. 9).<sup>58</sup> In a similar way, Wilhelm Heidelmann decorated the Library extensively,



fig. 9

bringing art and reading together in one room.<sup>59</sup> Even when the clubhouse grew into a full complex of buildings, the embellishment of the premises followed Alpine patterns.

A song was already dedicated to the first Muir Woods house in 1917:

Wo der Lorbeer strebt zum Himmel,  
wo das Waldes Ries[en] stehen,  
Fern vo[n] allem Weltgetuemmel,  
Ist ein Haus so wunderschoen.  
Wack´re Pro[letarier] schufen  
Hier ein echtes [s]or[g]enfrei,  
Und von dieses Hauses Stufen,  
Gruessen wir den Voelkermai.

Where Laurel grows to heaven  
where forest giants stand,  
far from noise and contamination,  
is a house so beautiful,  
devoted workers (proletarians) have created  
here a true carefree Paradise.  
And from the steps of this House,  
We sing greetings and a hearty BERG FREI.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1913: 248-249.

<sup>57</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1915: 103.

<sup>58</sup> The color photos not marked otherwise were taken during my own stays in the respective areas.

<sup>59</sup> Heidelmann was an artist and craftsman who also decorated public buildings in San Francisco, including the Opera House; cf. Fink. *California*. [6].

<sup>60</sup> Fink. "History of the San Francisco Branch": 9-10.

Looking back from the 1980s, Erich Fink concluded his “loose translation“ with a slight if telling twist, which stealthily undermines its final thrust: Evocating the “Voelkermai“ was a reference to the international fights of the trade unions; knowingly or unknowingly Fink tones this down to the—in this particular context—more neutral greeting phrase of the *Naturfreunde*, “Berg frei“.<sup>61</sup> A link with the greater Labor movement is transformed into one solely with one’s own club.

San Francisco and Muir Woods would set the patterns for other locals. In Oakland there was a significant overlap with the *Oakland Turnverein*, which combined singing and sports and conducted its own schuetzenfests. The local immediately began the construction of its own clubhouse, fitting it with a “Bavarian“ look; the first maifest there was reported in 1923.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, when the Sierra Madre Clubhouse of the Los Angeles local was opened in 1925, musical accompaniment came from the LA Socialist Glee Club.<sup>63</sup> Soon a third floor was added as a dance hall, and Fred Zahn again decorated the buildings in an explicitly Alpine Style. Although the Los Angeles local was the most politically (and internationally) minded in California, its cultural patterns resembled those of the Bay area.

After the administrative decentralization of the international *Naturfreunde* organization and the formal institutionalization of the Eastern District in the mid-1920s, the three Western locals followed suite in 1927 to incorporate “under the laws of the State of California,“ at the same time affiliating themselves independently with the Nature Friends International in Vienna. In the years to come this would have profound legal effects. One positive consequence of intensified regional cooperation of what now was officially called *The Nature Friends, Inc. (Tourist Club)* was the first clubhouse run not by a local but by the District, in Norden in the Northern Californian mountains. After a complete rebuilding in the late 1940s, it would be named Heidelmann Lodge, after Wilhelm Heidelmann, who—with Bern(h)ard Fischer—like at Muir Woods had provided the Alpine visual program for the Lodge. For the exclusive use of young members a dance and meeting hall would be added. Cultural life here very much resembled that of other Californian clubhouses.

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<sup>61</sup> Also elsewhere in Californian sources “Berg frei“ is translated as “Freedom lives in the mountains,“ although the original was based on an ambiguity: We feel free in the mountains, as we have a right to them—which widens the message from a romantic into the political realm.

<sup>62</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1923: 91.

<sup>63</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1925: 28-29.

In sum, although the Californian locals throughout the 1930s remained embedded in the progressive and Labor movements, beginnings of a changing self-conception were to be felt. Culturally, German-Austrian musical patterns and an Alpine visual language had begun to prevail even before the 1930s. Little was there then to be seen of the (re-)politicized self-image in the Eastern District; the trend rather went into the direction of a culture of preserving popular traditions of the home countries, if in adapted and Americanized form. Of the highbrow tendencies of the early days not much seems to have survived either.

### 3. 1930s and 1940s: The Depression and After

The Districts were at a crossroads. In the Vienna organ a correspondent from New York complained how the *Naturfreunde* did not reach out beyond German workers, and again emphasized a leftist approach as crucial within the city's immigrant and labor communities.<sup>64</sup> Outside the relatively intimate world of their camps, what would be the role of the club's cultural work, squeezed in between political intentions, present-day problems, and a nostalgic "Volkstümlichkeit"? Could infusions from European experiences help? After all, some of the developments in the USA found vague parallels in Europe.

The practices in Austria and in California resembled each other in as far as they shared a moderate Labor orientation but restricted themselves to outdoor and cultural activities. Unlike the Californians, the original *Naturfreunde* Vienna club could see itself as part of a stable social-democratic movement; its role as a front organization was clearly defined as proto-political. Such an institutionalized framework was unknown in the USA, and the closest (and diminishing) affiliation was with other Labor-oriented immigrant groups.

In Germany the situation was different. During the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) there were two dominant parties on the left, "reformist" Social Democrats and "revolutionary" Communists, with smaller groups in between and beyond. Both frequently perceived each other as political enemies—even in the face of pending annihilation by the Nazis. Among sympathizers, in membership, and in parliamentary influence the Social Democrats were the bigger group by far; the Communists were effective because of an extreme party discipline.

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<sup>64</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1927: 118.

Formally the German *Naturfreunde* were not part of any of these factions, yet were pulled into their conflicts nevertheless.<sup>65</sup> A majority especially among the functionaries supported the Social Democrats and the idea of the *Naturfreunde* playing an indispensable if secondary role in the political game: “By combining experiences of the rural landscape with a strong commitment to social justice, the Weimar *Naturfreunde* thus attempted to use leisure as a tool to raise working-class consciousness and strengthen the proletarian collective.”<sup>66</sup> In just that sense did the Weimar SPD describe the *Naturfreunde* as “non-political.” The Communist Party, in contrast, tried to anchor cultural (and sports) activities within its own sphere by politicizing even the smallest of club operations.<sup>67</sup> Both approaches, the moderates’ more *emotional* approach and the radicals’ purer form of a (class-conscious) *rationalism* were not as exclusive as theory made them and in day-to-day activities there was a lot of overlapping.

For the American Nature Friends West and East there were no parties big enough to draw their organization—or major segments of it—into their gravitational fields, or to split it along party lines. In retrospect, irrespective of party affiliation many a member recalled that the New Deal had done them a lot of good.<sup>68</sup> During this phase of social liberalism the Nature Friends could see themselves as part of a broad leftist mainstream, supporters of the dream of a better, more social America. The biggest of the small American parties on the Left was the Communist Party, which in the 1930s had some influence among intellectuals and unionists. But a major force it never was. To be a Communist or fellow traveler was as much an acceptable option for a Nature Friend as not to be one. Respective ideological positions led to heated debates and an occasional article, but with few exceptions were ultimately seen as a personal matter.<sup>69</sup> Members certainly took note of what was going on in Europe, yet concrete outdoor, cultural, and camp activities were much more important—as they held the club together.

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<sup>65</sup> Upmann/Rennspiess. “Organisationsgeschichte.” 77-90.

<sup>66</sup> John Alexander Williams. “The Tourist Association ‘Friends of Nature’ and Working-Class Hiking in Interwar Germany, 1919-1935.” *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 2.2 (2014): 1-30. 2-3.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Williams. “The Tourist Association ‘Friends of Nature’”: 10-11; Klaus-Dieter Gross. “Sozial Wandern! Zur Geschichte eines Kernkonzepts der Naturfreunde.” *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 7.1. (2019):1-26. 8-17.

<sup>68</sup> Lanset/Idzic interviews.

<sup>69</sup> How fuzzy the contours were is made clear when in some texts the terms “communist,” “socialist,” and “progressive” were used interchangeably—sometimes only referring to a society with a just wage system.

## *New York*

A year before Black Friday New York member Walter Boelke wrote a long text on the *Naturfreunde* in honor of the 25th anniversary of the *New-Yorker Volkszeitung*. Titled “The Nature Friends Constitute a Part of the Labor Movement,” the text introduced the club to New Yorkers who could read German: After intensively describing the joys of nature he summed up the history of an international hiking and culture organization (*Wander- und Kulturorganisation*) of people physically fresh and intellectually focussed („*körperlich frische und geistig klare Menschen*“) dedicated to sports and nature appreciation. Their purpose was to boost community feeling in the struggle for a new social order; in addition to hiking and mountaineering they were active in talks and meetings, in promoting the sciences, a socialist ideology and an ethics of solidarity.<sup>70</sup> The concept of culture used was that of a way of life pursued in the name of social progress.

As a legal document, politics was more or less absent in the 1935 *Constitution of the Nature Friends of America, Inc.* (i.e. the Eastern District).<sup>71</sup> What exactly was meant by “culture“ remained almost as vague. Its opening paragraph stated that “This association is an organization of workers interested in hiking, labor sports and cultural activities.“ The next paragraph (“objects of this corporation“) refers to educational purposes such as the dissemination of “the knowledge of natural science and the customs of the various people.“ The section on how the club’s aims are to be achieved names meetings, lectures, and libraries.

A much more outspoken statement on cultural matters was made in the same year in the (by now mostly English) follow-up publication to *Der Tourist* for the Eastern District, *The Nature Friend*, subtitled *Hiking – Workers Sports – Cultural Activities*. A programmatic article on “Our Cultural Front“ defined cultural work in strictly Marxist terms.<sup>72</sup> Setting out from an analysis of how economic oppression leads to cultural enslavement and reduces the arts to tools of the profit system, its author describes culture as a major field in the class struggle. In an emancipatory perspective aesthetic sentimentalism and an uncritical attitude towards

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Boelke. “Die ‘Naturfreunde’ bilden ein Glied der Arbeiterbewegung.“ *New-Yorker Volkszeitung*. January 29, 1928. 13B; repr. from: Labor Newspaper Preservation Project. *Glimpses of the German-American Radical Press*. 142.

<sup>71</sup> Excerpts in Gross. “New York’s Nature Friends“: 26.

<sup>72</sup> *The Nature Friend. A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Workers’ Sports, Hiking and Cultural Activities*. November 1935: 10-11.

amusement (sometimes also found among Nature Friends) are detrimental to the task—the latter probably a critique of social-democratic, “non-political“ attitudes within the club. Nature Friends contribute to the struggles of the working class through their camps, their science and education programs, and their recreational activities.

