

4F (Gymnastic) Steins By Walt Vogdes

This article, drawn heavily from one which appeared in *Prosit* in 1993, discusses 4F steins with emphasis on the historical perspective of the 4F movement. It begins with the salutation which is found on almost all 4F steins:

Gut Heil! (Good Health!)

Even novice collectors of antique beer steins are likely to come across a stein bearing the words *Gut Heil!* and the 4F symbol which is seen at right.

After reading this article you should be able to answer a number of questions about 4F:

- What is a 4F stein?
- What is the significance of the 4F insignia?
- Who started the gymnastics movement in Germany, and why?
- Who were the *Turners*, and what was a *Turnfest*?
- Who is to blame for the gym classes we all hated in school?

There is considerable evidence of gymnastics activity in antiquity. Perhaps the earliest suggestions arise from cave paintings seeming to show men jumping over the backs of wild animals. (Whether this is sport or the survival instinct is unknown!) Early forms of the sport were practiced in China and Persia, while western forms arise from the practices of the Greeks and Romans. The Greeks are credited with starting the Olympic Games as a form of organized athletic competition in 766 B.C. emphasis was on individual physical skills, the Romans viewed physical exercise as a mean of creating a powerful soldier. In 392 A.D. the Romans abolished the Olympic Games. During the Dark Ages, both physical culture were shunned, not to be reborn until the 18th and 19th century, when Germany was a center of activity of organized fitness and exercise.

In the period leading up to the 19th century, Germany was composed of various states, kingdoms and constantly shifting boundaries and rulers. Marriage within the nobility was most often based on political considerations and families struck ties to strengthen or extend their political hold. In the early part of the 19th century, Germany vied with the Russians, Prussians, and Austrians to exert political control over all of central Europe. At the same time, cultural and philosophical views were shifting toward a view that imitation of foreign ways was unnatural and that a true culture or civilization must spring from the life of the common people. Resentment of Napoleon coupled with this emerging sense of identity led to development of a new sense of German nationalism.

A contemporary of Napoleon's, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn was born in 1778 in Lantz, Prussia. In 1811 at the height of the Napoleonic wars, influenced by the growing sense of nationalism, Jahn began teaching gymnastics. Harkening back to the days of the Romans, Jahn organized the movement to promote physical health, patriotism, readiness and resistance. He founded an outdoor gymnasium in the *Hasenheide* (hare meadow) outside Berlin, and promoted organized competition. He was credited with inventing much of the equipment used by gymnasts, such as the pommel horse, parallel bars, and



generally considered the father of modern gymnastics. Many local *Turnvereine* (gymnastic clubs) were local community fitness and social centers. The widespread interest in developing strength, agility, and not limit itself to gymnastics. Steins commonly show that weightlifting was an important activity, and indications that fencing groups considered themselves part of the movement.

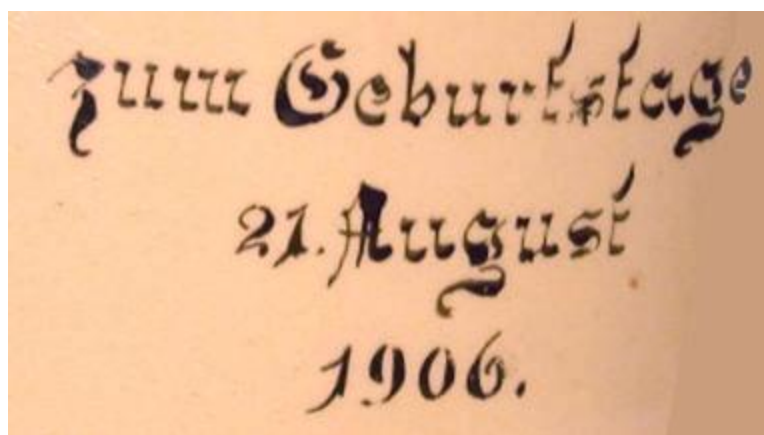
While the movement is sometimes perceived as a social or recreational diversion, the 4F symbol, standing for *Fromm, Froh, Frei* (fresh, pious, happy, free), makes clear the cultural and nationalistic values embraced by practitioners.

