

Lowden

A Study of Intolerance in an Iowa Community During the Era of the First World War

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LOWDEN, IOWA, experienced some of the most blatant forms of intolerance that flared up during the months of American belligerency in the World War of 1917-18. This intolerance was fanned by a deliberate policy on the part of the state government, which encouraged a fanatical vilification of German-Americans. Lowden provides a case study of the excesses experienced in a small midwestern community when intense prejudices surfaced, causing suffering and occasional violence. Constitutional rights ordinarily enjoyed by the whole community were suspended for an unfavored group that was alleged to lack sufficient patriotism. An examination of Lowden's experience during the wartime as well as the litigation that extended the local tensions into the postwar 1920s affords a close observation of the personalities who were involved in the clashes and the forces that provoked them.

The lawsuit *Mowry v. Reinking et al.*, which was tried in 1922 and 1928, provides a record of testimony documenting these difficult times in Lowden.¹ When the United States

1. *Mowry v. Reinking et al* (1922 and 1928), 5 vols., Jones County Courthouse, Anamosa, Iowa. In addition to the testimony in the lawsuit, I have relied on several newspapers for the years 1917-1921: *Lowden News*, as cited in trial evidence; *Tipton Advertiser*; *Clarence Sun*; *Franklin County Recorder*; and *Monticello Express*. I also interviewed several Cedar County residents in 1974-1975 and 1987-1989. Ages and occupations of individuals are derived from the Iowa State Census for 1915, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA 50 (Summer 1989). ©The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1989.

entered the European war against Germany, Charles Reinking, one of the defendants, was employed as cashier of the German Savings Bank in Lowden. Four years earlier, in 1913, he had resigned from a position with the Lowden Savings Bank in order to help found the rival financial institution. At that time, August Freund, owner of a general store in the town, transferred his substantial resources from the older bank to support the new German Savings Bank, as did others, including Louis Hoeltje, a grain dealer who also served as town mayor.

The number of German-Americans who had achieved positions of leadership and authority in Lowden was impressive, and reflected the strong preponderance of the German ethnic group in the town. Seventy-four percent of Lowden's population in 1915 consisted of first- or second-generation German Protestant immigrants. Outside the town, in eastern Cedar County, the rural population of German ethnic stock increased the percentage to 81 percent. Of those actually born in Germany, which was about one-third of the total German stock, most had settled in Cedar County during the nineteenth century. Some families, such as the Kemmans, who operated first a blacksmith shop and then a Chevrolet dealership, and the Strucks in the lumber business, had assimilated rapidly, relinquishing their German cultural identities.

Outside the eastern tier of townships, Cedar County had a solid majority of non-Germans; the residents of the county seat of Tipton were nearly all native born of native-born parents in 1915. This configuration, though fairly harmonious in the years before the war, created special stresses in Cedar County during the war. Since Lowden, so dominated by those of German ethnic stock, was full of confident men long used to leadership there, its high profile drew the ire of the rest of the county, especially of those in charge of county war activities in Tipton.

In 1916 the controversy arising over temperance caused a deep rift when advocates of prohibition became aware of the potential power that German-Americans could command with their votes at the ballot boxes. Election of the "wet" governor William Harding that November easily overshadowed reports of the European war in the local press. Many in the German-American community felt that the denunciation of beer con-

sumption constituted an attack on their customs, not to mention their civil rights. Assisted by the German-language newspapers in the state, anti-prohibitionists aggressively organized in eastern Iowa. They defeated a woman suffrage bill; they turned back a constitutional amendment favoring prohibition; and they succeeded in electing their favored candidate, Harding, to be state governor. In the process, they defeated a wide range of special interests—major newspapers, progressive reformers, and even the largest religious denomination in Iowa, namely, the Methodists—and the many avowed nativists.

In Cedar County, as elsewhere in Iowa, memories of the political power of the German-Americans remained vivid when during the ensuing months the United States went to war against Imperial Germany. Lowden's township had defeated prohibition overwhelmingly; West Branch, located in the western portion of Cedar County, had supported prohibition by a vote of 208 to 45. German-Americans were engaging in tough, American-style politics. The issue at stake was not merely the consumption of alcoholic beverages; they were defending their right to drink beer because they regarded beer as an integral part of their cultural identity. When America entered the European war against Germany, the military conflict afforded the prohibitionists special weapons of retaliation against those who had so recently defeated them at the polls. Perhaps because they had supported Governor Harding in his election campaign, the German-Americans of Lowden may have expected to receive protection from the state government. But, as events showed, such hopes were in vain.