It shows that the Eastern locals were not completely untouched by the conflicts in Germany. In the name of his group one Philadelphia member took sides for the *Naturfreunde Opposition* there, including an acceptance of the Communist Party as the vanguard in the revolutionary process.<sup>73</sup> But like in Germany also here functionaries did not always speak the language of the rank and file; members of his own local disagreed.<sup>74</sup> Party lines and members’ attitudes were never quite identical. Many a Nature Friend saw such ideological rifts as a bore, mere bickering unworthy of the values the club stood for. Not fixed ideologies but a progressive pluralism united the Nature Friends—with the effect of a significant openness in cultural matters.

The 1930s journals provided a complex mix of outdoor sports, tour tips, camp news, topical texts on science and ecology, film and book reviews, stories and poems, and even suggestions for collecting stamps, i.e. a hodgepodge of activities from all walks of life. The first pages were mostly reserved for politics. Yet seriously as the club took it (in particular with the advance of fascism in Europe), it was just one among other fields of activity. Political debates were embedded in a hiking and cultural environment, and vice versa.

In 1933 the German and in 1934 the Austrian national organizations were dissolved, their locals were disowned, and many a member was either incarcerated or active in the resistance movements. Keeping up the old contacts was close to impossible, although the new European head office (now in neutral Zurich) tried its best. English had become the dominant language in the Eastern District, and preserving German traditions had in itself become a cultural task—although it never became as much a defining element as in Western locals. There were generational tensions too, as two concepts of tradition operated side by side, not in the sense of competing but as to practical priorities, i.e. an orientation towards the “past“ (German) or the “future“ (English). A series of texts in the early 1930s, “A Yankee in the Fatherland,“

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<sup>73</sup> For a reprint of the documents in question see Gross. “New York’s Nature Friends“: 29.

<sup>74</sup> See exemplarily Walter R. Boelke. “Anmerkungen des Schriftleiters“; W.R.H. (Chicago). “Ein Ereignis?“; Karl Strahl. “Gedanken über die Abstellung des ‘Naturfreund‘“; *Der Tourist* July-August 1931: 5, 5-6, 8.

introduced the old (and soon terror-ridden) home regions to those who had lost touch with their forbears or grown up in the US.<sup>75</sup>

Practical culture often featured political elements. Up to the late 20th century old-timers of the then already defunct Eastern locals fondly recalled the May Day Parades in New York, when to the applause of the bystanders the Nature Friends marched under their green flag with baby carriages and hiking and skiing gear, backing anti-fascist action, supporting the Abraham Lincoln Brigades or agitating for the Scottsboro Boys and the Rosenbergs (Fig. 10).<sup>76</sup>

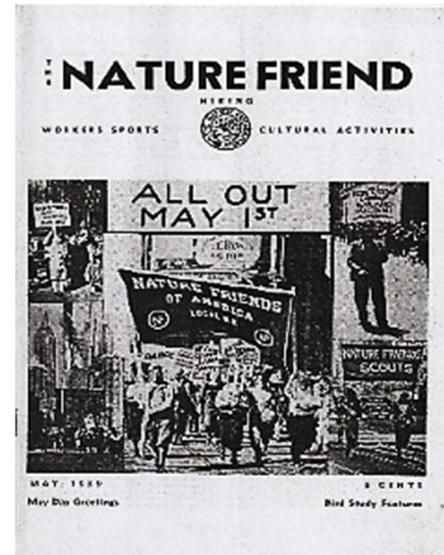


fig. 10

Regularly members enjoyed balls and entertainments for themselves, their friends and comrades. At crucial points festivities could be quite formal, like the 25th anniversary of the New York local in 1935, with its combined cultural, leisure, and political schedule quite different from the Californian “stiftungsfest“ of a decade earlier (Fig. 11, 12).<sup>77</sup> It seeks a balance between tradition and present, and reflects the wide range of the cultural work of the New York branch. An NF music group opens the evening with a “Jubelmarsch“ (celebratory march), then shows “Nature Friends in Action,“ followed by a “Sketch,“ a “Dance,“ and an “Address.“ A “Theater Collective“ displays “People Who Think.“ Individual dance contributions included pieces called “Neither here nor there“ and “The Militant,“ and the dance group presents the famous German anti-Nazi song “Die Moorsoldaten.“ Three widely different musical pieces (“Hiram

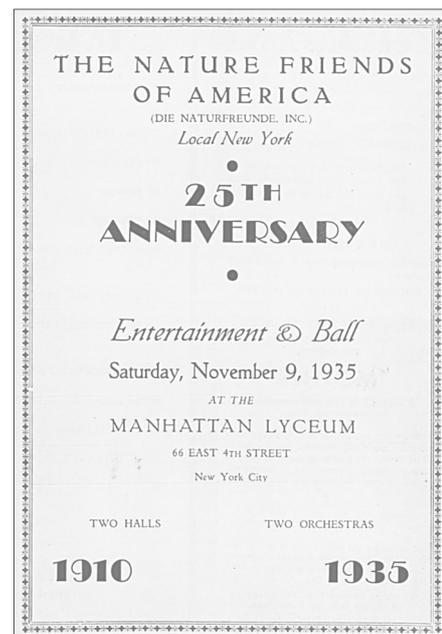


fig. 11

<sup>75</sup> E.g. *Der Tourist* July/August 1931 2-3; see also “A Bicycle Trip Through Nazi Germany (by a German Nature Friend.“ *The Nature Friend* March/April 1934: 7.

<sup>76</sup> In the 1980s Andy Lanset and Chris Idzik undertook interviews with more than 15 former members at Camp Midvale, which are now stored at New York University; cf. Mary Caldwell-Kane. “Ringwood Library: Camp Midvale Grant Project.“ *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 1.1 (2013). Almost all the interviewees were well into their eighties or nineties, and their memories occasionally are a bit inconsistent as to detail. On the following observations they agreed.

<sup>77</sup> Advert 25th Anniversary Ball 1935 (NFPW collection).

*Don't Miss To See:*

BOOK STAND  
INFORMATION BOOTH  
RAFFLE STAND  
PHOTO AND  
HANDICRAFT EXHIBITION

The handicraft work was done by our NF Scouts. Get information about our Scout Groups at the Exhibition Stand.

• • • •

**T H E A T E R P A R T Y**  
Another outstanding event is our Theater Party on  
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1935.  
at the  
**CIVIC REPERTORY THEATRE.**  
14th Street and Sixth Avenue,  
New York City.

**"MOTHER"**  
A stirring play with music, based on the classic Gorki novel.

"MOTHER" was written by Bert Brecht, noted German playwright, translated into English by Paul Peters. The musical setting is the work of Hanns Eisler, composer of "Massnahme", "Kuhle Wampe" and many fine workers' songs.

Tickets are: 45c, 60c, 75c and \$1.00.

Get tickets for you and for your friends as soon as possible. Tickets available at the Information Booth and the Nature Friends Center, 11 West 18th Street, New York City.

If ordering by mail, send money order to  
Pk. Berger, 2800 Bronx Park East,  
Section R, Bronx, N. Y.

**P R O G R A M**

1. JUBELMARSCH \_\_\_\_\_ by Wurmsbacher  
*NF Music: Group*
2. NATURE FRIENDS IN ACTION \_\_\_\_\_ *NF Photo Group*
3. SKETCH \_\_\_\_\_ *NF Youth Section*
4. DANCE \_\_\_\_\_ *NF Dance Group*
5. ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ by Walter Schmidt
6. "PEOPLE WHO THINK" \_\_\_\_\_ Play  
*Theater-Collective of New York*
7. a) "NEITHER HERE NOR THERE" \_\_\_\_\_ Dance  
b) "THE MILITANT" \_\_\_\_\_  
*By Elizabeth Baker*
8. "DIE MOORSOLDATEN" \_\_\_\_\_ *NF Dance Group*
9. a) HIRAM OUVERTURE \_\_\_\_\_ by Cousenza  
b) GUITARRES \_\_\_\_\_  
c) INTERNATIONALE \_\_\_\_\_ by Degeyer  
*NF Music Group*



The dance numbers are directed by ELIZABETH BAKER  
At the piano: PAULULA HALPERN

*Refreshments:*

*IN REAR OF MAIN HALL*

BEER  
SANDWICHES  
SOFT DRINKS

*IN SMALL HALL*

COFFEE  
CAKE  
BEER  
SOFT DRINKS  
SANDWICHES  
FRANKFURTERS

•

Get your information about our organization, its aims and activities at our Information Booth. Applicants willing to join our organization, may fill out applications to-night.

•

*PATRONIZE OUR ADVERTISERS*

fig. 12

Overture"; "Guitarres"; and the "Internationale") conclude the official part. Members are invited to an information booth, a book stand, and a photo and handicraft exhibition (with products made by the NF Scouts). A preview announces a theater party featuring Maxim Gorki's master drama *Mother* at the Civic Repertory Theater (in the version of Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler). In a way profoundly different from that in San Francisco, this is a statement on what the Nature Friends were capable of achieving in a *progressive* cultural context.

The old-timers interviewed for the Midvale oral history project unanimously agreed that the close interaction of sports, culture, and politics was a defining element for the Nature Friends as they knew them. It is not really clear how many of them really read the more abstract political contributions to their periodical intensively, but discussed they were. As quasi-illustrations to these texts the magazine printed creative formats, short prose texts or poems to translate ideology into concrete emotion. Particularly effective was poetry, which in a compact form rendered much of what otherwise may have been buried (and left unread) beneath longish prose texts. A survey of early 1933 numbers of *Der Tourist* provides examples, even on the brink of

pending Nazi takeover in Germany. Unlike the international organ, it puts the topic prominently on its front page, in a cartoon visualizing the fate of the oppressed working classes combined with a New Year's poem by German communist celebrity author Erich Weinert (Fig.13).<sup>78</sup> Even before Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler's *Mother* would be part of the 1935 celebrations, their movie *Kuhle Wampe* made it into the magazine in a translated reprint of its famous propaganda tune "Vorwärts und nicht vergessen"; the movie was widely admired for its emotional impact but had been put on the index in Germany for its communist tendency even before Hitler came to power (Fig. 14).<sup>79</sup> What remains odd is why it was here subsumed under the heading "Labor Sport Songs." Eisler's music would also elsewhere be recommended.<sup>80</sup> But not all



fig. 13

the poetic contributions to the magazine were as topical; "The Song of the Classes" by mid-19th-century English Chartist Ernest Jones, for example, recalls a century of continuity of the class struggle (Fig. 15).<sup>81</sup>

The better-known names on the American literary scene appear only in book reviews or introductions to famous authors, like for Walt Whitman.<sup>82</sup> An exception to this is Michael Gold, at the time the literary star of the Communist party. "A Strange Funeral in Braddock" is an interesting cross-over between dramatic and poetic forms, which may have appealed to the

<sup>78</sup> *Der Tourist* Jan/Feb 1933: 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Der Tourist* May/June 1933: 7.