The circumstances of the origin of the 4F insignia are not known, although the "gymnast's cross" has been dated to 1856. Although the movement began some 40 years earlier, the period from 1800 to 1850 saw the mass production of stein manufacture, and the vast majority of 4F steins date from 1870 to the early 1900's. Let's look at some examples.



Left, Mettlach PUG, form 1526, Dec. 567, simple 4F symbol in a wreath of laurel and oak branches.

Right and below, Mettlach form 1526, handpainted, 4F logo on a shield with crest, named to Julius Stuetz, inscription on the right side indicates a birthday present in 1906!



This is a good point to begin to note some commonalities in 4F steins. Oak and laurel branches surround the 4F logo on both of the above pieces, and this will be seen to be a common occurrence. Even in the 19th century, the oak leaf was a symbol of strength, while laurel symbolized victory.

Left, a half-liter porcelain stein, named to Hans Kraus and showing the 4F logo with barbells and a shield. Members of the 4F clubs were very proud of their skills, and it is quite common to see steins bearing their owners name.

Right, etched Mettlach, form 1914 (made in 1898), unnamed, shows the 4F logo on the body and inlay, a proud competitor wearing the sash of his *Turnverein*, holding a flag and a barbell, standing in front of parallel bars and a high bar.

Mettlach 1914 also has a nice figural thumbblitz of *Turnvater Jahn*, who originated the 4F movement as a means of preparing the populace for resistance to Napoleon.

Finally, a close-up of the central design of Mettlach 1914, probably the most widely held Mettlach 4F stein.



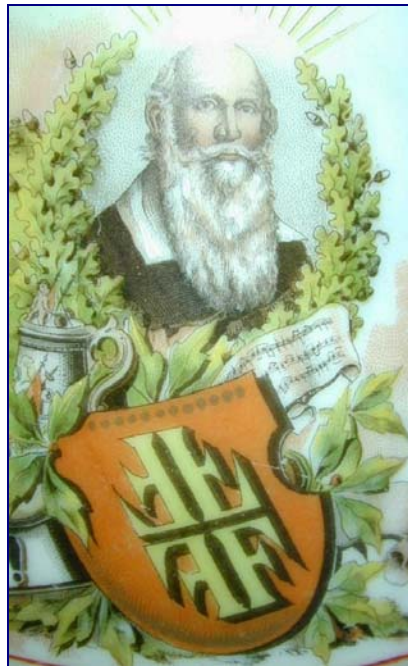
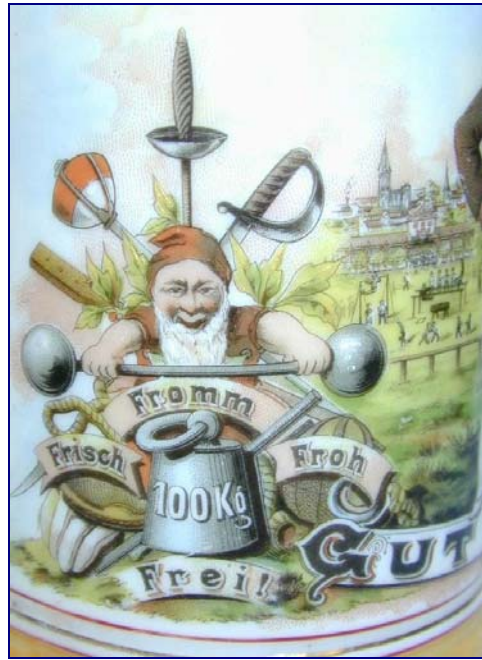
At left, a half-liter relief creamware stein by Reinhold Merkelbach, unnamed, showing gymnastics (parallel bars, high bar, pommel or vaulting horse), Vater Jahn, the words *Frisch, From, Froh* and *Frei*, and a reference to "Turners". (The term "Turner" is asserted to be a derivative of the French word "Tournier", or tournament, or as simple reference to the "turning" done in gymnastics.)



