

Klaus-Dieter Gross (Regensburg)

Elements of a Pictorial History of the Nature Friends in Chicago

We do not know much about the American Nature Friends local (or branch) in Chicago, Illinois.¹ Partly due to its dissolution in the 1950s, effected by anti-communist witch-hunts, little historical material seems to be available. The most extensive visual source I know of records the club's early outings and the building of its major clubhouse. These materials were, up to the archive's demise, part of the collection of the Eco-Archiv (Hofgeismar, Germany), and are now stored with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Bonn, Germany.² For all I know, they are published here for the first time in the main sections of the present paper. The second part then will shortly contextualize the photos with the help of other sources.

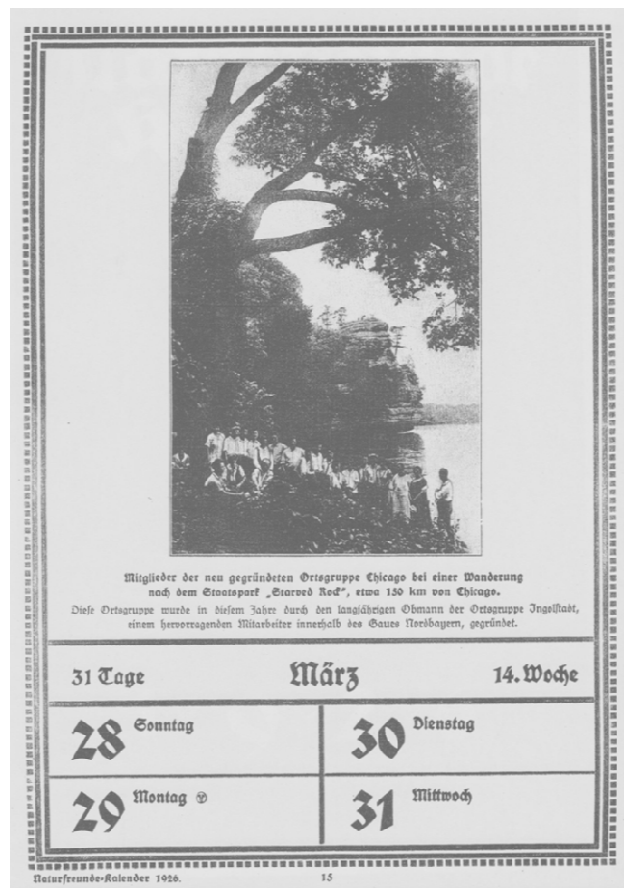
The following compilation does in no way aim at creating a full history of the Chicago club. For further research it might be promising to glean papers such as the German-language *Chicagoer Arbeiterzeitung* (after its re-emergence in 1931) and the various archives in the Chicago area. Quite self-consciously, the present paper is no more than an outline of rudiments and contexts.

A first international reference to an emerging chapter of the *Naturfreunde*/Nature Friends in the American Midwest was published in 1925, exactly twenty years after the organization had originally been founded in Vienna, Austria.³ Already in 1926 Chicago featured prominently in the popular *Naturfreunde-Kalender*, where German-speaking Nature Friends could see a photo (with an illustrating text) of an outing to Starved Rock state park, about 150 kilometers from the city:

¹ For a wider context see Klaus-Dieter Gross, "'Berg frei' jenseits des Atlantiks? Die Nature Friends of America," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 42.1 (März 2006): 60-87. An English version--"The Nature Friends of America: A Historical Sketch"--is available at http://www.highlandsnaturalpool.org/History_of_Nature_Friends_of_America.pdf.

² Thanks for providing me with and for digitalizing much of the material shown here go to Martin Becker, then at the Eco-Archiv, Hofgeismar, Germany. The materials were since given to the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie [AdsD], Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, Germany. It remains to be seen whether in due time the foundation will be able to find financial resources to make these documents available online on a larger scale.

³ *Der Naturfreund: Mitteilungen des Touristen-Vereins "Die Naturfreunde"*. Vienna, 1925. 63.

Fig. 1⁴

Walter Wieland's observations on the Chicago branch, 1920s through 1950s

Images like these may have been crucial in making it easier to help potential European emigrants to take decisions. We do not know, though, whether this particular publication helped to influence German emigrant Walter Wieland on his way.