<sup>80</sup> E.g. *The Nature Friend* March 1935: 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Der Tourist* Jan/Feb 1933: 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Der Tourist* May/June 1933: 9-10.

editors because it resembled the speaking choir presentations Nature Friends back in Europe had practiced. The plot is radically American though (Fig.19).<sup>83</sup>

**Labor Sports Songs**  
FROM THE FILM KUHLE WAMPE (PROHIBITED BY HITLER)  
Revolutionary Songs, composed by EISLER

1. Forward, and not forgotten  
Wherein the power setting us free  
Though starvation may threaten,  
Forward, and not forgotten  
Our Solidarity!

Forward, and not forgotten  
The workers' city and workers' field  
Forward, and not forgotten  
Just whose city is the city  
Just whose world is the world.

Solo  
Coming from the crowded backyard shanties,  
Dimed streets of the embattled cities,  
Gather and be together,  
In common cause to battle,  
And learn to conquer,  
And learn to conquer!

With the pennies of fragility  
These racing shells you have bought;  
From your mouth you have saved for the journey  
Learn to conquer  
And learn to conquer!

Pluck from the bitterest struggles  
For the direct needs  
A few hours in which to  
Gather and be together,  
In common cause to battle,  
And learn to conquer!

2. Forward, and not forgotten  
Wherein the power setting us free  
Though starvation may threaten,  
Forward, and not forgotten  
Our Solidarity!

First, we're not all of us here now  
Second, it's only a day  
When the weak of work and merry  
The brain and the body lay

Forward, and not forgotten  
Wherein the power setting us free  
Though starvation may threaten,  
Forward, and not forgotten  
Our Solidarity!

First, we're not all of us here now  
Second, it's only a day  
When the weak of work and merry  
The brain and the body lay

fig. 14

**The Song of the Classes**  
By Ernest Jones.

We plough and sow—we're so very, very low  
That we delve in the dirty clay  
Till we bless the plain—with the golden grain,  
And the vale with the fragrant hay.  
Our place we know—we're so very low.  
'Tis down at the landlord's feet;  
We're not too low—the bread to grow,  
But too low the bread to eat.

Then prostrate fall—in the rich man's hall,  
And cringe at the rich man's door:  
We're not too low to build the wall,  
But too low to tread the floor.

We're low—we're low—we're very, very low,  
Yet from our fingers glide  
The silken flow—and robes that glow  
Round the limbs of the sons of pride.

Down, down we go—we're so very, very low  
To the hell of the deep sunk mines,  
But we gather the proudest gems that glow  
Where the crown of a despot shines.  
And whenever he lacks—upon our backs  
Fresh loads he deigns to lay;  
We're far too low to vote the tax,  
But not too low to pay.

And what we get—and what we give—  
We know, and we know our share:  
We're not too low the cloth to weave,  
But too low the cloth to wear.

We're low—we're low—we're very, very low,  
And yet when the trumpets ring,  
The thrust of a poor man's arm will go  
Through the heart of the proudest king.

We're low—we're low—our place we know  
We're only the rank and file,  
We're not too low to kill the foe,  
But too low to touch the spoil.

Down, down we go—we're so very, very low  
To the hell of the deep sunk mines,  
But we gather the proudest gems that glow  
Where the crown of a despot shines.  
And whenever he lacks—upon our backs  
Fresh loads he deigns to lay;  
We're far too low to vote the tax,  
But not too low to pay.

We're low—we're low—mere rabble, we know,  
But at our plastic power  
The mould at the lordlings' feet will grow  
Into palace and church and tower—

fig. 15

2 THE NATURE FRIEND August, 1934

## A Strange Funeral in Braddock

By MICHAEL GOLD

Listen to the mournful drums of a strange funeral.  
Listen to the story of a strange American funeral.

In the town of Braddock, Pennsylvania,  
Where steel-mills live like foul dragons bournin,  
devooring man and earth and sky,  
It is spring. Now the spring has wandered in, a fright-  
ened child in the land of the steel ogres,  
And Jan Clepak, the great grinning Bohemian on his  
way to work at six in the morning,  
Sees buttons of bright grass on the hills across the river,  
and plum trees hung with wild, white blossoms,  
And as he sweats half-naked at his puddling trough, a  
fiend by the lake of brimstone,  
The plum-trees soften his heart,  
The green grass-memories return and soften his heart,  
And he forgets to be hard as steel and remembers only  
his wife's breasts, his baby's little laughter and  
the way men sing when they are drunk and happy,  
He remembers cows and sheep, and the grinning peas-  
ants and the villages and fields of sunny Bohemia.

Listen to the mournful drums of a strange funeral.  
Listen to the story of a strange American funeral.

Wake up, wake up! Jan Clepak, the furnaces are  
roaring like tigers,  
The flames are flinging themselves at the high roof, like  
mad, yellow tigers at their cage.

Wake up! It is ten o'clock, and the next batch of mad,  
flowing steel is to be poured into your puddling trough,  
Wake up! wake up! for a flawed lever is cracking in  
one of those fiendish cauldrons,  
Wake up! wake up! for now the lever has cracked,  
and the steel is raging and running down the floor  
like an escaped madman,  
Wake up! O, the dream is ended, and the steel has  
swallowed you forever, Jan Clepak!

Listen to the mournful drums of a strange funeral.  
Listen to the story of a strange American funeral.

Now three tons of hard steel hold at their heart, the  
bones, flesh, nerves, the muscles, brains and heart  
of Jan Clepak,  
They hold the memories of green grass and sheep,  
the plum-trees, the baby-laughter, and sunny Bohemian  
villages.

And the directors of the steel-mill present the great  
coffin of steel and man-memories to the widow of  
Jan Clepak,  
And on a great truck it is borne now to the great  
track in the graveyard,  
And Jan Clepak's widow and two friends ride in a  
carriage behind the block of steel that holds Jan  
Clepak,  
And they weep behind the carriage-blinds, and mourn  
the soft man who was killed by hard steel.

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Contributions for the next issue must reach the  
editor before the 15th of the preceding month.  
Secretaries, do not forget to inform the editor  
of changes in your Branch directory, so that it  
can be corrected up to date.

fig. 16

## March of the Liberals

*We are the liberals,  
tried and true;  
We read the New Republic and the Nation too—  
We're not dogmatic  
and we keep an open mind,  
A conclusion is something we can never find,  
The world's at the cross roads,  
We're needed! So—  
Boldly into action  
Let us gos  
(Chorus) One step forward  
and two steps back,  
That's the method of our attack.  
We're too superior  
to take any side,  
We keep our minds  
and mouths open wide,  
In the class struggle  
We're neutral too—  
So far above it  
we're hidden from view.  
(It's far more safer and convenient, how true!)One step forward  
and two steps back,  
That is our liberal plan of attack.  
We believe in sitting on the fence,  
Above the battle,  
The view is immense;  
On the one hand  
it is very true,  
But on the other  
it's obvious too,  
The world's at the crossroads,  
We're needed! So—  
Boldly into action  
Let us go—  
(Chorus) One step forward  
and two steps back,  
That's the method of our attack.*

(From DAILY WORKER)

fig. 17

<sup>83</sup> The Nature Friend August 1934: 2.

When a prominent figure like Gold supplied contributions to a small journal like *The Nature Friend*, then mostly as reprints from other sources, here the CPUSA paper *Daily Worker*.<sup>84</sup> From the same source came a sarcastic poem by an unnamed writer, “March of the Liberals,” which holds liberal neutralism up to ridicule at a time when sides should be taken, a question not only the Nature Friends were confronted with (Fig. 17).<sup>85</sup>

Revolutionary attitudes were also promoted for modern dance, such as in an article reproduced from a publication called *New Dance Group*, in which Grace Wyle and David Nelson introduced “The Proletarian Revolutionary Dance.”<sup>86</sup> Dance presentations were given in support of the Spanish Republic (Fig. 18)<sup>87</sup> and at the German-American Festival for Democracy, which was supported by the Nature Friends.<sup>88</sup>



fig. 18

**EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM**

**English Section:**  
 Thur. 7—Business Meeting.  
 Thur. 21—Liederabend (see special announcement).  
 Thur. 28—Theater Party (see special announcement).

**Brooklyn Section:**  
 Thur. 14—Business Meeting.  
 Thur. 21—“Kuhle Wampe,” German Sound Film (see “ad” on page 2).  
 Thur. 28—Theater Party (see special announcement).

**Manhattan Section:**  
 Thur. 14—Business Meeting.  
 Thur. 21—Liederabend (see special announcement).  
 Thur. 28—Theater Party (see special announcement).

**Special Announcement:**—All sections participate in the following affairs:

1. Liederabend, Thursday 21, at 8.30 p. m., at N.F. Center. Comrades Otto Karsch and Adolf Pohl will sing for us. The proceeds will be turned over to the Swimming Pool Fund. After the recital we will have dancing, coffee and cake. Admission 15 cents.
2. Theater Party, Thursday 28, at Civic Repertory Theater. We will see “The Sailors of Catarro.” Hurry and get your tickets from the chairman of your section. Proceeds for Swimming Pool.

An exemplary listing of cultural activities in daily club life, here on the month of February of 1935 and just for New York City (i.e. Manhattan) displays a range from Song Nights (*Liederabende*) and theater parties to the showing of *Kuhle Wampe*, the movie whose battle cry the magazine had introduced two years before (Fig. 19).<sup>89</sup>

fig. 19

<sup>84</sup> See also Gold’s “About Cows, Poison Ivy, Communists and Kids.” *The Nature Friend* June 1935: 3-4.

<sup>85</sup> *The Nature Friend* 9 (1935): 5.

<sup>86</sup> *The Tourist* May/June 1933: 8-9.

<sup>87</sup> *The Nature Friend* March 1937: 2.

<sup>88</sup> *The Nature Friend* February 1939: 2.

<sup>89</sup> *The Nature Friend* January 1935: 6.