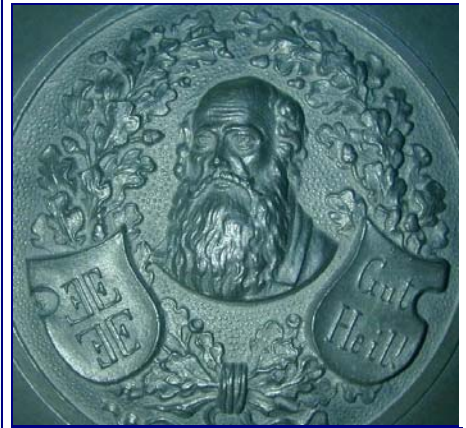
Left, a half-liter porcelain stein, unnamed, showing weights, parallel bars, a high bar, pommel horse, *Vater Jahn*, organized competition in an outdoor setting *a la Hasenheide*, a foil and a saber, and tumbling (turning).

Right, close-ups of the side scenes of this stein. The dwarf is surrounded by tools of the Turner, including a foil and a saber, a 100 Kg. weight, a barbell and a banner bearing the 4F motto. Over his shoulder we see an organized outside event, perhaps in the *Hasenheide* or Hare Meadow, in Berlin.

On the other side, we see Turnvater Jahn's image above a shield with the 4F logo. Note the repeated use of oak branches framing Vater Jahn's image, while the shield is set off by laurel. The honor in which Jahn was held is clearly indicated by the radiant highlights above his head.

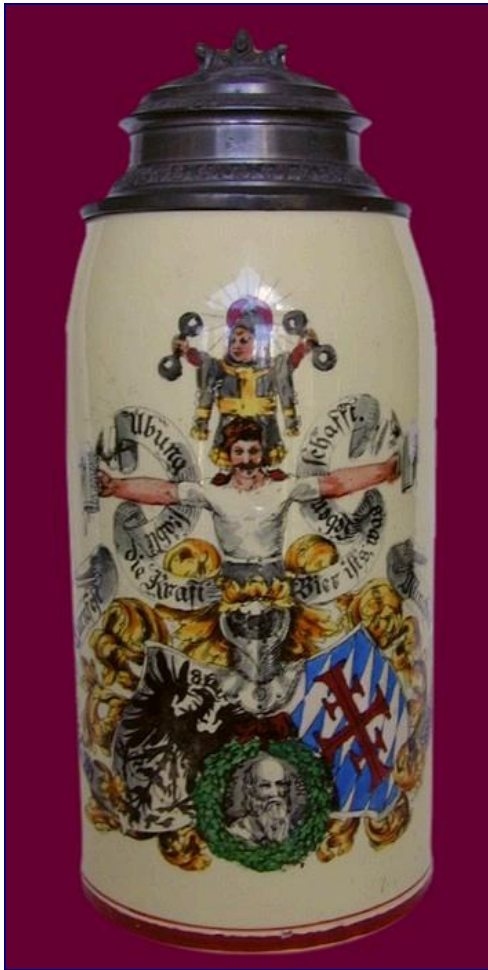


This half-liter creamware stein links the 4F movement to state and city pride. The Heidelberg Castle appears below the central wreath, and the familiar ode to Heidelberg appears on the sides: *Alt Heidelberg du Feine, du Stadt an Ehren reich, am Neckar und am Rheine, kein' and're kommt dir gleich* (Old Heidelberg, you are so fine, You city rich in honor, On the Neckar and the Rhine, like you there is no other). The circular design above the castle displays the colors of the State of Baden, a rampant lion, and the 4F symbol. The smaller rings are wreathed in laurel, while the entire scene is surrounded by a garland of oak. The relief pewter lid and thumblift display the 4F symbol, Turnvater Jahn, the words "Gut Heil", and the oak branches.



Up to this point the steins we have examined display either generic 4F themes, or honor an individual's participation. We turn now to steins which were produced to commemorate organized competitions, or *Turnfests*. These steins were typical souvenir fare 100 years ago. Turnfests were organized nationally, but held in a different city each time. Examination of the dates indicates that they were generally held every five years. While *Festkrüge* from the 1880's through 1923 are regularly found, the absence of earlier ones makes it appear that the events began before the event planners were prepared to produce the souvenirs! Note the sense of pride, patriotism and loyalty in the way these steins are decorated, many just chock full of symbols.

