

Was There Really A Nudist Colony in Butler at The Turn of the Twentieth Century? Fact versus Fiction

By Tom Fox

Back in the late 1800s, West Bloomingdale (about to become the Borough of Butler) was a small community with a bustling Main Street, an assortment of well-stocked businesses carrying an array of supplies and merchandise. It was the last stop on the Susquehanna and Western Branch of the Erie Railroad with the conductor calling out “Last Stop, Butler” as the train pulled into the station. Butler, as it already was being called, was a nice place to shop and often visited by folks living in New York City. With clean clear lakes to bathe, glistening streams full of fish, and green lush mountains nearby to hike and climb, Butler became a welcoming place for those trying to get away from the summer heat and daily bustle of city life.

Louise Stroebel visited Butler to see her brother, Father Albert Stroebel, and was impressed by the beauty of the surrounding area. She decided to stay and open up a small “health home” located on 60 acres of land overlooking the Village of Butler. At the Sanitorium Bellevue, Louise carried out the business of teaching rational dieting and the Rikli Air Cure method to good health. Immediately, her business was a success, with visitors coming from all over the area to experience her invigorating treatments.

While Ms. Stroebel was building her business in Butler, Benedict Lust, a recent immigrant from Michelbach, Germany, was building his career in Naturopathy in New York City. Lust was busy promoting his alternative treatments, as well as the Kneipp Water Cure method, to treat and even heal a wide array of health symptoms and ailments.

As Lust was becoming well known as healer of many ills in the New York City area, his methods garnered fierce criticism and even legal action from prominent New York City doctors as well as the AMA Board for his disrespect for the currently accepted ways of treatment. Over the years, Benedict Lust was locked up and charged a total of 23 times for “... promoting his wacky ideas as well as for taking away patients from Real Doctors.” Sometimes the charges were dropped; other times, Lust would beat the charges with a valiant defense of his ideas and methods. There were times when, no matter what Lust had to say or who spoke in his defense, a judge, set in his ways with his mind already made up, would find Lust guilty as charged and a hefty fine was imposed. Lust was forced to pay. Ironically, at the very same time Lust was facing persecution for his ideas on health care in New York City, he was being awarded medals and accolades from abroad for his pioneering ways in health care alternatives.

Benedict Lust was a driven man committed to the practice of Naturopathy. He opened a store in New York City to promote his ideas and the Kneipp Water Treatment Program that he so much believed in. He was also the editor and writer of numerous well known Naturopathic magazines that explained and promoted his strong beliefs in alternative ways to treat and care for one's body, soul, and general health.

In his limited free time, Benedict Lust enjoyed singing with a German Singing Society that performed at various local shrines, including one located in Butler, New Jersey. Lust met his future bride during one of these visits. Lust recognized how compatible his ideas were with those of the very eligible Ms. Louise Stroebel. He began visiting more and more often. At first, he helped Louise Stroebel with her Sanitorium. When the demands of his own practice increased, he would send numerous associates under his guidance to help her continue to grow her business. He continued to visit monthly to see how things were going.

This arrangement continued for seven years with Lust asking Louise Stroebel for her hand in marriage many times. Louise finally succumbed to his persistence and charm and said yes. Benedict Lust and Louise Stroebel were wed on June 11, 1901 in a gallant ceremony held in Saint Patrick's Cathedral located in New York City, officiated by Father Joseph Dailey.

Shortly after their wedding, things began to change rapidly at the Sanitarium Bellevue. New Naturopathic classes were added to the program, buildings were built, scattered around the 60-acre grounds, and wooden fences were put up to offer privacy and safety for those visiting the ever-growing Resort. The name of the Resort was changed from the Sanitarium Bellevue to the new name, YUNGBORN, meaning “a return to a natural diet, allowing water, light and air to influence one's health.”

The wealthy and famous from all walks of life would travel from far and near to stay at the YUNGBORN Resort and experience the Naturopathic methods. Many were looking for a fountain of youth while others hoped to improve their overall health or find solutions for specific medical problems. Treatment included lots of fresh air and rigorous exercise, a diet based on fresh fruits and vegetables, frequent bathing in fresh water, and exposure to the healing rays of the sun.

It was at this time that the rumors of a nudist camp began to circulate among the inhabitants of Butler, most of whom had no knowledge of what was really going on within the boundaries of the YUNGBORN Resort. Rumor has it that numerous times, piles of abandoned bicycles could be seen along the roadside as local children, eyes pressed firmly up against a knot hole in the fence, tried to get a peek at the YUNGBORN guests. There are times that I am sure that those youngsters got an eyeful of Lust's patients as they hiked the trails around the Resort, enjoying the feel of the fresh earth on the soles of their bare feet and the warm summer sun on their naked bodies. The tales the children shared, with maybe a little bit of creative embellishment, probably made for some lively dinner conversation.

So, to answer the question, was there a Nudist Colony in Butler at the turn of the Century, that answer is a resounding “no, there was not,” but, for a time, there were certainly YUNGBORN guests trekking through the woods or splashing in the streams minus their clothing.....

There is so much more to the amazing life of Benedict Lust and the YUNGBORN and I encourage you to read the book **YUNGBORN**, written by Butler's very own Anita Lust Boyd, niece of Benedict Lust. Another excellent source is **Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America** by *James C. Whorton, Ph.D.* , in which there is a very informative chapter on Naturopathy, including a good deal of information about Benedict Lust. Both books can be

seen and read while visiting the Butler Museum, located in the old train station on Main Street, Butler, on the first and third Saturdays of each month between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.