Up to this point it might seem that the club's life was dominated by politics, mostly of a fairly orthodox slant. Yet this was definitely not the case for outdoor and camp life. As often as to politics, on the title pages of *The Nature Friend* one finds references to sports activities, like a woodcut about the joys of swimming and kayaking (Fig. 20).<sup>90</sup> The photos inside almost exclusively are on nature and the outdoors. With a strong local touch, the "Berg frei" emotions on reaching the top of High Point above Camp Midvale after a tough hike are poetically interpreted in quite some intensity:<sup>91</sup>

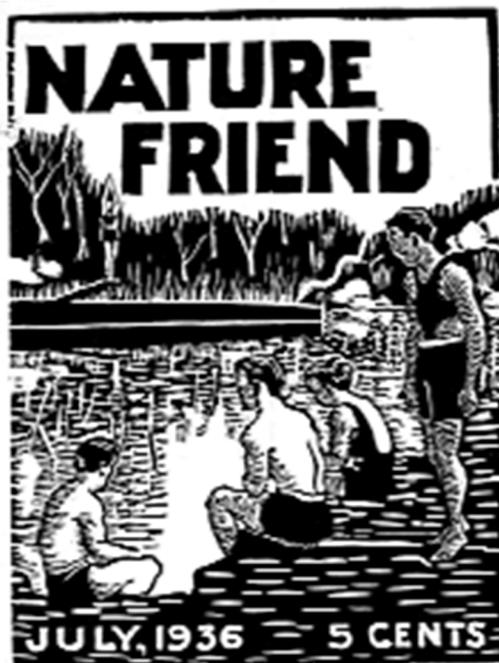


fig. 20

"HIGH POINT"  
— AT MIDVALE —

I stood there breathless —  
With my head against a tree,  
Panting from the climb and from the scene before me.  
My body swayed from the vibrations  
Transcended, by the enchanting magic of the afternoon.  
Aloft I stood —  
High, high, in momentary exaltation.  
Supreme in everything —  
Height and depth and glory.  
With might and satisfaction.  
Hills strewn with trees,  
Their foliage spreading glazed hues of green  
In wave-like undulations  
Weaving a pattern of multitude variations  
Forming intricate designs;  
Against a background of a lovely blushing sky  
in blue.  
Below me the sacred voices of Nature  
In musical communication, enraptured my senses  
Uplifting me to an ethereal plane  
And for that moment — the world was indeed  
mine.

—CELIA LIZZO.

fig. 21



fig. 22-24

<sup>90</sup> *The Nature Friend* July 1936: 1.

<sup>91</sup> *The Nature Friend* November 1937: 8.

An important practical and cultural role was played by photography. Hans Wittich, whose collected photo diaries and scapbooks grant comprehensive insights into Nature Friends practices, in a 1925 self-portrait poses as the self-confident reporter of the life of the club he in fact was (Fig. 22). Visually and in writing he documented his many hiking and mountaineering excursions, and the social life at Platte Clove camp, whose chairman he was. Through Wittich we have materials on the drama activities during the NF Scouts Day in September 1935 and of young Nature Friends in 1939 marching lightheartedly to self-made musical accompaniment from the clubhouse at Midvale to the Pool (Fig. 23, 24).<sup>92</sup> Wittich's slide presentations ranged from social critique like in "New York City – rich and poor" to a tour report on the Austrian and Bavarian Alps, "From West Tyrol to the Allgäu."<sup>93</sup> He also went into film making, yet little came of that because the New York office could not come up with someone to develop his material. An avid writer as well, he may have been the author of instructions in the members' magazines on how to effectively make good pictures and who critiqued the aesthetic quality of Nature Friends' film nights. (Fig. 25, 26).<sup>94</sup>

## With Our Photographers

### A "F & F" LEAGUER CRITICIZES OUR FILMS

Herewith is a brief review of your four films that were shown at the headquarters of the Film and Photo League, December 13. We realize that your films were taken by comrades inexperienced in film or camera technique; therefore our comments are given in the hope that they will prove constructive and be of some guidance to you in the future.

The three nature films could really only be considered moving snapshots of outdoor activities. It is difficult at first, we realize, for you to obtain professional quality in your work, but here are a few suggestions that might prove helpful. Do not use positive stock in taking your films. Make sure your lens' are clean. Be very careful about the correct exposure and existing light conditions. All three nature films were much too dark!

In construction try using more imagination in what you film and how you do it. The action photographed had a monotonous quality, because you seldom varied the manner of your photography,—that is, most scenes gave the effect of being taken from a certain distance. Avoid that. Take angle shots, close ups, shots from below and above. Show fragments of a scene, then build up the whole. Often intelligent cutting has a great deal to do with a film's rhythm. Don't "pan" so rapidly; (that is, moving the camera sideways up and down to show a larger area) in fact, "pan" only infrequently.

The first film we saw, the one about New York, was extremely interesting, particularly the Coney Island scenes. There was some splendid photography, some real imagination, and good cutting. One could learn from this film, which had a distinct professional quality. The scenario was a bit weak,—one did not feel a strong plan of approach.

Comrades, do not be discouraged by these comments—on the contrary, be encouraged. The film of New York showed good process. That you should have come so far alone is splendid. We think, if you bear in mind our suggestions in your next attempt you will go ahead even faster. The best teacher of cinema technique is the Russian film—study it closely.

EDWARD KERN, for the League.

fig. 25

### Our Photographers

**WHAT AMATEURS SHOULD KNOW:**  
 The height of the camera from the floor is of considerable importance when making interiors and generally the view should include more of the floor than of the ceiling.  
 It is well to err on the side of giving too much exposure rather than too little exposure.  
 A picture which lacks particular point of interest is like a story that lacks point.  
 The distance at which the lens must be placed

from the film to give a sharp image of an object 100 feet away, represents the "focal length" of the lens.  
 You should prepare separate fixing baths for prints and negatives.  
 Excellent interiors can be made by using combination daylight and flashlight exposure.  
 A cold developer works slowly. It is a wise practice to test such solutions with thermometer.  
 (Our Photo-Groups will give you further instructions in the art of photography!)

fig. 26

<sup>92</sup> Hans Wittich collection, NFPW.

<sup>93</sup> Lanset/Idzik interviews.

<sup>94</sup> *The Nature Friend* January 1935: 9; *The Tourist* May/June 1933: 5.

Wittich's material hints at the importance of young members. Every now and then NF Scouts were asked to send in essays for contests on "why you are an N.F. member,"<sup>95</sup> the best of which would be used for advertizing. Among these were also more creative answers, like a "Song of the Nature Friends Scouts" which combines a highly stylized political and personal self-description with the call for others to join (Fig. 27).<sup>96</sup>

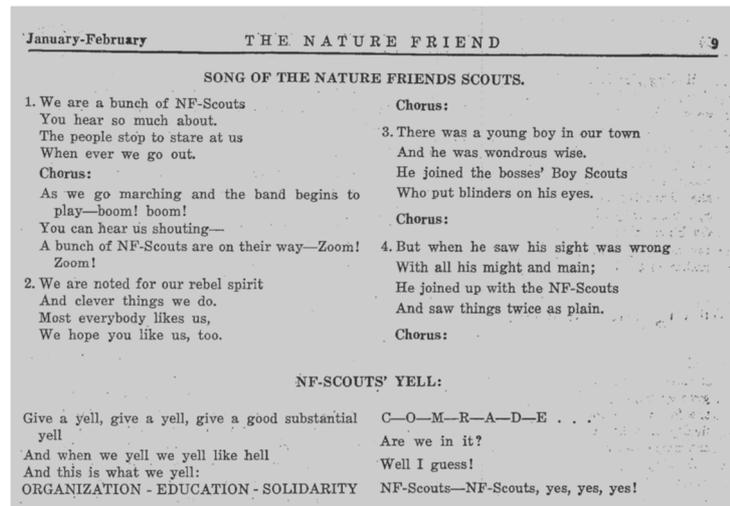


fig. 27

The "NF Scouts Yell" beneath that poem may equally have been part of the theater activities of the young, as once more it refers to the tradition of speaking choirs. But not only the NF Scouts went on stage. The Nature Friends adult theater groups did not only produce plays live, they also held classes on stage technique and make-up as well as on acting.<sup>97</sup>

Few longer references in the magazines deal with so-called minority questions—the "Jewish Question," the "Negro Question" etc. This is surprising because not only were some Nature Friends of Jewish extraction, they also kept their swimming-pool non-segregated in a mostly white and not too friendly regional environment. In Camp talk such topics were not uncommon, but in the journals they were reserved for contexts dealing with the European situation, or when in literary reviews books like Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* or Richard Wright's *Native Son* were recommended for reading. Anti-semitic attitudes among Nature Friends were certainly attacked in the magazines as well.<sup>98</sup> On the didactic side every now and then there were texts on the ethnic backgrounds of the USA, like in a travel report ("The Red Man") on Native American sites of importance.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> *The Nature Friend* January 1937: 2; there were also literary contests for adults (cf. *Nature Friend* August 1940: 14).

<sup>96</sup> *The Nature Friend* January/February 1934: 9.

<sup>97</sup> *The Nature Friend* July 1936: 9.

<sup>98</sup> *The Nature Friend* July 1936: 6; *The Nature Friend* February 1939: 6.

<sup>99</sup> *The Tourist* May/June 1933: 3-4.

In the 1930s, the Eastern District comprised of thirteen locals. In addition to New York (with various subgroups) these were Syracuse, N.Y.; Jersey City, N.J.; Paterson, N.J.; Rochester, N.Y.; Newark, N.J.; Hudson Valley, N.Y.; Philadelphia, PA; Allentown, PA.; Detroit, Mich.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Chicago, Ill.—and Camp Midvale.

Even though over time many of the cultural activities in New York and in New Jersey were to shift to Midvale, in urban areas members kept meeting, also for cultural events.<sup>100</sup> Specialized sections within the locals would gain certain degrees of independence, such as when Newark saw some competition between its dance and its folk dance groups when the latter hired its own dance instructor. Locals more distant geographically became more independent as well. Certainly most groups remained leftist, although Rochester (and to a lesser degree Syracuse) took a more moderate stance. But when Rochester celebrated its popular tree blossom festival (*Baumblütenfest*), irrespective of ideology members of other locals were welcome; more radical groups like Philadelphia or Chicago were not much different when it came to such traditional festivals.<sup>101</sup>

### ***Camp Midvale***

From a beloved hiking location Camp Midvale had developed into a many-faceted institution. The camp lived on a culture of cooperation. As members were mostly craftsmen, they managed to work together effectively on a fairly intuitive basis. You had to have a feeling to work fast and to work thoroughly, and afterwards enjoy the results jointly, with a sense of sharing and community. Social and cultural life at the Camp was intense. But when in the 1930s members began to rent and build their own cabins there, over time some felt more affectionate for the location than for the organization as a whole. The Olympic-size swimming pool dug into the rocky grounds next to the trailheads up High Point substituted for the old and intimate swimming hole (the only non-segregated pool in the whole area) and on weekends attracted hundreds and even thousands of visitors—and thus again changed the character of the Camp profoundly.

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<sup>100</sup> For hikes and music the Brooklyn section met at the Queens County Labor Lyceum on Seneca Avenue in Ridgwood; cf. Hans Wittich. "Nature Friends in Brooklyn." *The Nature Friend*. October 1945: 39-40.

<sup>101</sup> Lanset/Idzik interviews.

