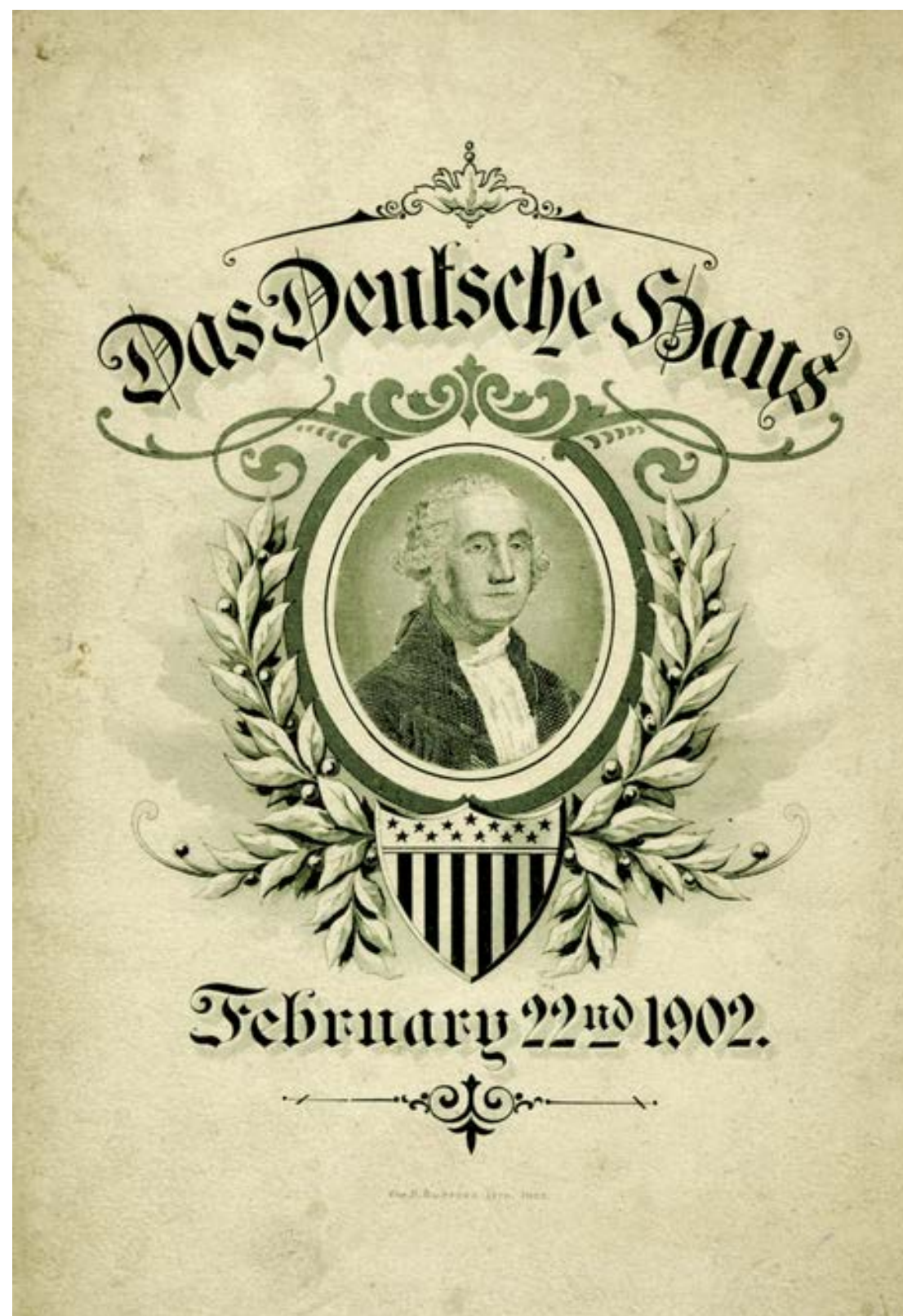


# „Stop Teaching Your Kids Dutch“ (Dis-)Continuities in German American Life in the US between 1890-1932



© IUPUI Archives, Indianapolis

In 1890, **German Americans** were a proud and visible community in many cities throughout the US. Innumerable newspapers, clubs, businesses catered to a clientele familiar with German customs and the German language. German culture – in the sense of **high brow Kultur** – was a defining characteristic of this group's identity. World War I, so the opinion of current research, put an end to this era. A community that had drawn a big part of its self confidence from **cultural superiority** was now depicted as a community of cheating, lying, dishonest traitors. German Americans reacted to this development by shedding their German roots. Upon closer examination, however, the German American community proved to be far **more resilient** than current scholarships gives it credit for. The project will take a look at how the German American community defined its ethnic identity from the height of its influence in the 1890 to the post-WW I era. Special attention shall be given to how German Americans communicated their situation to their relatives in Europe, thereby **encouraging or discouraging them to emigrate** to the US.

