

The German Picnic

The few published histories of the Northcote area invariably mention the settling in Separation Street of a number of German families, leading to the establishment of "the German Cemetery" till existing today.

Separation Street is generally believed to have been so-named in late 1850 or in 1851 when the new Victorian colony was celebrating "separation" from their previous Government master in New South Wales, but it seems the German community was not part of the settlement as previously believed.

The uncovering of electoral rolls for 1856, the first held under the colonies' new statutes reveals no listings for any of the German families believed to have been settlers in Separation Street.

The election required a three-year residency regardless of naturalisation before "non-British" citizens were eligible to vote - 'Germantown' under Epping, and the Epping district itself had a around a dozen registered voters with Teutonic family names.

A brief biography of "Charles" Helwig, perhaps the best-known of the German settlers, published in 1888 suggests he arrived with his family in 1855, some little time after the generally accepted date.

But certainly by 1875, the German influence was finally emerging with the announcement late in 1874 that the Deutscher Turn Verein would hold their annual picnic on New Year's Day, on a private paddock in Northcote, later a little more clearly identified as "near the Northcote Machine Brickworks"

The picnics were alternatively advertised as the "ANNUAL GERMAN PICNIC" and the "TURN VEREIN PICNIC", but they were one and the same.

The Deutscher Turn Verein (meaning an association or club of gymnasts) was formed in 1860 with 64 members, and a few years later acquired a property on the corner of Lonsdale and Stephen (from 1880 Exhibition) Streets, now the site of the Comedy Theatre. The Society's annual meetings were usually declared "open to German-born settlers and British-born who speak the German language".

The club later moved to Victoria Parade in East Melbourne, and although immensely popular with German and Prussian settlers, many of whom had been in Australia for most of their lives, the society was forced to disband just after the declaration of the First World War. The Turn Verein Hall was taken over by the Commonwealth Home and Territory Department early in 1919 and was occasionally used for meetings and lectures up until the early 1930s.

Later reports on the New Year's Day picnic suggested some 500 to 600 had attended – the site was obviously popular as it was to host the event over the next three years.

Advertisements for the 1876 picnic suggested "a paddock kindly lent for the occasion by Mr. C Lehrke. Gymnastics, Singing, Dancing, Racing. N.B. NO GAMBLING ALLOWED". Conrad Lehrke settled in Separation Street around 1873 established a dairy farm, in the interim marrying a Northcote girl, Teresa Ahern. Lehrke was noted as senior vice-president of the Turn Verein for some years before the group's demise.

For the New Year's Day picnic, special omnibuses from Melbourne were laid on – "cabs leave from the corner of La Trobe and Swanston-streets, fare one shilling", and "... there was a good attendance of our German fellow colonists ... a varied and interesting programme of sports

C H R I S T M A S . — C H R I S T M A S .
MELBOURNE GERMAN TURN VEREIN,
71 Latrobe-street East.
F A N C Y F A I R
And
CHRISTMAS TREE
Illuminated by 60 Gas Jets.
CHRISTMAS DAY, 25th DECEMBER.
A splendid band is engaged.
Doors open at 6.30 p.m.
Admission—One shilling. Children (in the charge of adults) free. Every visitor receives a ticket which entitles to a prize. All prizes, no blanks.
N.B.—On Monday, the 27th December (Boxing Day), a Ball will take place, beginning at 9 o'clock. Admission—Members, 2s. 6d.; non-members (introduced), 5s.

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The annual celebrated
G E R M A N P I C N I C
Will take place
On NEW YEAR'S DAY,
At NORTHCOTE,
In the private paddock situated next to the Northcote
Machine Brickworks.
Splendid Brass Band. Gymnastics.
Chorus Singing. Dancing and other Amusements.
Gentlemen, one shilling.
Music from 11 a.m.
Refreshments to be had on the ground.

was carried through, and appeared to be heartily enjoyed both by the spectators and by those who engaged in the contests”.

“Some excellent singing was given by the Turn Verein choir, accompanied by the orchestra, under the direction of Mr. Weinberg. Members of the club went through a display of gymnastics in which they proved themselves very efficient to Mr. Wiesbaden, the hon. secretary, and his fellow office-bearers were accorded praise for the successful manner in which matters were conducted. In the evening a ball was held in the Turn Verein hall”.

For reasons unknown, Lehrke's Paddock did not host the 1879 picnic, the event for reasons unknown shifting to the nearby Kirk's Paddock, later the home of The Little Sisters of the Poor. Any connection between the new site and the German society is a mystery.

The site selected for the 1880 event was confusing to say the least. Early advertisements suggested it would be held in Mr. Kitchingman's paddock in Kew, alternatively described as "near the Prospect Hill Hotel" and "just to the east of the asylum" (directories show him as a farmer and slaughterman in Derby-street), but on December 23, the notice changed to Lehrke's paddock.

The Northcote site remained for the rest of the year, but lo and behold, The Argus's review of the New Year's Day celebrations around Melbourne had around 800 people turning up at Kew!

The event remained at Kew for the next two year's, although Lehrke secured a consolation prize with an Easter Monday picnic in 1881, the usual events augmented by a new pastime "rooster-killing".

The 1883 picnic returned to Northcote for the last time and by now, the attendance was noted at around the one thousand mark. .

Conrad Lehrke appears to have left both the area and dairying around this time and became a publican – perhaps not a wise career move as he was declared insolvent in 1895 while licensee of the Exhibition Hotel in Exhibition-street, unable to pay a sum of just over £300 owing to the Castlemaine Brewery.

Archives suggest that the 1884 and 1885 picnics – the latter noted as the 25th – returned to Kew, the site now the Kew Asylum Reserve, but from that point on, although the Society itself remained highly active, the New Year's Day picnic seems to have been dropped from the German social calendar.

A brief commentary in the Jubilee edition of the Leader on May 19, 1933 celebrating fifty years of Northcote being proclaimed an independent shire suggested Lehrke's Paddock was a year or two after the picnics ceased was bought by the Northcote Brick Company, “but was at the time, heavily wooded, green and shady” – the site was quite probably that section of the Brickworks Park immediately opposite the Northcote Library.