HENRY "HANK" MOWRY was probably pleased to learn in April 1917 that the United States was at war with Germany. A newcomer to Lowden, he and his brothers had migrated years earlier from Rhode Island, farming in Cedar and Clinton counties before settling in Tipton. Hank, his wife, Emma, and their six children were of Welsh descent. At age 50 Hank Mowry decided to retire. Then in 1917 he moved to Lowden, where he operated a produce stand while pursuing a lifelong interest in arguing politics. Newspapers referred to Mowry as "an intense partisan" of the British and French. His daughter Bessie remembers him as "very energetic and active." She

described him as "raw-boned," fair complexioned with blue eyes, an avid reader, well informed, always eager to engage in political disputation.

Louis Hoeltje, as mayor of Lowden, displayed a very different personal style. He believed the decision to intervene in the European war called for calm and restraint. On April 20 the *Lowden News* published advice from the mayor under the headline, "Do Not Talk War." "In order to avoid trouble, I would advise our American people not to say or do anything to irritate and provoke our German-Americans, and I would advise our German-Americans not to do anything against our Government. To all, I would say, talk war as little as possible. Louis Hoeltje, Mayor." The editor of the *Tipton Advertiser* countered, "Hoeltje should wake up. This country is at war; there are no longer two sides."

The war stimulated popular emotions, and people could not be restrained from expressing their views about the war. In June, when Lowden engaged in the first Liberty Loan bond drive, inflammatory rhetoric was deemed to be a necessary motivator for arousing Americans to buy the bonds. Germans were depicted as brutish and inhuman. In July registration for the military draft of manpower began in the United States. This was a particularly difficult time for Lowden. Many social relationships quickly fell apart.

At the end of July, two dramatic arrests brought national attention to Lowden. Trouble began with the traditional Fourth of July oratory. Attorney Elmer Johnson of Lisbon delivered an address in which he introduced lurid atrocity tales of Germans taking delight in torturing and maiming their victims. Then, to underscore their new latitude, those local citizens who had selected Johnson as their spokesman grabbed two German flags. They tied one to a goat and ran it through Main Street while the second flag was pulled through the dust of the streets behind a Ford car.

Reverend John Reichardt raised vehement objections. He was pastor of the Zion Evangelical German Reformed Church in Lowden. Like the smaller Lutheran church headed by Reverend Brammer, his German-language congregation sponsored a parochial day school as a means of maintaining an enclave of German cultural consciousness. Respect for German cultural

traditions seemed even more vital during a war being fought by the adopted country against the fatherland. The Kaiser could be accepted as wrong-headed and mistaken, but the quality of being German must not be in question. During Reichardt's sermon the next Sunday, he reassured his congregation that there were two sides to the story. He cautioned his parishioners against believing everything they read in newspapers, and he denounced the brand of patriotism conveyed through the Fourth of July address.

The minister's ringing words were soon known throughout the town. Lowden's only lawyer, Daniel McGillivary, notified the United States marshal in Cedar Rapids, Mike Healy, who arrived in Lowden in early August. He brought Reichardt and a parishioner, John Frubois, into McGillivary's office for some plain talk. Frubois thereupon signed a pledge to "quit talking in favor of Germany," and he was no longer detained. Reichardt proved to be defiant, so Healy arrested him and placed him on the train headed for Cedar Rapids. On arrival there, the magistrate took a conciliatory approach with the minister, urging him "to put his unquestionable ability into good . . . channels." To this Reichardt agreed; he put up a five-thousand-dollar bond against his appearance on sedition charges and then boarded the night train back to Lowden. The new sedition law, passed by the United States Congress on June 15, 1917, had hardly been tested in practice; what remarks might constitute violation were still unknown.

When Reichardt stepped off the train in Lowden, a crowd consisting of both sympathetic and hostile residents was waiting at the depot. Someone soon made insulting remarks about McGillivary's son, Max. Immediately, Henry Mowry rushed to Max's defense, and so did the "hot-headed" Francis Clemmons, owner of Lowden's sole hostelry and friend of Mowry. A genuine melee ensued, and threats to lynch the lawyer for causing the minister's arrest could be heard.