## „Deutsches Eichenrauschen“

### German American Kultur at its Peak, 1870-1890



© IUPUI Archives, Indianapolis

Around 1890, about one-third of all people living in states of the **Midwest** (Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota etc.) did have German roots. These 30 percent did leave their **imprint on American society** – not only through sheer quantity but also through the fact that a remarkably large number of Germans were in positions of power. German Americans were a minority but a **confident minority**. They were, teachers and pastors, businessmen

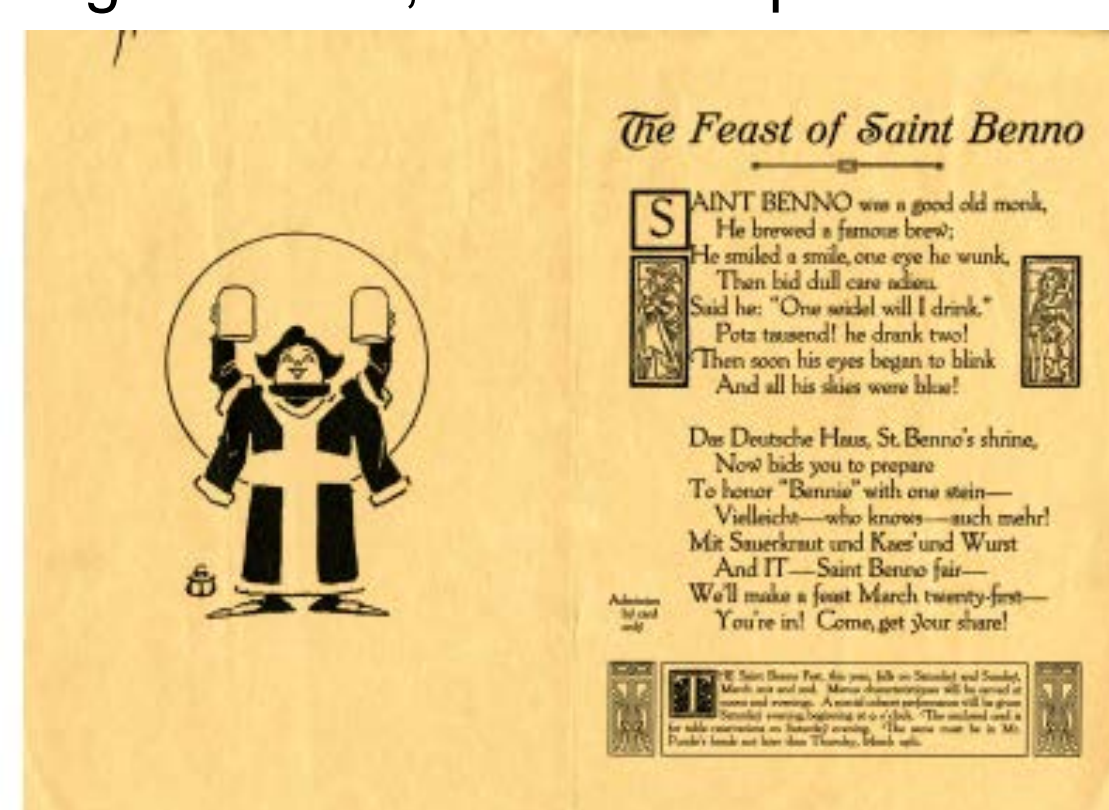
and successful entrepreneurs, mayors and senators. Innumerable **German societies**, turners, singing and music clubs, gardening societies and of course churches thrived. Culture – in the sense of **high brow Kultur** – was a defining characteristic of this group's identity, emphasized by the minority's elite to stake its claim towards the country's majority culture.