At left is a one-liter creamware souvenir stein memorializing the VII. *Deutsches Turnfest* held in Munich in 1889. Talk about full of symbols! The stein shows a shield with the Prussian Eagle, the 4F symbol on a shield displaying the blue and white colors of Bavaria, an image of Turnvater



Jahn surrounded by an oak wreath, a competitor holding two over-flowing steins at arm's length, and the *Münchner Kindl*, ubiquitous symbol of Munich, standing on the competitor's shoulders and hoisting two barbells! The pewter lid is a nice relief of the city skyline, and the thumblift is a Munich Child with outstretched arms. The one-liter saltglaze stein at right above was made in 1893 for Sendling (Munich), and it again bears a prominent image of the *Münchner Kindl*. The acorn thumblift, a new symbol, stands for good luck.

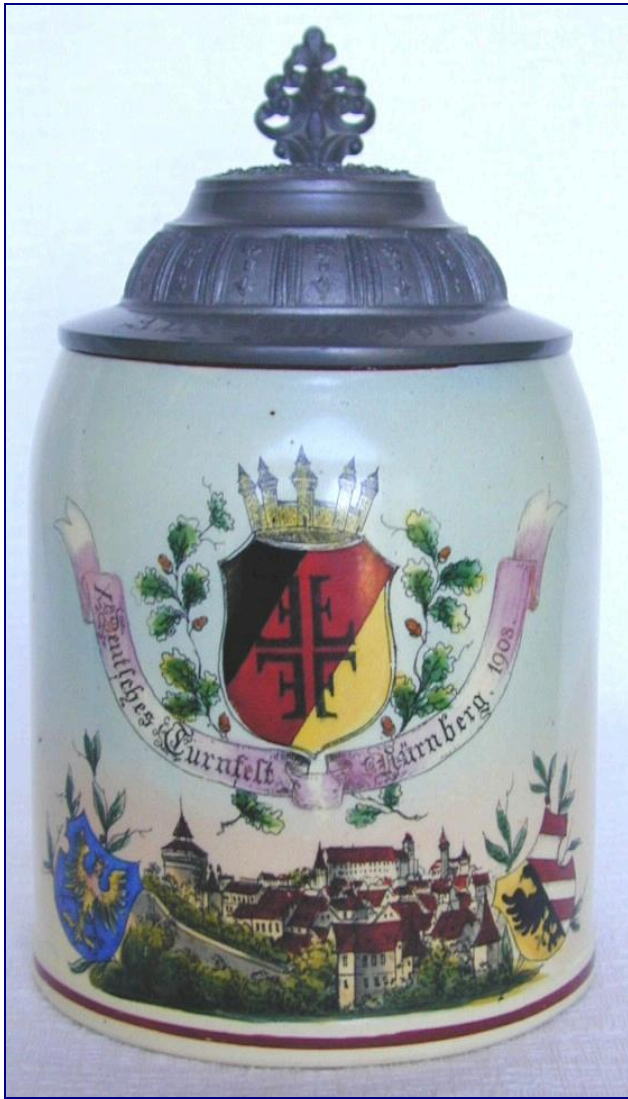


This one-liter saltglaze stein with incised cobalt decoration was made for the X. (tenth) *Deutsches Turnfest*, held in Nürnberg in 1903. It displays several now-familiar symbols (the 4F logo, the words "Gut Heil" and the oak leaf wreath), plus the winged harpy (*Frauenadler* or maiden eagle), symbol of the city of Nürnberg. The base is incised "L. Ostermayr" and "Nürnberg."

The relief pewter lid shows the skyline of Nürnberg, characterized by its numerous towers. The inside of the lid is marked "L. Ostermayr" and "Nürnberg".



Left, a half-liter creamware stein, again Nürnberg 1903, showing the same skyline as the lid above. Here again we see shields bearing city and state symbols, along with oak and laurel



embellishments.



To the right, this half-liter saltglaze stein was designed by famous artist Franz Ringer as the *Offizieller Festkrug* ("Official Fest Stein") for the XI. *Deutsches Turnfest* in Frankfurt, 1908. The magnificent spread-winged eagle on this piece virtually screams strength, determination, patriotism. Note also the oak wreath and the acorn thumblift. The relief pewter lid shows the skyline of Frankfurt. Ringer was a renowned artist in his own time, yet he designed souvenir steins!