The cultural activities at Midvale merged German and American patterns. There were bonfires (solstice and other), schlachtfests (parties and picnics with freshly made sausages), Thanksgiving and 4th of July meetings, music, drama and dance festivals, events for children and youths, games (from sports to cards and chess), nature excursions<sup>102</sup> etc. Many a vacation was advertised without allusions to politics (Fig. 28).<sup>103</sup>

The photo group did not only document what was going on at the Camp, it also produced postal cards for advertising purposes. An occasional poster about an ongoing strike or solidarity action on a wall by the Pool or on the sports grounds reminded the participants of the fact that there also was a world beyond.



fig. 28

Among the meetings which regularly brought cooperating organisations to the Camp were anti-fascist events. For its bilingual character it was especially attractive for German-speaking refugees and activists. This is why prestigious exiled German writers like Ludwig Renn and Oskar Maria Graf came, sometimes just for an anti-war rally, sometimes, like Graf, to stay longer.<sup>104</sup> Renn, an independent-minded Communist whose literary work circled around the war theme, was introduced as a “famous German writer and officer of the glorious International Brigade,” and was to give the main address at the “German-American Anti-Fascist Celebration.”<sup>105</sup> Oskar Maria Graf, a Bavarian whose political convictions followed no party line, at the same event was announced as “a well-known writer and antifascist”; Graf would later play a role of his own at Camp Midvale.

Ever again in the club’s journals one finds essays dealing with a theoretical perspective. Texts like “Hiking and the class struggle“ or “On our Trail“ argue how to coordinate outdoor, cultural and political activities.<sup>106</sup> Their overarching question was how to define “proletarian sports“ or “proletarian culture.“

<sup>102</sup> Aristocratic or masculinist “sports“ like hunting for fun were not accepted!

<sup>103</sup> *Nature Friends newsletter* Nov. 1935.

<sup>104</sup> *The Nature Friend*, July 1939: 5/8.

<sup>105</sup> For his relative independence from party lines cf. Jürgen Rühle. *Literatur und Revolution. Die Schriftsteller und der Kommunismus in der Epoche Lenins und Stalins*. Frankfurt/M.: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1987. 251-259.

<sup>106</sup> *The Nature Friend* December 1934: 2; *The Nature Friend* May 1935: 2.

## *San Francisco*

Unlike the East, the Californian Tourist Club preferred a more apolitical approach—with the exception of Los Angeles, the smallest of the locals. Although contacts with the Labor movement had not yet been severed, politics was left to the parties, and these were not present at the locals and their clubhouses, Germanic-type traditions were singled out as the identifying features of their activities, and these combined well with numerous hiking and mountaineering trips. The Eastern radicalization of the Depression years did not take hold here. Anti-fascism played less of a role, although money was collected for the fight against the Nazis and for the support of European refugees as well.<sup>107</sup> All in all, *The Nature Friends, Inc.* (the Western District) was more self-referential than the East.

A main reason for the attractiveness of the Californian clubs to a larger public were mottos like “Dance, Sing, and Eat,” which even during Prohibition meant that alcoholic beverages were available. Food contributed to the semi-exotic appeal so far from the sometimes frugal American or fast-food conventions: Eating and drinking were in themselves cultural values and experiences. Beer gardens were a major feat.



fig. 30

Like in the early days, dancing was important both as communal and as show dancing. Dancefloors had been added to the buildings from the oldest days, and were regularly renewed and extended (Fig. 30).<sup>108</sup> A major criterion for building them was physical stability, as they were to sustain large numbers of people stomping the *Schuhplattler* and other dance moves of the rustic type—and a rustic appearance characterized the structure as a whole. In a local like Oakland to the present day high-quality group dances of the Bavarian or Austrian type are a major activity. This includes a musical life based mainly on adaptations of the folk tunes remembered from back home, including brass band and alphorn.

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<sup>107</sup> San Francisco members were nevertheless active in political causes, such as the Spanish Civil War; cf. “A Message from Spain. (From a member of the San Francisco local).” *The Nature Friend* November 1937: 3.

<sup>108</sup> Muir Woods; photos by author.

#### 4. Divergent Roads: The Split and its cultural effects

##### *The demise of the Eastern branches: Internal troubles and McCarthyism*

During the war years all national *Naturfreunde* organizations except for Switzerland and the USA were banned by fascist governments. The International Office had fled to neutral Zurich. When rebuilding the European locals after the war, European clubs were glad about the support of the American Nature Friends. But in the USA the Cold War had revived an anti-Communist radicalism that had been slumbering under the surface as long as the Soviet Union had been an ally. To their own surprise the Nature Friends of America found themselves on the Attorney General's subversive list.

In addition, Eastern and Western Districts could not agree on where the Nature Friends were to go. There were two transnational meetings, in the Rocky Mountains in 1940 and in the Tetons in 1947. Both conventions were successful in as far as they showed how the clubs still shared an outdoor life of hiking, mountaineering, singing and being together. After a short flaring up of a cooperative mood political differences and the threatening McCarthy scenario prevailed. The Split could not any more be avoided.

In the Eastern District locals began to dissolve or leave the organization. Walter Wieland, who had been a member of the Chicago local in the late 1920 and then gone back to Germany, in 1952 found his old club—quite unlike the Californians—in very poor shape (“auf einen kümmerlichen Rest geschrumpft”).<sup>109</sup> A Boyertown District Convention in 1951 tried to restore a working basis. Within its old ideological framework, it emphasized how Art. II of the current constitution summed up as its cultural aims the study of nature, teaching its appreciation, the distribution of knowledge on nature and the conservation of natural resources.<sup>110</sup>

The Central Board (*Zentralausschuss*) of the Nature Friends International (NFI) played a role of its own.<sup>111</sup> It promoted a social-democratic, strictly anti-communist agenda. In a 1948 letter to the Eastern District it described as the core of the club's activities “tourism and the related [natural] sciences“; politics was to be reserved for political parties. The New York Central Executive Office's disorienting line, it decreed, had caused harm to the organization. In the

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<sup>109</sup> Gross. “Elements of a Pictorial History“: 2.

<sup>110</sup> Hektograph copy, in Lanset collection.

<sup>111</sup> For details see Gross. “The Split“: 14-19.

wake of the conflict the Californians became the sole representatives of the Nature Friends in the USA and internationally. Had the developments of the 1930s laid the groundwork for differences between the club's American branches, the NFI now cemented distances. So also culturally both factions would go differing ways. When the Eastern district had—at least theoretically—continued to associate its sports, educational, and cultural activities with the class struggle, the clubs in the West preserved the traditions of their forbears in an entertaining way, and soon were to add an explicitly ecological awareness to their profiles.

The New York administration now was hardly more than an empty shell in the phaseout of the Eastern clubs; it had lost contact with the Nature Friends International, found its own District locals critical of its politics, first saw activities shifting away from the city towards the camps and then had to look on when locals changed their names and sold their properties. Rochester and Syracuse had already refused to attend the Rockies conferences. The Philadelphia camp was sold, and today is an administrative building for the District Council Municipality at Boyertown, PA. The only Eastern camps still active in the mid-fifties were those around Camp Midvale, and in the long run even these were given up to families and institutions close to the original intentions of the *Naturfreunde*.

Much of the information used in the following could not any more be gleaned from regular Eastern publications, as these had almost come to a halt; one main source therefore are the interviews recorded by Andy Lanset and Chris Idzic in 1987 at what had become the Weis Ecology Center and the Highlands Natural Pool.<sup>112</sup>

Cultural and political life, these sources say, had first gone on almost like before, if under strained conditions. Many a member attended the March on Washington as late as 1963. At the Camp speakers were supposed not to give election-type speeches, even when for the 1948 elections Progressive Party Presidential Candidate Henry A. Wallace's running mate Glen Taylor came to the camp. Party rallies were not welcome on the grounds, although no-one asked which strand of progressivism visitors belonged to.

What still kept the old groups together and attracted others were the numerous gatherings at the Camp. There were bonfires, campfires, dance events (communal and show), theater events

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. Karin Adamietz Ahmed. "Why Camp Midvale Still Matters to Me!" *NaturFreundeGeschichte/ NatureFriendsHistory* 2.1 (2014).

(both amateur and professional), food and drink festivals, Thanksgiving dinners and Pool parties. In his interview Werner Jurow [Jurkowsky] claimed that culturally the Nature Friends were “far above the American Labor Movement.”

The Camp then dissolved for a number of reasons, including attacks by the Ku Klux Klan, the Minutemen burning down the clubhouse, surveillance by the FBI, members’ fears of losing their jobs, internal problems about property rights, tax and health matters, and a decreasing number of people active at the camp. For the newcomers—many of them refugees from Nazi oppression—political work was more important than camp activities, and older members lost the physical and psychological energy to be as active as they had been. In its final days to many Camp Midvale was hardly more than a hang-out.

Until the late 1950s, cultural life at the camp continued, although in what some felt reduced intensity. In his interview old-time member Louis Merkel complained that when in the latter days of the Camp singing was over, the “Heart of the Camp is lost.” Singing and outdoor activities had always gone together, and the range was wide: The famous Brahms Lullaby was sung at the evening campfire; there was a Nature Friends chorus and dance jump; in a letter Solveig Leslie remembered that the summer solstice music at Midvale firesides included German Labor songs like “Brüder zur Sonne, zur Freiheit“ and the Nature Friends’ song “Bricht an der Tag mit Morgenrot“ (Berg frei-Lied)<sup>113</sup>; in May 1948 the Camp still had a record and sheet collection (“People’s Songs“); Matt Locker remembers a “Melody Trail“ which ran between Weis and Winfield Farm [the main camp and the building used by the youth groups] and was marked with green musical notes<sup>114</sup>; even when the camp was in an already problematic condition, members wanted to make sure that its music library was preserved.

The name most frequently mentioned as a musical visitor is that of folk song hero Pete Seeger, a resident of the near-by Hudson Valley and regular guest on the grounds since the late 1930s (Fig. 31; 32).<sup>115</sup> New Jersey Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel recalled some of his own experiences with the folk music icon: “Seeger told me a few years ago that he lived in Camp

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<sup>113</sup> Solveig Leslie, letter to Chris Idzic, 1986 (Idzic collection).

<sup>114</sup> Matt Locker, post on an internal Camp Midvale social media site.

<sup>115</sup> At the Camp in the 1950s (photo Robert Ehrlich); solidarity concert 1961 (both NFPW collection).