## „Wahrt deutsches Wesen“: Pre-War Decline, 1890-1913

**Mass migration** from Germany stopped in the early 1890 as the industrial revolution offered job opportunities at home. Over the following two decades more and more **second or third generation Germans** left their ethnic roots behind. By 1910, the distribution numbers of German American newspapers had declined by almost 30 percent nationwide since their peak in 1893. **German schools** had closed or merged with public high schools, membership in the

different German clubs was in decline as well. **Ethnic entrepreneurs** that had catered to a German American crowd until the late 19th century were now opening up their services to a wider market.

The ebbing flow of immigration was not the only reason that led immigrants to leave their roots behind. **Nativist tendencies** that had been prevalent in American political discourse since the 1850s and, related but more importantly, **the temperance movement** put stress on German American culture



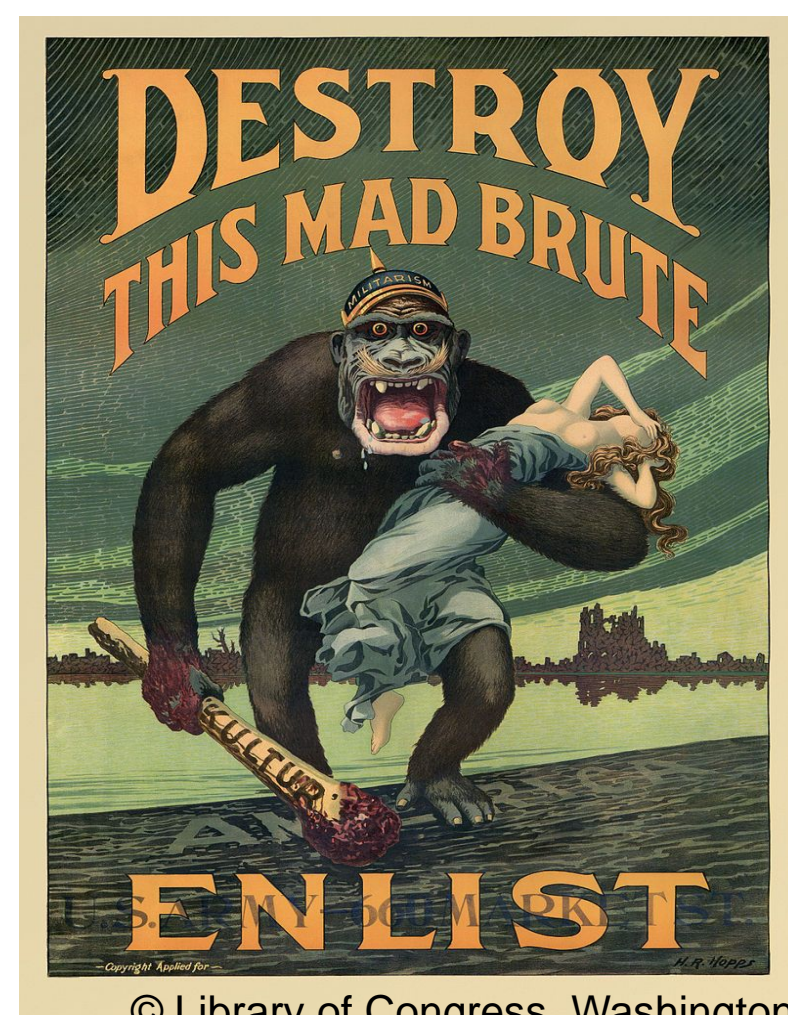
© IUPUI Archives, Indianapolis