In a few days Mike Healy returned to Lowden to arrest five more men, all in their fifties and sixties, and all naturalized citizens with the exception of Carl Gehrls. According to the *Clarence Sun*, the arrested men "broke down and wept" during the forty miles enroute to Cedar Rapids where they were to be indicted. They insisted that they had been "misled by the minis-

ter." The United States Marshal extracted pledges from the group that they would never again speak a word of German. In return, charges of "treasonable utterances" were dropped.

There was a lone exception among these men. Ernest Meier, a fifty-seven-year-old retired farmer, failed to be sufficiently contrite. A lifelong bachelor, Meier had lived in and about Lowden since 1885. To the charge of some townspeople that he was opposed to the military draft, he offered no defense, adding that if he had had a son of draft age, he would rather kill him than watch him become a soldier. When Meier was eventually brought to trial, his attorney, John Redmond of Cedar Rapids, claimed that remarks about a hypothetical son could not be construed to constitute interference with the country's military preparedness. Judge Henry Reed disagreed, sentencing Meier to eighteen months at Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary. Later, the Court of Appeals in St. Louis upheld this conviction and sentence. Even so, Meier filed for a further appeal that allowed him to remain free on bond for the remainder of the war.

The conviction of Ernest Meier was one of the earliest in the United States under the sedition act based on charges of opposing the draft. Lowden was rapidly becoming notorious. Mike Healy was already calling the town "a hotbed of pro-Germanism," a phrase that both embarrassed and enraged many persons residing in other portions of Cedar County.

In August 1917 a grand ball was advertised for Lowden's Germania Hall. Strangers were instructed to bring their draft registration papers should there be a "slacker raid." By 1918 the dance hall's name would be changed to "Liberty Hall," and by then any reference to an "unwelcome war" would constitute sufficient grounds for arrest. All this did not augur well for Lowden.

AT THE OUTSET OF 1918 Iowa was ranked last among all states in reaching its quota in sales during Liberty Loan bond drives, a status that reflected both Iowa's rural and isolated population as well as its many areas of indifference or hostility to the war. A feeling of humiliation provoked Charles McNider of Mason City, a member of the state's war council, to take the initiative in trying to correct the state's image. He reorganized

the statewide collections all the way to neighborhoods and in the process achieved incredible success. Through the remaining drives in 1918, Iowa would rank first in the nation; in the October drive, the entire quota was realized within hours following the opening gun.

The secret of McNider's success was his tight organization coupled with what can be called calculated intimidation. There was no place to hide and no recourse for persons who suffered abuse from this system. Bank records were thrown open to public scrutiny. Local vigilante committees charged adults a percentage of their gross worth, with loans available at 5 percent interest. Assessments ran high, so that a person with any standing financially could easily be assessed \$1,500 at each call, and individual quotas were made public or could easily become public. Enforcement was implemented through kangaroo courts or homefront war activities committees located in every county seat. These extralegal groups had no meaningful functions other than publicly shaming persons into subscribing to this mode of patriotism. Such public displays were clearly designed to disgrace shirkers in front of their neighbors and to force them to conform. Before huge crowds, shirkers were shamed into buying bonds; they were often compelled to kiss the Stars and Stripes, and kneel and apologize for their waywardness; then they could be assessed heavy fines payable to the American Red Cross. Such ceremonies were fully reported in the local press. Lowden did not escape the wrath of the local war zealots.

Attorney Elmer Johnson later claimed that banker Charles Reinking had been called before the local committee. Johnson also declared that Reinking's bank was the place where German residents "received a copy of German newspapers to be read by the people who assembled . . . there to hold their jubilees over the successes of the Germans during the war." In fact, German newspapers were very unlikely to find their way to Lowden. Yet this threat of sedition, the real undermining of the American war effort, stemming from a rural Iowa town, seemed plausible enough at the time to many people. They could not appreciate how much of their passion emanated from long-standing resentment toward a different ethnic group, from per-

sonal grudges, and from the effects of a propaganda campaign designed to promote hatred toward the Germans.

By 1918 the military draft was causing intense anxieties as it reached into households everywhere. In April three more Lowden-area boys, out of the total of fifty-five, were drafted into the army. Mayor Louis Hoeltje, asked to preside over a resounding send-off for these men, sent word at the last minute that he had "other pressing business." This response did not sit well with some, and Hoeltje's office was painted yellow, the color of the slacker, the pro-German. Newspapers predicted another burst of violence in Lowden as pent-up bitter feelings were near the breaking point against both Hoeltje and the Reverend John Reichardt, whose trial for sedition had been twice postponed.

