

New oompah for an old club

23-86
Fresh spirit changes Arion Singing Society to the German-American Club

By MARYBETH VARCADOS
Sentinel Living Section

IF IT'S sauerkraut you hunger for, don't show up Saturday night when the German-American Club celebrates Fasching, its equivalent of Mardi Gras.

Inge Linke, a third generation livewire of the nearly century-old club, says "Oh, we're just going to have some potato salad and weiners."

But if you want some real sauerkraut music and sweat-producing dancing, show up at the hall — formerly the Arion Hall, but now called the German-American Club Hall — at 230 Plymouth St. Doors will open at 7 p.m. and The Hollanders band is coming from San Jose to play from 8 to midnight. It's \$7 for non-members. Wear a Mardi Gras costume; there will be prizes.

Isn't this an awful lot of oompah, coming from such an old club? Not at all, say members young and old. There's a revitalization going on, and a reaching out to the community.

An organization based on family fun and conviviality, with some ethnic spice on the side, is just what folks need in today's high tech world, thinks Linke, who bounces with an enthusiasm contagious to her granddaughter, Ericka Schwartz, 7, and even infects Felix Guenter, the club's oldest member.

Linke, club vice president, and Heimke Buse, treasurer, were so eager to talk about their club this week that an interview became occasion for a little lunch. They bustled into the hall, shook a white cloth over a small table and spread plates with blood sausage and head cheese, teawurst and braunschweiger, dark breads and Linke's home-canned mustard pickles, called senfgurken.

When Felix Guenter arrived, he was seated as

honored guest. Retired after many years as a butcher and proprietor of a Pacific Avenue deli, he is the club's oldest member. He would tell its history. Ericka played near the stage.

Focal point of the hall is the tiny stage, its walls covered with a colorful mural of a German village, painted by former member Dorothy Geobel.

Above it, in traditional German lettering is this:

*Zu jeder Zeil an jedem Ort
sei frei das Lied und frei das Mort*

It's a fitting motto, commented Guenter:

*Anytime and any place there should be
freedom of word and freedom of song*

The three Germany-born Americans treasure freedom of song and word for three different reasons.

Guenter, a native of Engers, Germany, learned the value of freedom both as a boy and through the club.

"My folks brought their nine children here in one load in 1906 through Ellis Island. We came because my dad always said he did not raise six sons to be cannon fodder for the Kaiser." They stopped in Pittsburg, then Oakland, then established a family farm in Visalia, working land "that never had been plowed," he said.

Like most German families, they loved music. "My dad had a good voice, my oldest brother played the violin, and we sang the old German songs. We were a mixed chorus of our own. Music always was a part of our life."

Guenter started his career in Santa Cruz in 1916 at the sausage kitchen. In 1922, he married and went into meat cutting at the slaughterhouse, near pres-



Felix Guenter is oldest member.

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Music and dancing are important to Helmut and Heimke Linke and other Germany-born people in this community.



Photos by Bill Lovejoy

German-American Club

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ent-day Dominican Hospital. Then, he opened the Independent Market downtown.

Guenter — like other German immigrants in towns throughout the country — belonged to Turnverein, the German-American club where men could do gymnastics and form their singing groups. Here, Turnverein began meeting informally in 1872, but didn't organize formally until 1890. Its Arion Singers sang at many public events, including the cornerstone-laying of Cooper House when it was constructed as the county courthouse. Annual picnics were at Wagner's Grove and, later, at Rother Ranch in Scotts Valley.

When World War I broke out, public attitude turned against Germany. "The newspaper said that the Arion singers were secretly having military workouts, using broomsticks," Guenter recalls. So, Turnverein gymnastics were ended, meetings were conducted in English.

"We were shocked and afraid," he said. "Later on, one of our members my age was in the Elks Club — his father, Theodore Beck, had started Beck Brewery here — he gave all the gymnastics equipment to the Elks.

"And ever since, we became the German Singing Society, Arion."

Not Aryan, as in Nazi ideology. Arion, for Arion of Methymna, a legendary poet and musician from Corinth circa 625 B.C.

Historical tracings on Arion have been posted at the hall, to avoid confusion, said Linke, because for some reason, questions keep popping up about the name.

In fact, pressure over the name Arion has increased recently to the point, said Buse, that they're calling themselves the German-American Club, and have changed the sign outside the hall accordingly.

Their earliest halls were meeting places such as Bernheim's, the Germania Hotel, the Flatiron building. Their first hall was at Soquel Avenue and Front Street, where Long's Drugs is now.