## „Destroy This Mad Brute“

### The German American Community During WWI

The **outbreak of the war in Europe** served for the German American community as a focal point, a cause around which to rally, and a reason to recover and rejuvenate their roots. Between 1914 and 1916, the subscription numbers of German American newspapers skyrocketed and German club memberships rose to pre-1890 heights.

When the **US joined the war** in April of 1917, prominent organizations, such as the German Turners, were quick to assert their loyalty to the US. Nonetheless, anti-German propaganda increased. With the **Espionage (1917) and Sedition Act (1918)**, laws were passed that extended the definition to



© Library of Congress, Washington

target enemies inside the US. The previously cherished concept of German **Kultur** now became a smear word of war time propaganda. Some leaders of the German American community tried, but failed, to replace the concept of **Kultur** with the concept of **freedom** to reclaim the community's place within the American mainstream.

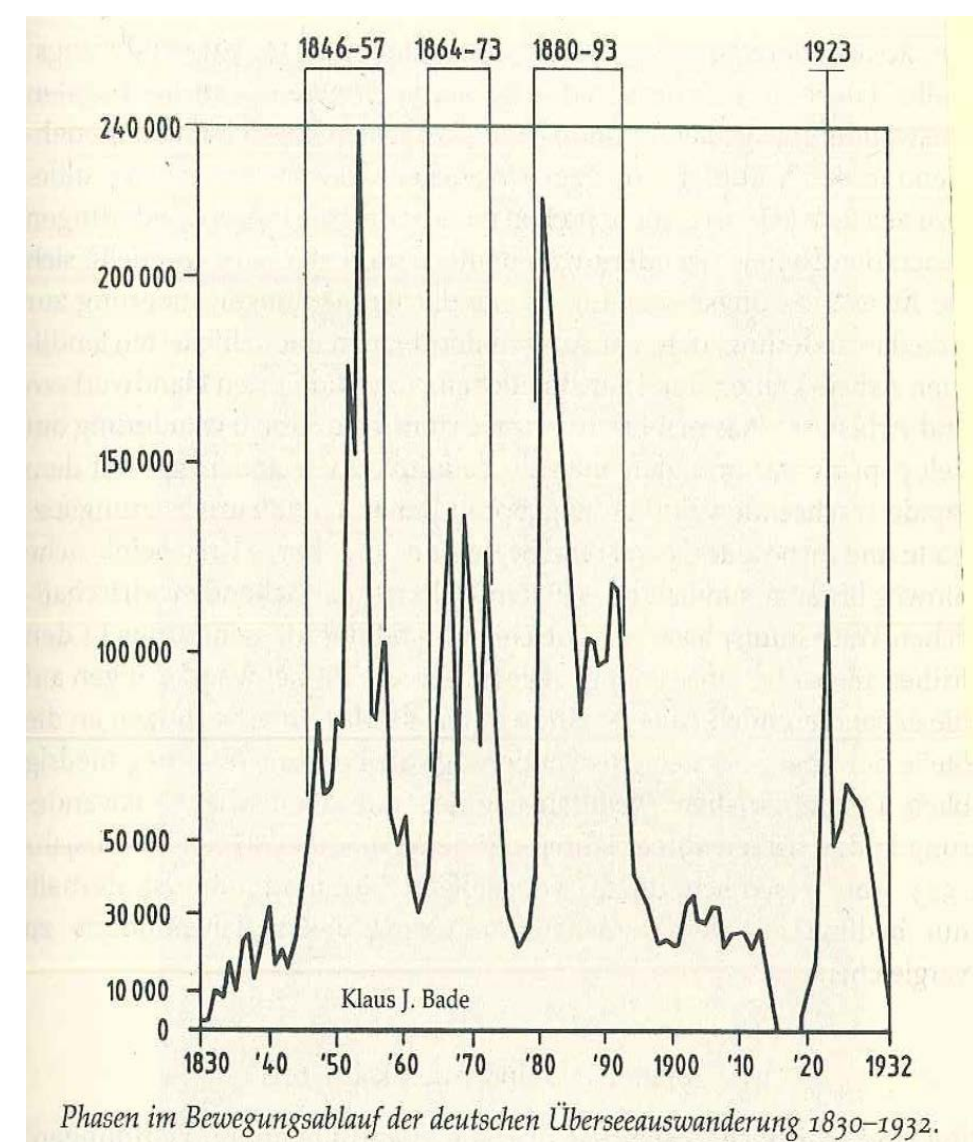
## Recovery and Interwar Reality, 1919-1932