Beer steins have provided modern collectors with evidence of two variants of the 4F movement. Weightlifters formed a specialized organization with the motto and values of Kühn, Koernig, Kraftvoll, Kunstvoll (bold, sound, powerful, skillful). Although very uncommon, these words are found on a character stein of barbells (see ECS #111). It's tempting to think that they also created a 4K symbol, but I've never seen one. In contrast to the weightlifters, a second variation of 4F is known to us primarily through its symbol. Comprised of the two F's which normally form the top half of the 4F symbol, with a T replacing the lower two F's, all overlaid with an S, this variant is known as FFST. Writing in Prosit a number of years ago, Sig Klein told us that the symbol stands for Frisch, Fromm, Stark und Treu. While the symbol has been observed on steins, I'm not aware that these four words have appeared, and we remain unaware of the nature of this separate group.

A half-liter porcelain stein showing the FFST logo (see close-up at the right). Interestingly, the participant, holding a barbell in one outstretched arm and - what else - an oak wreath in the other, is wearing a shirt with the 4F logo! Apparently, whatever group adopted this logo, they continued to identify with 4F. One other interesting aspect of this stein is the use of the phrase *Frei Heil!*



instead of the common *Gut Heil!*

When Germans emigrated to the U.S. in large numbers in the 19th century, they understandably tended to stay close to family, friends, and those who shared their language. German customs and culture were naturally maintained within these communities, and German ideas about physical education were introduced to America. In 1825 a director of physical education was appointed at the Round Hill School of Northampton, MA. Harvard began a program of gymnastics at about the same time. The first Turner Society in the U.S. was established in Cincinnati in 1848. A large number of Turnvereine were established in New England and New York, numbering over 150 by 1860. 4,000 Turners performed at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. After peaking in the early part of the 20th century, enthusiasm for gymnastics began to decline. Boredom, less demand for manual labor and physical strength, more emphasis on free play and less regimentation, and the rise of team sports all contributed to this



decline.

While technically speaking it is not a stein (no lid), Whites of Utica manufactured a mug for an American Turnfest which was held in Dolgeville, NY, in 1894. The saltglazed mug displays another version of the FFST logo, with crossing sword and torch, and the obligatory laurel wreath. The incised cobalt design indicates it was made for "25. Bezirk's Turnfest", "West New York", "Dolgeville, N.Y. 1894". Found on the base below the handle, the manufacturer's trademark - C.N.Y., Utica, NY - is that of White's Pottery.



Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this article, a 4F stein is simply one which features the 4F insignia (or one of the recognized variants) as a central part of the theme. Thus the character stein of a weight bearing the 4F insignia is a 4F stein, while the one of Turnvater Jahn is relegated to the category of "go-with". Friedrich Ludwig Jahn began the organized gymnastics movement in Germany and appealed to a sense of pride, personal well-being and patriotism. Local and national competitions were held, providing competitors, attendees and latter-day stein collectors with a variety of 4F steins. As a routine part of everyday life, German immigrants brought their interest in exercise and fitness to the U.S., and it ultimately became the stimulus for physical education in our school system.

I finish with one last example, although since it does not bear the 4F insignia, it does not meet the definition I have used for a 4F stein. Nonetheless, it is obviously pertinent to this subject.



This most interesting stein, Mettlach 979/1909, made in 1895, bears the words *Turnschule i. Ostafrika* (Turn School East Africa) and shows an exaggerated representation of black Africans practicing athletics, including the tree climb, weightlifting, high jump, and the forerunner of the shot-put, the turtle-put! I consider the person at the right of the scene to be the

century-old version of either a coach or a personal trainer, take your pick! Note the customary salute below the scene on the front - *Gut Heil!*

German colonization of Africa began in 1884 when the flag was raised at Luderitz Bay in Southwest Africa. Further protectorates were declared later that year and in 1885, but most German attempts at colonization were completed by 1890, as the efforts appeared to be a losing financial proposition.

I hope this discussion of the historical and cultural aspects of the 4F movement has given you a renewed appreciation of 4F steins, and I close with a more familiar salute than I used at the opening:

Prosit!