Midvale in the late '30s and '40s," and that "[o]ne of the old German masons taught him how to lay bricks and helped him to build his house." Of his own musical memories Tittel wrote "When I was about 3 years old, I got to sit on his porch to see him play children's songs," and that "[h]e used to perform benefit concerts at Camp Midvale to raise money for the civil rights movement and other causes."<sup>116</sup> Seeger had already come before he was famous, and he was there for solidarity concerts when after the burning of the clubhouse in the 1960s and other trouble support was needed.



fig.31; 32



Seeger's older mentor Woody Guthrie was remembered to have been at the Camp in the 1940s. Other visitors who actively contributed to its cultural life included blues musicians Leadbelly, Brownie McGhee, and Odetta Holmes; established stars like Harry Belafonte and Paul Robeson could be heard and seen. The latter is interesting because his son Paul Robeson Jr., later a prominent political activist, met his wife at the camp; and during and after the Peekskill Riots the Nature Friends (of whom some had attended the concert) helped to rescue visitors when "in the summer of 1949, a concert by the black singer Paul Robeson, held at Peekskill, New York, to benefit a civil rights organization that had been placed without hearing on the attorney general's subversive list, was brutally disrupted. Hundreds of casualties resulted."<sup>117</sup>

On Saturday nights theater and dance groups were active. In addition to dramatic productions for the Camp as a whole, from the youth section came a theater group located at Winfield Farm.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Holly Stewart. "Folksinger Pete Seeger hammered down in Camp Midvale, Ringwood." 6 February 2014. *NorthJersey.com*.

<sup>117</sup> Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak. *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977. 28-29.

It wrote its own scripts in both German and English, and their plots as a rule were connected with progressive causes. Occasionally the group performed in New York City as well.

Midvale had its own dance league praised for its „well balanced program“ (Wilhelm Voelkel); it also danced at political events in New York. Although these were amateur performers, they were supported by modern dance professionals such as Jerome Robbins and his sister, who for a time functioned as the group’s instructor and organized performances in New York City. Edith Siegel, a Martha Graham student, also worked at the camp as a dance instructor and brought with her modernist elements. On the more social side were seasonal dance meetings which brought together members, people in the area, and visitors, for New Year’s Eve Dances, dances with band recital, and fall dances. Rustic types like the barn dance were very popular, in particular in the Catskills camps (Fig. 33).<sup>118</sup>



fig. 33

New York being so close, in particular during the McCarthy years a number of well-known film stars came by. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, actors and civil rights activists, visited often in the 1940s and 1950s and among other plays staged scenes from Chekhov.<sup>119</sup> Another regular visitor was actor John Randolph with his wife, actress Sarah Cunningham, probably also playing Chekhov; Belafonte and Robeson also fit into that category. Of particular relevance is Martha Schlamme, the Austrian-born American singer and actress, who performed from her multi-lingual repertoire of folk songs (also singing with Pete Seeger) and later was a major popularizer of the music of Kurt Weill.

Lost by now due to the burning of the clubhouse in the 1960s are the libraries the camp provided, both of specialized books (hiking, science, politics) and narrative literature. There were talks on and reviews of literary publications. Also readings took place, many in German. The reason may well have been that more than the magazines *the camp* had retained a German character; many still cherished their first language. Especially during and after the Nazi years a significant number of German-speaking refugees appreciated that.

<sup>118</sup> *The Nature Friend* July 1939: 8.

<sup>119</sup> Among the Chekhov plays staged most probably was *The Cherry Orchard*; cf. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. *With Ossie and Ruby: In the Life Together*. New York: William Morrow, 1998. 246.

Among these exiles was Oskar Maria Graf. His insisting on his Bavarian identity made Midvale and the Nature Friends perfect for him. He not only found anti-fascist comrades but also befriended fellow Bavarian Hein Kirchmeyer, a joiner and furniture-maker well-known for his manual expertise as well as for his avid literary interests. Graf had first lived in New York, where he met Bertolt Brecht (author of the *Mother* for the 1935 anniversary of the New York local), but Midvale was more inviting. He could sell his books and talk to unspoiled, “normal” people who could and did read his novels and short stories in the original. Graf was extremely proud when the camp made him an “honorary member.” Repeatedly he travelled to Philadelphia’s Boyertown clubhouse. Alfred Kantorowicz, another German writer in exile, remembered how “hundreds of German-American workers recently came together in the Nature Friends’ camp near New York to listen to an impressive speech by Oskar Maria Graf.”<sup>120</sup> Even at a Washington’s Birthday event he was among the speakers—probably addressing his audience in German. The English version of his *Wir sind Gefangene, Prisoners All*, is dedicated to Midvale and Boyertown (Fig. 34).<sup>121</sup> The Pompton Lakes area he passed through between New York and Midvale in one of his later novels became part of the setting.<sup>122</sup>

The publication of this book was made possible through the financial assistance of some friends and the subscription of progressive German-American workers all over the country. Special gratitude goes to the *Nature Friends of Camp Midvale, N. J.*, the *Nature Friends of Camp Boyertown, Pa.*, and members of the *German-American Congress of Democracy, Detroit*. All these have thus visibly demonstrated their determination to stand up for German freedom and the great German culture.

fig. 34

Old-timers also remember that other intellectuals who used to come to the camp for lectures on various subjects stayed away after McCarthyite intimidation. The poor state of the Camp in that phase shows in that the Museum and the Library of the Camp had to be combined in one room of the old farm house; in addition, the reduced literary interest was partly due to the fact that many members now lived on the grounds and thus had their own home libraries.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Eike Middell et al. *Exil in den USA*. Frankfurt am Main: Röderberg, 1980. 110.

<sup>121</sup> Reproduction in NFPW collection.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. “Oskar Maria Graf’s langsamer Weg zu den Naturfreunden.” *NaturFreundeGeschichte/ NatureFriendsHistory* 3.2. (2015); “Prisoners All” frontispiece NFPW collection.

Most people using the grounds and the Pool in the 1960s and 1970s were not aware of the Camp's past as a part of the international *Naturfreunde* movement. Only in the 1980s a new generation began to be interested in the all but forgotten camp they had grown up with. Their memories are mostly connected with its cultural life:

Various actors, musicians, and others in the creative arts, including several who were on the government's subversive list, joined hands with the Nature Friends. Actor Herschel Bernardi was on the cultural staff one summer and organized various skits. Another actor, John Randolph, and his wife Sarah Cunningham, staged excerpts from Chekhov plays. Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis performed, and folk singer Pete Seeger played a concert in front of an audience of 1,200. John Wilson, an artist in residence, was commissioned years later to create the bust of Martin Luther King in the U.S. Capitol Building.<sup>123</sup>

For children Midvale was an island of freedom and independence, as is remembered by another youthful resident of the 1950s, whose fondest childhood memories were those of the Camp:

Our bungalow had no electric or water so we had to go to the "Front" with our pails and pump the water. Usually by the time we got back to our home the buckets ended up half empty. We'd eat our meals in the front of our cabin and watch the deer coming down from behind us. There were shows on the stage on weekends and we kids would sit under the apple trees on our blankets. Talent shows, music, dancing and puppet shows. Every week we'd go hiking with our lunches up to High Point. What fun. Maybe I was too young to realize anything political was going on, but it sure wasn't when I got older. We used to go down to the dump in the evenings with our flashlights and watch the bears rummage through the trash. In the afternoons the men would play pinochle in the clubhouse and the women played canasta. We kids just ruled the camp. Ping pong, volleyball, horseshoes, swings, swimming.<sup>124</sup>

Today The Nature Friends for Preserving Weis and other projects do their best to keep what is left of Camp Midvale as a site of memory, including the reactivated ecological center, an outdoor pool open to everybody and fascinating hiking routes originally marked by the *Naturfreunde* of old. They thus preserve the Camp as the last trace of this progressive working-class and immigrant organization in the East of the United States.

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<sup>123</sup> <http://www.shortescapes.net/A-Hideaway-for-Natures-Friends.4039384.html> [06/11/20]; with slight inaccuracies as to historical detail, also see Michael C. Klein's memories of the Camp (*Dissident Doctor: Catching Babies and Challenging the Medical Status Quo*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglas&McIntyre, 2018. 14-16).

<sup>124</sup> E-mail to author, received February 2014.

### *The Western District: Preserving Alpine ways*

In the 1940s the smaller Los Angeles local had sided with the Eastern District, and its Fred Zahn had joined Hans Wittich in organizing the Rockies conventions. But Zahn and his group were relatively alone among Western functionaries. During and after the Second World War, the Tourist Club still contributed money in support of the war and for reconstruction efforts, but in the long run sympathies shifted towards folk traditions, into what to the present day is called “social and recreational life.“ After the 1940s in the Bay area the counter-cultural impetus was almost completely lost.<sup>125</sup>

Like elsewhere, the number of German-speakers among the active members began to fall, and all communication was conducted in English. A name change from *Naturfreunde* to Nature Friends in 1941 marked this reduced impact of German-speakers. Robert Wyler, from 1942 to 1952 president of the San Francisco local, and for three decades of the Corporation of the three Western clubs, was the first American-born in such a position. It was he whose name represented the final break between East and West. New generations with few first-hand memories but a strong will to realize what they had grown up with assimilated Austro-German patterns, from Alpine traditions and alphorn music to Schuhplattler dance and the decor of the buildings. Most of the cultural life at the clubhouses, to where much of the club life had shifted, played with what was a German/Austrian culture in an Americanized form.

After the 1940s the more politically-minded Eastern clubs were so much involved in contemporary matters that they were less and less interested in their own past; ironically, the Californians, who had left their leftist ideas behind, maintained a special awareness of their overseas roots. On the websites of the Tourist Club historical references abound. Even the new and outspoken focus on ecological matters was and is embedded in and explained by historical *Naturfreunde* discourses.

Purists may find these „Alpine“ allusions overdone, and certainly many of them are blends from a host of different and sometimes imaginary backgrounds. But given this, present-day cultural

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<sup>125</sup> For historical surveys see Erich Fink (ed.) *50 Years The Nature Friends Branch Oakland. 1921-1971*. Oakland, 1971, non-paginated; Fink. *History of the San Francisco Branch*; for more recent information access to the club’s various websites is handy.

practices are consistent with the expectations of those active and of their audiences. And much of a participant's action it is.

Large-scale decoration of the clubhouses along Alpine patterns had begun in the 1920s and many of these quasi-original elements are still prominently positioned there today. This is also true for the playful mix of German and English found on the premises—from the signs to the bathrooms to the kiosks outside (Fig. 35-38). Some of the decorations are quite complex, and most are exquisitely taken care of.<sup>126</sup>



fig. 35-38

Another characteristic of the clubhouses is their emphasis on good food and drink—beer serves as the European marker and much of the food is of an American/German mix. Regularly events take place in which the clubhouses' banquet halls, embellished by Alpine art, host guests from all walks of life, and the smaller "Bierstube" (decorated with "bäuerliche Malerei" [rustic painting]) invites hikers. Activities at times attract more than 1,000 visitors. Sometimes Alpine dress codes are encouraged. Even more than the other clubhouses the Muir Woods complex makes clear that the nature reference is to be taken seriously, as a bit of a hike is needed to get down to it from the nearest parking lot.