In a letter to Wulf Erdmann,⁵ Wieland reports how he had lived in the USA from 1925 to 1927, and been a member of the Chicago local. He returned to Germany in the late 1920s, but revisited the USA in 1952. In contrast to the liveliness he again found among Californian Nature Friends, his former Chicago club was in a decrepit state, reduced to a withering rest (“auf einen kümmerlichen Rest geschrumpft”). To his letter to Erdmann, Wieland added 32 photos mainly from the 1920s - the groundwork for this paper.⁶ The captions given came with the photos.

⁴ T.V. “Die Naturfreunde” Reichsleitung für Deutschland. *Naturfreunde Kalender 1926*. Nürnberg [1925].

⁵ Manuscript Walter Wieland to Wulf Erdmann, Sept. 8, 1986; Erdmann's response is dated Sept. 18, 1986.

⁶ Pictures from his second visit in 1952 are not reproduced here.

According to Wieland's recollection, the Chicago Nature Friends were founded in 1923 or 1924; this is obviously incorrect. Both the calendar entry and other sources claim the local was born in 1925. So what he may have witnessed was hearsay stories of how and when the idea came about in the first place. Wieland's pictures obviously represent the very first activities of the club, including visits to the future setting of its clubhouse, in the sand dunes of Indiana (fig. 2, 3, 4). The youthfulness and the formal attire of the participants is striking.



Fig.2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Other hikes took the members to forests closer to the city, showing what then must have been a very liberal lifestyle (fig. 5).



Fig. 5

Starved Rock, the location of the calendar photo of the following year, remained a major destination throughout 1926, including travelling in privately owned cars (unimaginable to most European Nature Friends!) (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

But these modern means of transport were rather tools to get to places where more primitive pastimes were to be enjoyed, such as camping, campfires and communal singing (Fig. 7, 8, 9, 10).



Fig. 7



*Zeltlager in den Sanddünen
bei Chicago 28. 1926*

Fig. 8



Am Lagerfeuer
in den Sanddünen
July 1926

Fig. 9



*Camping in den Sand
dünen (Michigan Lake)
bei Chicago
28. Juli 1926*

Fig. 10

Group outings attracted especially young people, like these singing on the banks of the Chicago River (Fig. 11):



Fig. 11

In spite of private cars (cf. fig. 6), public transportation seems to have been at least as important – creating situations reminiscent almost of scenes from a Western movie ... (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13

As by then Chicago was not the only branch in the Midwest, meeting others - like, here, comrades from Milwaukee (Fig. 13) - was part of the Nature Friends idea.



Fig. 13

The year of 1927, Wieland's last year in Chicago, began with a New Year's trip to the Fox River Dells (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14

Wieland on building the Sand Dunes Clubhouse

Almost directly after founding the club, the idea of creating a Nature Friends Clubhouse must have been born. An area was found at the Sand Dunes State Park, only a short distance from Lake Michigan. From first conceiving the house to the final celebrations of their communal efforts Wieland provides us with intense visual documents of the co-operative spirit which created this members' haven. First came the clearing of the ground (Fig. 15):



Fig. 15

For the removal of dirt even at such a very early stage the club owned its own truck – which is duly mentioned in the caption. An option technologically and financially unimaginable to European Nature Friends! (Fig. 16)



Fig. 16

Many manual workers and experienced craftsmen were members of the club, and consequently the construction of the clubhouse seems to have taken place swiftly. Wieland provides us with pictures of each major stage of building the house (Fig. 17, 18, 19).



Fig. 17



*Ortsgruppe Chicago der Naturfreunde
beim Bau ihres Hauses
in Indiana —*

Fig. 18



*Ferien i Heim
d. T. V. Die Naturfreunde
Ortsgruppe Chicago
in den Sanddünen
Staatspark von
Indiana.*

Fig. 19

By March 1928 the main building was almost completed, with a lot of landscaping still to be done (Fig. 20, 21).



Fig. 20



Hand set
Barrigkeit in
März 1928.

Fig. 21

For the grand opening finally a hat were waved and a flag raised (Fig. 22, 23, 24):



Fig. 23



HAUS EINWEIHUNG
des Touristenvereins "DIE NATURFREUNDE"
Grüppchen CHICAGO - Ill.
in den SANDDÜNNEN in Indiana.