In May 1918 Governor Harding issued his infamous "Babel proclamation," by which Iowa became the one state to forbid conversations in foreign languages. No newspaper, school book, church service, or prayer, no telephone conversation or even friendly prattle over a fence was legal if it was not in the English language. The proclamation created special problems for ethnic congregations. Since their goal was to prevent assimilation rather than to hasten it, ethnic congregations commonly sought out pastors from the fatherland. Pastor Brammer of Lowden's Trinity Lutheran Church, for example, announced that he would be simply unable to continue his duties as minister if barred from speaking German. Unable to speak English, Brammer would not be able to preach or to comfort the sick.

In Lowden, moreover, with its large population of German speakers, the proclamation provided the spark that ignited nearly daily disputes and violence. Henry Mowry remembered stopping at August Freund's store in late summer and warning him and his customers that they were courting arrest. He reported that Freund replied, "We talk German here, and I would like to see you stop that." Freund testified that Mowry had been drunk on that occasion. He recalled the particular day because that was the very afternoon a Mr. Bentine was beaten up on the street.

ON THE DAY THE WAR ENDED, conditions in Lowden reached a climax. Armistice Day in Cedar County was a time

when aggression against the designated scapegoat community was sanctioned. A caravan of sixty-five cars proceeded from Tipton to Lowden for the avowed purpose of evening scores against those Germans close at hand. Dozens more joined the caravan at Clarence. A crowd of men from Cedar and Linn counties stopped at Bennett, pulling one Henry Heinemann from his house "in a rough and angry manner. . . . they knocked him down, beat him, kicked him, cursed him, and . . . abused him . . . by force and violence. [They] dragged him to Tipton . . . and dragged and kicked him up the court house steps and threw him violently into the Cedar County jail . . . without any warrant . . . medical treatment . . . food or drink."

As a consequence of this incident, Heinemann, who was sixty-two years of age, lost his hearing in one ear, and his back and one leg were permanently impaired: so stated the lawsuit that Heinemann brought against twenty-five men for false imprisonment and violent handling. Eventually, a judge reduced the list of defendants to three: Edward Kruse, Jim Trotter, and Valley Willey. They were tried in Tipton late in 1920, amidst parades and demonstrations by supporters. In their defense, counsel offered only the argument that Heinemann was pro-German and hence disloyal. A Tipton jury found the three men not guilty, despite their admission that the charges against them were accurate.

Vigilante action was countenanced in Cedar County. Many residents did not understand the principle that disloyalty and treason are defined through behavior, not through thoughts. Even if Heinemann did support Germany in his mind, or even if he failed to buy bonds, he had committed no crime.

Lydia Strackbein, whose husband, Franz, was serving in the army, wrote to her sister, describing Armistice Day 1918 in Lowden:

Monday we had an awful time. People acted like savages. They came in mobs from towns all around. . . . one mob got the minister and made him march through town carrying a flag. Then, they made him stand on a coffin which was a rough box and kiss the flag. . . . On the coffin was written, 'Kaiser now ruler of Hell.' Some men from Clarence carried this box. Then, he was ordered out of town. I think some of our town people got them up to

it. . . . Some 'know-nothings' stuffed two men . . . one was Rev. Reichardt. They hung him on the flagpole by our church. . . . The sheriff got Rev. Reichardt to Tipton for protection as the mob could come any time and [might] even kill him. . . . Papa and the boys made boxes for [Preacher Reichardt] all day yesterday. . . . Rev. and Mrs. Reichardt look bad as they are not safe at all. We will not have any church for a long time now.²

In Tipton, Reichardt asked for protection from the county's war activities committee but without success. They told him to flee the state for his life, though they permitted him to spend the night in a locked cell at the jail. Newspapers in communities away from Lowden were not at all sympathetic to the plight of German-Americans. The *Franklin County Recorder* asked, how did "the kaiser lover . . . feel about the kaiser when he ran away from his own wife, leaving her to the mercies of the mobs . . . ?"