The festivals celebrated on the grounds fall into two basic categories, a more Alpine type and a more Anglo-American type, and some in between. Of the more traditionally Germanic type are: New Year's Eve party (beginning at Muir Woods in 1913); Fasching (carnival/mardi gras, going back to the 1930s); Maifest or Mayfest (both spellings; already in the 1920s); Spring, Summer and Herbstfest (seasonal festivals); Kinderfest (for kids and families), Schuetzenfest (marksmen's fair); Oktoberfest; Alpenfest; or Heimatabend. The Anglo type includes St. Patrick's Day; Potluck Dinner; Midsummer Mountain Fest (at the Heidelmann Lodge). The

<sup>126</sup> Pillar embellishment, door sign (Muir Woods); kiosk, sign post (Oakland); photos by author.

cross-over type includes erecting a May Pole (both a European and partly American tradition), Christmas Parties, Halloween Dances, and Old-Timers' Dinners.

A particular feature are the Schuhplattler performances, which are shown regularly and in which since 1953 the Oakland local, still serving a German community, excels. As an intricate group dance it requests the dancers to have both rhythmic expertise and physical dexterity. The irony here is that historically the *Naturfreunde* Schuhplattler tradition is controversial—not on principle, but because these groups even in the early 1920s tended to call for a certain amount of autonomy from the other functions of the club.<sup>127</sup> For the Oakland local it is a defining tradition. In more international Los Angeles it never took hold fast, and the former intensive cooperation between Oakland and San Francisco today seems to be more one of visiting each other's festivals.

Dancing is closely connected with the music at the clubs and with outdoor sports. This is how Erich Fink (in 1971) puts that observation in an Oakland context:

Somehow there is a connection between dancing and hiking, dancing and skiing, singing and hiking. In an old German Nature Friend songbook the title page has "singen und wandern gehoert eins zum andern" (Singing and hiking go together). In such things as song and dance, we are still traditionally European at the Oakland club. We have always had a little band built around an accordionist at our club since the very beginning and there were few occasions when an accordionist wasn't playing folk-songs to which one could sing and dance.<sup>128</sup>

Among these musicians certainly was Joe Smiell, who played many roles in Oakland, in San Francisco, and at Muir Woods. For decades (including the hundredth anniversary of the San Francisco club in 2012) he was active as an individual musician (accordion, guitar), as the leader of "Joe Smiell's Bavarian Band" and as what might be called a dancing master: "Joe's love of Alpine folk music was shared by all the members of the club for many decades and many people were drawn into the club because of that special ambience."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *Der Naturfreund* 1921: 92; the Schuhplattler performances were also practiced in the New York local (*Der Naturfreund* 1921: 15-16).

<sup>128</sup> Fink. *Oakland*. [32].

<sup>129</sup> Fink. *California Nature Friends*. [31].

Culturally the Californian groups have been playing an active role in attracting enthusiasts of German and Austrian folk dancing and music. A literary life is less easily found. If poetry appears in the clubs' publications, it is mostly connected with immediate experiences in nature or at the camps, or with the memories of members gone. Exemplarily, after the unexpected death of Wilhelm Heidelbergmann in 1947, his friend Joe Harris wrote a spontaneous, stylistically almost daring poem which also sums up much of what the Californian Nature Friends stood for.<sup>130</sup>



**Wilhelm Heidelbergmann**

A Simple Elegy to a Lover of Nature and Man

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*Come...said the Spirit of Nature...  
Come...O most gentle, devoted friend...  
Your work is done...the time has come for eternal peace...in the garden of the blessed.  
The work of love you accomplished will live on...  
The sweet memory you planted will be evergreen...  
And the hearts of men, women, and children will cling to your achievement...will linger to your name.  
Yea, true hearts will see you where beauty dreams...will mourn...will remember Wilhelm Heidelbergmann!*

*The flowers are drooping and sad...  
The flowers you tended with loving care...  
And the wistful paths of the Tourist Club,  
Where you dreamed of the joy of others...  
Are stilled...hushed...with poignant memories of Wilhelm Heidelbergmann, who lived for Beauty.*

*And where the High Sierras' snow-capped glory shines...  
Where the fragrant balsam and wild bloom glisten...  
And where the beloved trails beckon and wind to Tamalpais,  
There, the spirit of Wilhelm Heidelbergmann shall be...  
Thru the Cow Trail...ablaze with Lupin...Mountain Lilac...  
Down to Nature's cathedral of hallowed Muir Woods...  
On...and on...where tinkling streams meander...sing...and chant the litany of the Nature Friends.*

*The Voice...that taught peace and harmony.  
The great heart, that beat so unselfishly...  
For the Ideal he visioned...fought for...  
And with most conspicuous devotion to duty...  
Lived...practiced...and died for...But...  
The name of Wilhelm Heidelbergmann shall not die.  
His work stands noble...a monument of beauty...  
The man who loved others...more than self.*

*Come...Come, said the Spirit of Nature...  
Come to me...O thou humble, sweet soul...  
Thy work is o'er, thy task is done...  
But thy memory shall live on...and on...  
Wilhelm Heidelbergmann!*



By Joe "Shorty" Harris  
1947

25(A)

fig. 39

Today it seems the Western Nature Friends have found their place in California's cultural life. In their own and largely apolitical way they are thriving. In the 1980s club historian Erich Fink suggested that Nature Friends were "participants and friendly users of the pleasures of nature."<sup>131</sup> Almost stealthily a kind of repolitization has taken place, when over the last decades the locals have adapted ecological ways of thinking and acting. Websites sum up the purpose

<sup>130</sup> Joe Harris. "A Simple Elegy to a Lover of Nature and Man." Repr. in Fink. *History of the San Francisco Branch*. 25A.

<sup>131</sup> Fink. *California Nature Friends*. [3].

of the club(s) as “We are hikers, mountaineers, and passionate advocates for the natural environment.”<sup>132</sup> The cultural element, in 2010, is added by longtime international liason officer Susi Raub, Oakland, who describes ist present-day practices:

Today the clubs continue to foster and preserve European Alpine social activities and cultural heritage. We have a Folkdance-Group that wears traditional Tracht [...] and some of us sing in Bavarian and Austrian dialect. We have a Heimatabend and we have a Kinderfest and Oktoberfest. We also have annual (members only) events such as Saint Patrick’s Day, Old-Timer’s and Christmas Dinner. [...] our clubs [...] therefore have more a cultural atmosphere with emphasis on hiking, skiing and dancing.<sup>133</sup>

Another self-characterization is “Comradship and Gemuetlichkeit,” yet this one comes with a double twist. The early *Naturfreunde* had been comrades in a political sense, and had addressed each other by that name; now the meaning of the term has shifted to camaraderie, a trustful and enjoyable reliance on each other; comfortably being together has always been part of a *Naturfreunde* life, but not mainly in the nostalgic format the Californians use so flexibly. This is why also the term „Gemuetlichkeit“ was a contested one, not by the redheads of the American 1930s and 1940s but by one of the founding fathers. In 1907 Victor Adler published an essay “Nieder mit der Gemütlichkeit“ (“Down with Gemuetlichkeit“), in which he criticized the abuses of alcohol among contemporary workers; cozy entertainment was a trick of the ruling classes to take in the workers, an ideological distraction from the class struggle. So as closely as the Californian clubs recall being embedded in cultural patterns of old, their practices today do only cover one particular segment of their complex tradition.

## 5. Conclusion

From the late 19th century onwards the *Naturfreunde* sought the physical and cultural empowerment of the working classes with the perspective of emancipating them from an oppressive capitalist environment. Their particular slot in the comprehensive network of Labor organizations was to offer leisure time activities, outdoor sports and educational work, with an explicitly counter-cultural impetus.

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. <https://touristclubsf.org> [June 10, 2020].

<sup>133</sup> *Naturfreund* (Switzerland) 2 (2010): 31.

Until after the First World War connecting recreational aims with politics worked out well. When international Labor around 1920 began to split into “moderate“ and “revolutionary“ factions, the *Naturfreunde* felt that impact too. In some areas (e.g. much of Northern Germany, the American East) the Nature Friends became more overtly political; other regions (Austria, parts of Southern Germany, the American West) adopted an approach in which the Labor context was preserved but outdoor and cultural activities were not to interfere with day-to-day politics. Depending on what faction one belonged to, cultural work tended to either be subservient to political topics or to play a more independent role, as the outdoors sidekick to the Labor movement at large. In real life these tendencies were not easily separated, though.

By the 1920s these shifts in focus reached the American locals, although until the 1930s the cultural work in the East was not much different from that in the West. It organized a network of leisure time activities (hiking, mountaineering, running its clubhouses), specialized amateur groups (science, music, dancing, photography), and publications promoting both. Only when in the early 1940s the Eastern and Western Districts split, cultural practices drifted apart in a more fundamental way: The West would apolitically concentrate on its Austro-German origins, and the East—under huge external and internal pressure—tried to continue the cultural ways developed in the politicized 1930s and 1940s.

Club life in the *East and Mid-West* was much less focussed on the Germanic element; it was open to a wider segment of the public (American leftist mainstream, Blacks, other immigrants, refugees). Sports, outdoor life, cultural activities, and political action were supposed to be integrated. There was a comprehensive influence both of popular and of sophisticated cultural traditions; various formats (science, photography, drama, music, literature) and popular uses (campfires, singing at hikes etc.) were to go hand in hand with political ones (demonstrations, rallies); the clubhouses and camps were both recreational and political centers. Ideally, such a scope came close to the concept outlined by the *Naturfreunde* in early Vienna.

The major difference with that concept was that in the Eastern clubs significant segments in the leadership and among the contributors to the periodicals took politics to be the *main* preoccupation. The flipside was that this bound manpower needed for outdoor and camp programs; it permanently created internal debates and undermined a cooperative mood; pressing and *objective* tasks (from antifascist activities and the World War to the opposition to

excessive anti-communism) competed with concrete cultural and outdoors action, i.e. the element which provided an *immediate and personal* experience of solidarity. The groups which emphasized outdoor and cultural activities felt their recreational needs (hiking, camp life, and the satisfaction coming with them) had become secondary to the club's large-scale aims. At least in practical terms "solidarity at a distance" (or socialism at large) was at odds with "solidarity at close range" (or socialism as a life style).

One example for how this destroyed the well-integrated triad of politics, culture, and hiking were the beloved May Day Parades in New York. When a debate arose about whether to participate in the "revolutionary" or the "reformist" parades, memories of former unity were frustrated and an important binding element for rank and file members was lost.<sup>134</sup> A more recent problem came when during the war a new wave of refugees arrived from Nazi-occupied Austria; these were mainly interested in the camps as meeting places, not as areas of a community life (including workhikes to keep the camps in shape). Even District president Georg Schmidt was better known for his coordinating German-American organizations—he was on the boards of the German-American League for Culture and the German-American Emergency Conference<sup>135</sup>—than for his participation in hikes or cultural activities. Yet unlike in Germany this did not lead to a break-up along party-lines but rather to differing life styles under the structural and ideological roof of one organization.