Despite the anti-German propaganda during WW I, **immigration rates from Germany skyrocketed** right after the end of the war. About 500.000 Germans came to the US between the passing of the peace treaty in 1921 and 1923. In 1924, in reaction to the newly developing trend of mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe the US passed a law that established fixed quotas for immigration. The German quota was set at 57.000 people per year. These high immigration rates do give an indication that the **anti-German sentiment did not survive the war** to an extent that would cause German Americans to warn against migration to the US. **German American clubs** – and the



Aus: Boundless. "Nativism." Boundless U.S. History, 2015

newspapers that had not ceased publishing during the war – did bounce back with remarkable speed. The Indianapolis Academy of Music did go back to its previous name Männerchor in 1919, the Deutsche Gärtnerverein retained German as its main language until 1983, the membership rates of the American Turnerbund Indianapolis increased its membership as well as the one of the Männerchor in the after war years. German Carnival was celebrated again in 1921, as was the St. Benno Fest. **German newspaper** that had not ceased publication completely, such as the New Yorker Staatszeitung and the New Yorker Volkszeitung went back to prewar publication rates by 1921. The **McCray Law**, that had outlawed foreign language teaching in Indiana since 1919 was **deemed unconstitutional in 1923** – German was now taught again in Indianapolis alongside Spanish and French.



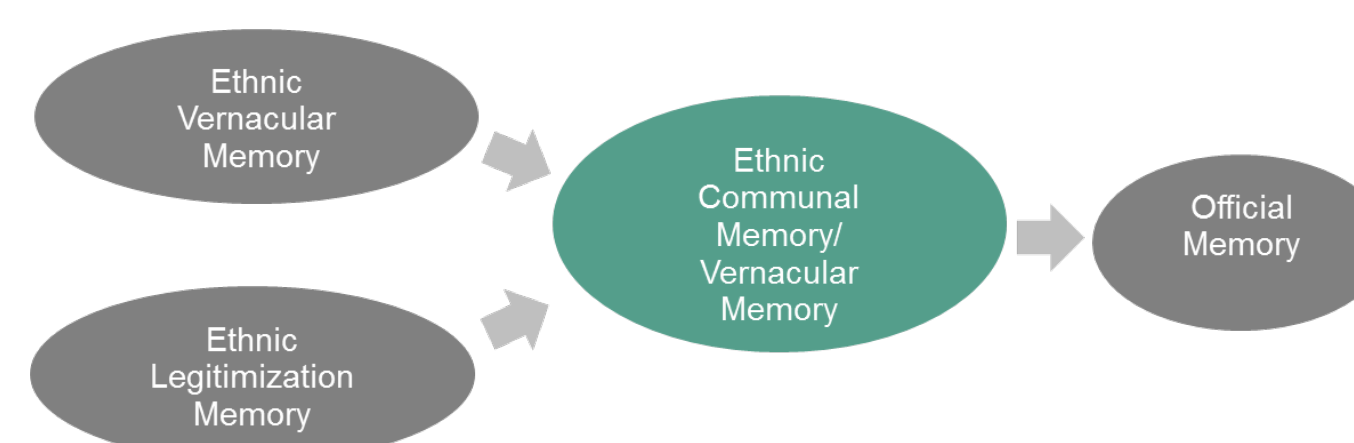
Aus: Klaus Bade, Deutsche im Ausland, 1993

During World War I, German American **Kultur**, a concept that had already been in decline before the war, lost its final battle for superiority. The German American elite had to redefine its group's identity at a time of renewed scrutiny towards newcomers to the US.