Some of Reichardt's feelings, not about the kaiser but about the Lowden instigator Henry Mowry, were revealed in a letter he wrote to the William Niermeier family at noon on November 20. His wife was with him. "We greet you dear friends from a distance," he wrote. After reassuring them, he concluded, "I believe God is still with you in Lowden. May God let you see the truth and give you the strength to carry on the fight and let justice prevail. Stop the bad guy. May God be with you."³

The mob scene on Armistice Day had difficulty finding a suitable climax. Lydia Strackbein's letter continued,

When [the mob was] through with the minister, they got a hold of Fritag, kicked him and pushed him into the crowd carrying a flag. The men that made him do this was Francis Clemmons, John Lafferty and one other. I was standing right next to Fritag when they got him. Nearly scared him stiff. Charles, Mamma and I beat it for home. Then they got Lou Heuser, after Heuser they got John Frubois; after Frubois they went after Lou Rixe. He was just in the corn field when the mob came down there. They

2. This letter is in Manuscript Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

3. This letter is the property of Erwin Niermeyer of Clarence (my translation).

scared the children and Lena something awful. Lena came over here and cried with all her children. Louie had to march in Main Street and carry the flag. While all these men were marching they would ring the fire bell something awful.

Those overheated days in early November 1918 coincided with the political elections. Very few persons in the eastern tier of townships in Cedar County voted; they were too demoralized. Those German-Americans who did exercise the franchise tried unsuccessfully to defeat Governor Harding as a response to his "Babel" proclamation.

THE NEW YEAR, 1919, began with several Lowden residents seething with deep resentment at being subjected to public humiliation. Many more persons were upset at the loss of both of their ministers. Yet the non-Germans in town anxiously wanted to retain the power they had come to exercise during the months of American belligerency. This group was outraged in March 1919 by the news that President Wilson had commuted fifty-three wartime sentences, including that of Ernest Meier of Lowden. A complaint featured in the Tipton newspaper noted that since the "inexcusable" pardon of Meier, "pro-Germans" in Lowden "do whatever they want."

Contributing to the incendiary conditions in Cedar County was the gradual return of the servicemen, no longer green draftees, but now respected veterans and heroes. Some Lowden residents, led by the combative Otto Struck, tried to continue their wartime passions. Struck disliked the mayor, Fred Hartwig, who had succeeded Louis Hoeltje. Nervous about threats, Hartwig swore in several men as "town officials," and armed them to serve as his personal bodyguard. Despite such precautions, Struck succeeded in beating up Hartwig, and he got the sheriff to arrest a bodyguard, Henry Albert, for carrying a concealed weapon. August Freund, the general store owner, was arrested for selling guns to the men. Then Struck was able to force the resignation of Mayor Hartwig, the town marshal, and two members of the town council.

The new mayor, Hugo Pancratz, a schoolmate of Struck's and fellow lumber dealer, served for only a brief time. As its first act, the new town council required that every business post

a sign indicating "We are 100% American. If You Aren't, Don't Come In!" Struck and some others in town had taken comfort in the wartime atmosphere in which earlier ambiguities evaporated. Everything was cast in simple terms—black and white, heroes and traitors. In this way, the abstraction of the villainous Hun could be imposed on familiar relationships.

In late June 1919 two farmers reported to Struck that Dick Schluter had once said, "All soldiers who enlisted should have been sunk on the way to France." Struck thereupon took a few veterans out to Schluter's farm. When the vigilantes arrived, Schluter resorted to a hatchet, but he was overpowered. The two farmers who had reported on Schluter, William von Roden and E. J. Behrens, were expelled from membership in the threshing ring. This led the *Clarence Sun's* editor to declare that Von Roden was "put out . . . because he ain't pro-[German]." To be ostracized from a threshing ring was no minor matter, for it was clearly impossible to join a threshing ring far from one's own farm, and investing in a thresher was usually too costly for an individual farmer. The outcome of this confrontation was that both Von Roden and Schluter sold their lifelong farms and moved away. E. J. Behrens bought his own threshing outfit from a fellow loyalist in town, R. D. Kemman. In the words of the *Clarence Sun*, "If some of the personalities and local fights could be eliminated, the town would be rid of its undesirable reputation."

Later in the year, two Lowden-area veterans—Hugh Kemman, a younger son among ten children in the blacksmith's family, who would later leave Lowden permanently, and Dr. A. J. Charlton, a fifty-year-old physician and a newcomer to Lowden, who would practice there for the duration of his life—put their energies into organizing an American Legion Post. The first meeting of the Lowden Legion Post, in January 1920, honored one of the area's war heroes, Otto Bunge, a farmer who had captured thirty-two German prisoners. Al Mensing was elected post commander; he had enlisted in the Naval Aviation Corps. Another flyer who had seen action in the air over France was Jesse Buttleman. The earliest enlistee was the feisty and quick-witted Lambert Meier, who had been accepted in the first call and had arrived in France as a sergeant in the spring of 1918. All of the surviving local veterans—forty-nine of the

fifty-five who participated in the country's military service—joined the post. As its first order of business, the veterans named their post the Lillis-Deerberg Post, honoring the first two of the six men from the town killed in the war, namely, Frank Lillis, a volunteer who was blown to pieces at Chateau-Thierry, and Christ Deerberg. Christ and his brother, Henry, both farmers, had been drafted in July 1918. Charles Strackbein was selected to be post commander in 1921.