In a few cases, in particular of the cultural kind, the blending of politics and recreation was still successful (and years later affectionately remembered by old-timers). Pete Seeger next to Chekhov plays, singing labor songs by the camp fire and watching youth drama groups stage their own plays was certainly something one could be proud of. For a time this kept alive the hope that against the odds the Eastern clubs—or some of them—might survive, but the clubs were already weakened so much that they stood helpless when external pressure was added on multiple levels. Anti-communist threats and the fear that members might lose their jobs were present all around the District, and even in California; Camp Midvale as the last remaining major camp was under observation by the FBI, there were conflicts with local communities and financial trouble with the government about tax, property and health matters. That the Nature

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<sup>134</sup> Boelke. "Anmerkungen des Schriftleiters": 5.

<sup>135</sup> John F. Cronin "The Problem of American Communism in 1945: Facts and Recommendations." [1945] 135; repr. <http://mdhistory.net/hiss/cronin-report.pdf> [June 18, 2020].

Friends International rather accused the New York District of misbehavior than support it after the Rockies conferences may not have been crucial for the destruction of the Nature Friends in the East, but it certainly did not help prevent it.

So the Eastern and Mid-Western history of the *Naturfreunde* came to an end. Its cultural activities may have been relatively close to what the founders had had in mind; even in the final years of the New York District they proved that for those active a certain degree of concord was still to be found, a set of experiences which kept people together even under strained conditions. Strong enough for a surprise recovery it was not.

Thus only the Californian Tourist Club thrives in its niche today. What it preserved from the programmatic statements of the founding years was a fascination with nature and a love for hiking and mountaineering; this was combined with a specifically American experience of preserving one's old culture in new surroundings. What it gave up was an immediate involvement with progressive traditions and the concept of culture as an emancipatory mode. The old ideological concepts were replaced by a variety of Austro-German "Alpine" practices in an Americanized form.

So setting out from the same late 19th and early 20th century *Naturfreunde* program two almost contradictory concepts emerged. Polarizing terms like "subversion" (for the *progressive* element) or "*Gemuetlichkeit*" (for the *nostalgic* one) help to outline these divergent trends, although by far they do not cover the complexity of the underlying processes. *Subversive* the Nature Friends were at least on the Attorney General's list (and mainly in the East); in their lifestyles they were part of a leftist-liberal mainstream, with significant Eastern excursions into more dogmatic directions. A subversive danger they never were, to whoever. – The West Coast locals escaped these political troubles by finding their niche in the nostalgic cosiness of *Gemuetlichkeit*. At the cost of hoping to change the world, the Austro-German roots provided guidance for a cultural program that has proved to be a success story.

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**Appendix:****Major publications on American topics in the international magazine, *Der Naturfreund*, published in Vienna since 1897**

*The following list is incomplete yet aims at giving an impression of how immigrant American Nature Friends tried to promote their new home country among those staying in Europe; by far most of the essays were illustrated by photos. As a rule they were based on excursions done individually or with the club.*

*The very first travel report came with the news of the first American local in New York:*

Alexander Wiederseder (New York). "Bei den Niagarafällen." (*Der Naturfreund* 1910: 245-246)

*From the early 1920s onwards similar texts appear quite regularly, mostly concentrating on outstanding areas in American nature (by year):*

Kurt Loesch (New York). "Die Besteigung des Mt. Marcy." *Der Naturfreund* (1920: 89-90)

Jules Bucher (San Francisco). "Ein Tag in der kalifornischen Wildnis." *Der Naturfreund* 1921: 51-53

G. Gerhardt (San Anselmo). "Yosemite." *Der Naturfreund* 1924: 70-72

Hermann Ursprung (New York). "Naturfreunde in Amerika" (strenuous two-day hike in Catskills). *Der Naturfreund* 1924: 129

Jules Bucher (New Jersey). "Der Windbeam" (hiking report). *Der Naturfreund* 1926: 105

Fritz Deuer (San Francisco). "Mesa Verde." *Der Naturfreund* 1926: 201-204

Karl Jawurek (Los Angeles) "Am Grand-Canyon in Arizona" (photos Wiederseder). *Der Naturfreund* 1927: 13-18

Gerhard Wolff (Milwaukee). "Nach Devil's Lake State Park" (hike report). *Der Naturfreund* 1927: 53-54

Karl Jawurek (Los Angeles) "Die südkalifornischen Berge" (geological info and hike report; photos - Wiederseder). *Der Naturfreund* 1927: 91-96

Ernst Durvenmatt (Olympic, Wash.) "Eine Querung des Mount Hood." *Der Naturfreund* 1928: 19-21

Fritz Deuer (San Francisco). "Sommerfahrt 1927" (mountain vacation). *Der Naturfreund* 1928: 72-76

C. Kaemmer (San Francisco). "Durchs kalifornische Hochgebirge (Sierra Nevada)" (mountaineering, including Mt. Whitney). *Der Naturfreund* 1928: 97-104

Otto Lirsch (San Francisco). "Die Donner-Party" (on the Donner pioneer tragedy of 1846-1847, which gave its name to the area of what was to become the Californian branch's Heidelmann Lodge). *Der Naturfreund* 1931: 15-18

Carl Müller (then Chicago). "Als 'Fire Fighter' im Urwald" (gives an impression of the size of a mountain forest area). *Der Naturfreund* 1931: 135-136

Fritz Hochstrate (San Francisco). "Von einer Fahrt in Amerika" (hiking experiences through various areas, including Mt. Rainier). *Der Naturfreund* 1931: 142-144

Otto Richter (Dresden [!]). "Der See im Krater" (on Crater Lake). *Der Naturfreund* 1931: 211-212

Wilhelm Heidelmann (San Francisco). "Ferientage in Alaska" (photo page plus long text). *Der Naturfreund* 1932: 165-171

**NATURFREUNDLICHE  
ARBEIT**  
IN DEN  
VEREINIGTEN STAATEN



Unsere amerikanischen Ortsgruppen besitzen zusammen 6 Schutzhäuser und Heime. Ortsgruppen bestehen 15, und zwar in: Allentown, Chicago, Detroit, Michigan, Jersey, City N. Y., Milwaukee, Newark, New York, Paterson, Philadelphia, Rochester, Syracuse, St. Louis, Missouri, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco.

In San Francisco wurde im Jahre 1912 die Ortsgruppe unseres Vereines begründet, der später solche in Oakland und in Los Angeles, der Filmstadt, folgten. Die herrliche landschaftliche Umgebung dieser drei Städte ließ eine erfreuliche Wanderbewegung aufleben. Zwei große Gebirgsketten durchziehen das Gebiet. Das Küstengebirge weist mehr Mittelgebirgscharakter auf, erreicht aber dennoch 3000 Meter. Die Sierra Nevada bildet das eigentliche Hochgebirge. Über hundert Gipfel ragen auf 4000 Meter hinauf, darunter die höchste Erhebung der Vereinigten Staaten, der Mount Whitney mit 4500 Meter. Da konnte sich ein schönes Bergsteigen und Bergwandern entwickeln, und als vor mehr als zwanzig Jahren das erste Naturfreundehaus außerhalb Europas hier erstand, war das ein wichtiges Ereignis. Als das Haus zu klein wurde, erfuhr es in den letzten Jahren eine Erweiterung auf zwei Hauptgebäude und mehrere Nebenhäuser für Schlafräume. Auch das Rohrauer-Haus, das der Geselligkeit gewidmet ist, steht hier. Da, in Muir Woods, spielt sich hauptsächlich das Vereinsleben der Ortsgruppe San Francisco ab. Man kommt rasch hin, nur das letzte Stück muß zu Fuß zurückgelegt werden. Die herrliche, ursprüngliche Landschaft des Muir-Woods-Nationalparks umgibt die Naturfreundehäuser. Herrliche Sequoia, Rotholzbäume, die unter Naturschutz stehen, erfreuen den Naturfreund. Etwa fünf Kilometer bergabwärts zur Meeresküste findet man herrliche Badegelegenheit.

Am Fuße des Redwood Peak liegt das Naturfreundehaus der Ortsgruppe Oakland. Der Blick über die ganze Bucht von San Francisco ergibt sich vom Haus. Hieher gelangt man am schnellsten und daher herrscht an Sonntagen sehr reges Leben.

Die Ortsgruppe Los Angeles hat ihr Haus am Fuße der Sierra Madre errichtet. Wunderbare

Bergfahrten und Wanderungen ergeben sich vom Haus, so auf den Mount Wilson, 1900 m, mit der berühmten Sternwarte. Alle drei Häuser sind ganzjährig betreut, doch verpflegen sich die Gäste stets selbst, außer an Festtagen.

Im Hochgebirge besitzt der Gau der Weststaaten das Sierra-Haus in einer Höhe von 2200 Meter. Da in der Nähe eine Poststraße und Bahnlinie verläuft, ist auch diese Unterkunftshütte leicht erreichbar. Hier kann der Wintersportler ebenso auf seine Rechnung kommen wie der Bergfahrer im Sommer.

Die Ortsgruppe Philadelphia ist mit der Fertigstellung ihres Hauses beschäftigt. Das Kultfest fand im Sommer 1932 statt. Ein Treffen der Ortsgruppen des Mittelwestens beim Hüftenplatz verlief sehr anregend.

Im Mai 1932 fand auch die Weihe des Hauses der Ortsgruppe New York statt. Es ist eines der stattlichsten in den Vereinigten Staaten geworden. Die Feier verlief, besonders dank des Sprechchors der New Yorker Werbegruppe, sehr eindrucksvoll. Diese Gruppe entfaltet übrigens eine sehr rege kulturelle Tätigkeit auch über die Grenzen der Ortsgruppe hinaus.

Die schwere Wirtschaftskrise hemmt selbstverständlich auch die kulturelle Arbeit unserer Naturfreunde in Amerika. Aber wenn auch die Entwicklung in die Breite darunter etwas leidet, um so erfreulicher ist die Tiefe der Idee unserer Bewegung. Langsam, allzu langsam dämmert vielen Tausenden die Ahnung auf, daß nur geschlossene Gemeinschaft aus dem Elend herausbringen kann und daß nur treue, unerschütterliche Einigkeit, geboren aus Not und Kampf heraus, Großes schaffen kann.





Oben: Sierra-Haus, 2100 m hoch, in der Sierra Nevada gelegen; ideal für Wintersport

Mitte: Naturfreundehäuser Muir Woods, Ortsgruppe: San Francisco

Unten: Haus der Ortsgruppe 'Oakland', Californien

61
62

Survey text in *Der Naturfreund* 1933: 61-62.