## Theoretical Framework: Migration Memory

**Communal memory** has been a popular topic of research. However, it has received little attention from migration historians, although ethnic memory is a key element in **constructing group identities** among immigrants.

This study will take the Ethnic Memory concept developed by Heike Bungert (University of Münster) as a **theoretical framework** to analyze the interaction of different fragments of the German American community among themselves and towards majority culture.



Concept of Ethnic Memory (Heike Bungert, 2008):

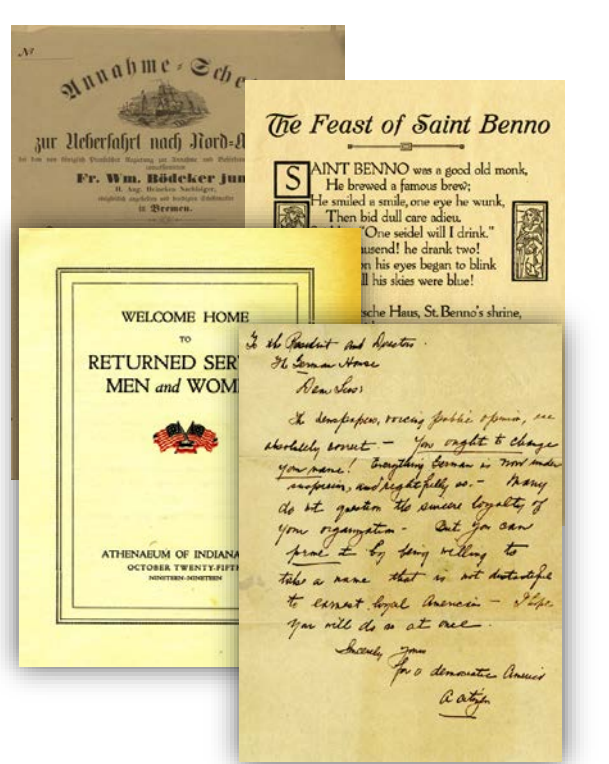
- **Ethnic Legitimization Memory** – the political memory of an ethnic group, coined and constructed by the leaders within the ethnic community
- **Ethnic Vernacular Memory** – the counter memory of various subgroups within an ethnic community
- **Ethnic Communal Memory** – results from an interplay between the Legitimization Memory and the Vernacular Memory and has the function to achieve distinction for the whole ethnic group, which serves as the Vernacular Memory towards the **Official Memory** of the society at large

## Sources and Resources

German American **newspapers, club records and meeting minutes** provide rich resources for analyzing the discourse within the German American community. It is an elite discourse and will be complimented both by **union records and private letters** to get access to the situation of a broader demographic.

The Immigration Act of 1924 renewed the debate on the German American community within mainstream society.

**Charities** were funded to help the newcomers adjust. **Social workers** descended on migrant communities in large numbers to familiarize them with the American way of life. These reports give an invaluable inside into how American mainstream society viewed the German American community – both in contrast to other minorities, to second and third generation German Americans, and to what was perceived as the American mainstream.



© IUPUI Archives, Indianapolis

### Working Hypothesis

- The German American community in Indianapolis were to a large degree active agents in the development of redefining their ethnic identity.
- The anti-German sentiment during World War I served as a catalyst to the downfall of a culture already in decline.
- The anti-German sentiment ended the function of German **Kultur** within the Ethnic Legitimization Memory, German American culture however proved to be astoundingly resilient.