Club membership has changed with the times. After World War II, feelings of nationalism either were at an ebb or Americans of German extraction stayed to themselves. Membership, limited to men, dropped to 35. "It was quite an upset in those years. You had to be very careful how you conducted things, and what went on," Guenter said.

Not until about 10 years ago were women allowed to join.

The night before the 1955 flood, the Arions rehearsed what they'd do if the waters from San Lorenzo River spilled over into their hall. "We set the piano on the stage so we could save it," Guenter recalled. "But when the flood was over, the piano was like a bathtub, in 54 inches of water. The hall was condemned."

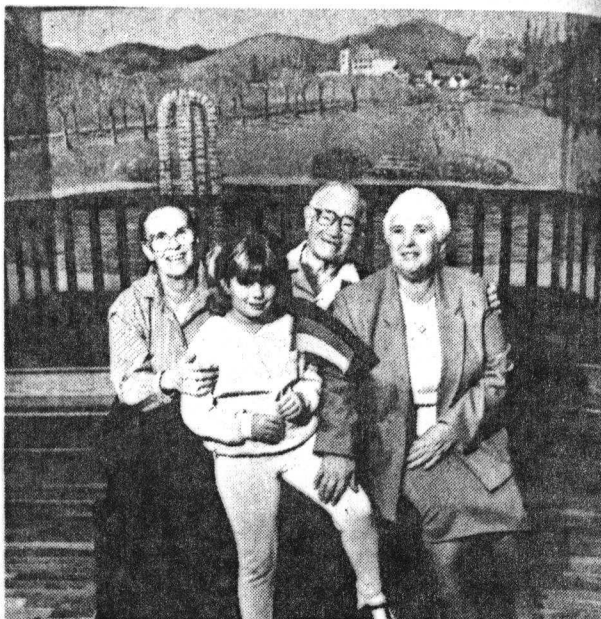
"We got paid for it in some way, and decided to move," he said. "Julius Bauman, an early member, spotted this lot," he said of the current location.

By renting out their hall on Plymouth Street, the club pays its expenses. Members do all the work. In early days, rental was \$10 a day; now it is \$250. Membership, which has been as high as 100, runs around 60.

HELMUT AND Heimke Buse came to this country after World War II. Heimke was born in Northern Germany, on the Danish border. Helmut, who is club president, also is a native German. At age 17, he was drafted into the armed services and during the war was in a special paratrooper company. He was captured by the British and taken as a prisoner of war. German POWs were taken out of Europe; Helmut wound up in the town of Berlin, Mass.

"He liked this country. He worked in the fields and was an interpreter. There was no hunger or cold," says Heimke.

After the war, he was sent home where Heimke was



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Three generations of the old Arion Singing Society, left to right: Heimke Buse, Ericka Schwartz, Felix Guenter, Inge Linke.

a nurse, his nurse once when he was ill. And that is how they met. They came to the states, but finding work was an impossibility for Helmut, an electrician.

Then they met a man from Santa Cruz who helped them come to Santa Cruz and find Helmut a job in electrical work.

When the topic of prejudice arises, Heimke, with her distinct accent, has plenty to add. "I even encounter it now. People come to our hall and ask why we call ourselves Aryans. I tell them it's not Aryan but Arion and we were founded in 1888 when Hitler wasn't even around. I send people into the hall to read about Arion. I don't want to get into political hassles with people."

She remembers days when neighbors would call her "Nazi" over the back fence. "But now people are more tolerant of German people — younger people, who were not born with a knife in their mouth."

IN 1960, the Linke family came to Santa Cruz from northern Wisconsin. They had moved to the States after the war. Werner, Inge's husband, became a displaced person when Poland was lost as his country.

"Wisconsin was called Little Germany," Inge recalls. "I had to translate for people there before me who still couldn't speak English."

Immigrants kept up on their own news through German newspapers, and a frequent writer, Julius Bauman of Santa Cruz, glamorized the wonders of this city to them. That's why many Germans moved, or retired, to this area, Inge explains.

"That's why we came, and we've been active in this club since the day we arrived in 1960. It was like home."

The Linkes, fun-loving and family oriented, brought a spark to the Arion Club. "We came with our impulsive, young ideas." Getting live music for their dances was one idea. The singing society has disbanded for now, but a new leader is being sought, she explained. For now, the club has two events a month, a meeting and a family social.

What Inge misses is the middle-range age group. "Some members are very old, and now children and nieces and nephews are coming. I'm 65, and what I am missing are the ones in their 50s."