Fig. 24

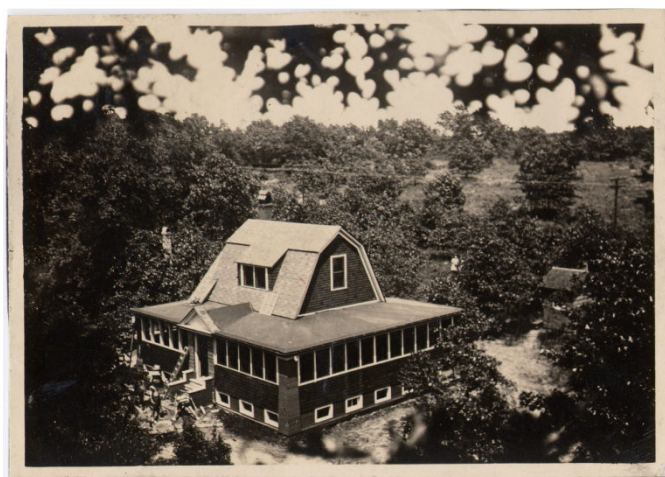


Fig. 25

Unlike the splendour of the outside, the interior is marked by a rather functional and practical approach (Fig. 26, 27).



Fig. 26

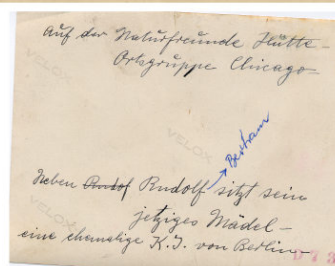


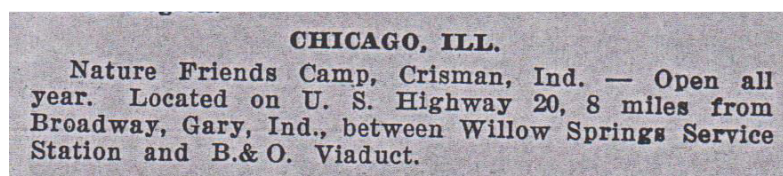
Fig. 27

Contexts and additions from American sources

A map printed in 1935 in the American members' magazine *The Nature Friend* helps to locate the exact area of the building. *The Nature Friend* was edited in New York, and in the volume quoted here celebrates the 25th anniversary of its incorporation.⁷ The Chicago local congratulates the New York club on this occasion:

Fig.28⁸

The Dunes State Park reference so prominent in Wieland's images is also given here. Elsewhere the site near Lake Michigan was tagged differently. Even the address section of the same 1935 *Nature Friend*, just a few pages later, calls the site "Camp Crisman."

Fig.29⁹

⁷ Originally the first American branch of the *Naturfreunde* was founded in New York City in 1920.

⁸ *The Nature Friend* 13.11 (November 1935): 14; this advertisement is accompanied by a hiking report of the "English Section of Chicago" to Starved Rock State Park.

⁹ *The Nature Friend* 13.11 (November 1935): 34.

In an international survey published by the Nature Friends Vienna central office in 1929 its name then reads “Stade Indiana,” and the railroad address is given as Garylon (Gary¹⁰ being the township nearby).¹¹ This source also describes the building as being equipped with 20 beds, 30 mattresses, and cooking installations, and a few pages on names comprehensive options for leisure time activities:

STATE OF INDIANA
9. Camp Crisman of Local Chicago near Gary,
Ind. Summer vacationing—winter weekends
—no restaurant—hiking—swimming—nearby
—skiing—playgrounds.

Fig.30¹²

Ten years later, in the anniversary edition of *The Nature Friend* to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of the international club, we also find an ad which details the post office box number of the camp (and includes a reference to the end of fascism in Europe):

OCTOBER, 1945 53

Fiftieth Year Jubilee Greetings
from
LOCAL CHICAGO
Which Celebrates Its Twentieth Anniversary.

May Our Nature Friends Movement in Europe
Come to Full Life Again After Thirteen
Dark Years of Nazi Tyranny.

•

Make our camp, located in the famous
Indiana Dunes Region of Lake Michigan,
the stop-over for your vacations and
future travels. The camp is open all year
around.

•

Post Address:
NATURE FRIENDS CAMP
Route 1, Box 155 Gary, Ind.

Fig.30

¹⁰ *The Nature Friend* of November 1935. 7. reports that the Chicago local has managed to establish an independent local in Gary.

