

The German American Impact Upon 19th Century American Education

Written by Kathryn Davis
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The German American Heritage Center will open an historical exhibit with a regional focus. By focusing on a forgotten institution of the mid-19th century, the German Free School, this exhibit will explore a forgotten idea. The migrating Germans of the 1850s took their ideas with them, and opened Free German Schools in Austin, Texas, Madison, Wisconsin, and Davenport, Iowa. But only in eastern Iowa did the school continue in its original form until the 1880s, and enjoyed an attempted revival and an influence until 1910.

"This exhibit tells us many things about the original German settlers of eastern Iowa, and their unique ideas about education which impacted public education of today," said Schar Blevins of the Center.

The exhibit traces the powerful ideas of the 1848er generation who moved to America, and Midwestern leaders such as Theodore Guelich who supported the founding of a German Free School in Davenport, in 1853. Attention is placed on the early teachers who helped make the school a success by the early 1870s, and the interesting interaction of ideas on Iowa's public schools. The final attempts by Emil Geisler to revive this concept in the 1890s are traced for the first time.

"This is the first time that the whole story has been described, with an analysis of historical forces involved and the results," said Prof. William Roba, Scott Community College and Executive Director, Roba consulting. He will be presenting an interpretive talk about the exhibit on April 5, 2009, at 2 P.M. at the German American Heritage Center.

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Roba added, "this has been a fascinating project to research and develop, and our staff has done outstanding work with Glen Trute providing imaginative graphics, and student interns making this a truly interactive exhibit." The GAHC has staged permanent exhibits on historical subjects, but this is the first one to travel to other museums in the Midwest.