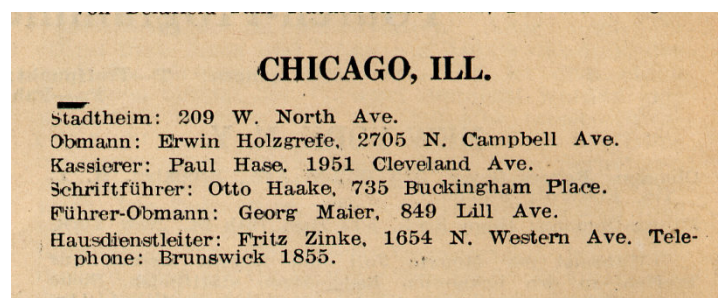
¹¹ *Verzeichnis der Schutzhütten und Ferienheime des Touristen-Vereines "Die Naturfreunde"*, Vienna 1921. 76.

¹² *The Nature Friend* XXIII/10 (October 1945): 62.

On the following page, an editorial text introduces the Chicago local and in particular praises the progressive context of the club, explicitly highlighting the purely co-operative manner in which - as proved by the photos above - their Sand Dunes Clubhouse was built.

Fig. 31¹³

In 1931, we then find a German-language reference to a separate city headquarters, on Chicago's North Avenue:

Fig. 28¹⁴

¹³ *The Nature Friend* XXIII/10 (October 1945): 53 and 54.

¹⁴ *Der Tourist: Nachrichten für den Gau der Nord-Ost Staaten Amerikas* 9/4 (Juli-August 1931).

In spite of being predominantly German, the local had its own “English Section.” But the Chicago Nature Friends were mainly recognized as part of the German cultural and sports infrastructure.¹⁵ The names of the club’s officers seem to be exclusively German. Even a glance at the names of the 56 felicitators in the Chicago section of the vast *Tabula Gratulatoria* (“Greetings from Our Members and Friends,” pp. 71-76) only slightly modifies this impression.

The Great Depression definitely led the political identities of the American Nature Friends regions (“Gau”) in different directions. Up to the 1930s such differences seem to have been few, and a future leading figure in California like Fred Zahn was welcomed on his way from Germany to San Francisco and then Los Angeles by his Chicagoan comrades in the 1920s.¹⁶ Also the clubhouses were advertised together; here the Chicago site is found in the upper right-hand corner:



Fig. 29¹⁷

¹⁵ cf. Chicagoer Arbeiterzeitung; repr. in Anne Spier. "German-Speaking Peoples" in: *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s to 1970s. An Annotated Bibliography*. Vol. 3: Migrants from Southern and Western Europe. Ed. Dirk Hoerder. 308-558. 390.

¹⁶ Erich Fink. *History of the San Francisco Branch of the Naturfreunde*. (privately printed, after 2008). 11.

¹⁷ This pictorial collection of international clubhouses was published variously also by the Californian Nature Friends.

Whereas the Californian locals in the late 1930s and 1940s turned towards preserving German traditions in their own right and even slowly gave up their former connections to the trade union movements, Eastern and Mid-Western locals increasingly considered themselves as predominantly political activists with a focus on leisure-time activities. Two major attempts at mending the gap in the 1940s failed, and the Californians began to separate from the "Nature Friends of America" (centered in New York City). In particular the locals in Philadelphia and Chicago were known to be highly critical of the capitalist system in the USA.

Like Wieland has observed, in the early 1950s the Chicago Nature Friends had fallen victim to anti-communist witch-hunts. From 1953 on they are not any more mentioned in the documents of the international Nature Friends, the central committee of which now only acknowledged the branches in California. According to Gerald Schügerl, for safety reasons the Chicago local was renamed "Midwest Campers,"¹⁸ but even under this name vanished in the haze of history. Research in Chicagoan archives might well unearth valuable material on in how far the demise of the Nature Friends in Chicago resembled that of locals like New York, on which recent research has begun to create a new perspective on the American Nature Friends.¹⁹ Walter Wieland's visual documentation is an excellent starting point for such scrutiny - as it focuses our interest not only on political aspects but also on the daily routines of a major branch of the American Nature Friends.

*Dr. Klaus-Dieter Gross
Eichendorffstr. 3a
D-93051 Regensburg
dieter.gross@naturfreunde-bayern.de*

¹⁸ Gerald Schügerl. *80 Jahre Naturfreunde Österreich*. Wien: Naturfreunde: undated [1975]. 164.

¹⁹ See Mary Caldwell-Kane. "Ringwood Library: Camp Midvale Grant Project." *NaturFreundeGeschichte / NatureFriendsHistory* 1.1 (2013)