BY 1921 changes had occurred in Lowden. Both German congregations had new ministers. The Lutherans welcomed C. J. Pritz; the replacement for the Reverend Reichardt was Paul Van Dyck, a German-born Texan who had spent many years among German-Americans in the Lone Star State. He had the temperament to step into the leadership role vacated by Reichardt, and he possessed many of the same interests. The *Lowden News*, too, had a new editor, Hubert Hoeltje, the son of the former mayor, who also taught English and geography at the high school. That year, Henry Mowry served as town mayor.

As one looks back, the crisis of 1921 began with little fanfare. Three officers of the Legion post—Dr. Charlton, Charles Strackbein, and Lambert Meier—met with Mayor Mowry and the town council in April to ask permission to hold a Legion Day replete with parade, a ballgame, and foot races in order to raise money. The date they proposed was June 11. Mowry refused. He explained that he was trying to avoid any festivity on that particular date, fearing some disguised attempt to revive the old *Kriegerfest* celebrations. These celebrations, sponsored by the Lowden *Deutscher Kriegerverein*, war veterans of the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, had been held in Lowden every June until 1910. Then, the festivals had been moved to nearby Wheatland in Clinton County because local option had stopped the flow of beer in Lowden. Eventually, the war stopped the celebrations completely.

Mowry also reminded the group of the belief, widespread in 1921, that the recent European war had been caused by German militarism, exactly what he believed the *Kriegerfest* had stimulated, with German flags streaming above old soldiers and German martial music filling the air. Elderly Mr. Peterson spoke up to say that he had always enjoyed the *Kriegerfests*.

Albert Licht, owner of the other general store, replied, noting that even so, it was out of place for Mowry to suggest that the patriotic veterans were seeking to revive the *Kriegerfest*.

Mowry lost his temper after his views received so little support. He indicated that he would ask the governor to call out the state militia if that proved necessary to stop the festival. If townspeople insisted on having their celebration on June 11, bloody murder would result. These rhetorical exchanges would be remembered later by persons then present. Lambert Meier noted, "The eleventh of June has no more significance for me than the day I volunteered for military service and went across." "Oh," Mowry responded, "I suppose the Fourth of July doesn't have any significance either then."

Gradually isolated by the town council, Mowry had little choice but to resign. In his place, Al Mensing succeeded. But Mowry was stubborn in his insistence that there was a real threat. On May 3, he traveled to neighboring communities where he sought the assistance of Legion post commanders and newspaper editors. The *Olin Recorder* subsequently commented, "That disloyal bunch at Lowden should have been put out of existence or deported. . . . it seems they want to hold a celebration on June 11 of the big German holiday in memory of winning the war against France. . . . Mayor Mowry was in town yesterday to get the assistance of the Legion post here to help in preventing that event." Soon after post officers in Lowden read that, they drove off to Olin in order to find out from Olin's post commander, Cub Wolfe, just what Mowry had said. Wolfe told them that Mowry was anxious to "bring a bunch back to Lowden and . . . beat up the legion and get the charter away from them."

By early June articles printed in the Cedar Rapids newspapers reported Mowry's visits there too. A number of Lowden's German-American leaders, along with the two new ministers and newspaper editor Hoeltje, decided to hold a mass meeting in Lowden to which Mowry would also be invited and given a chance to explain himself, and to clear his name of denigrating the patriotism of the Lowden Legion Post. If he failed to make a suitable case or retract his earlier statements, the community would hold him in disrespect. This resolution, written by Hoeltje and Van Dyck, was eventually endorsed by more than

five hundred persons. It declared that the meeting would deal with "the trouble mongers who during the time of the war disseminated . . . deliberate calumnies against law-abiding and loyal citizens of this section and have instigated against them a series of shameful and atrocious molestations and extortions and who are still at work." Mowry was warned to retract his slanders "or be reported to the Federal authorities."

According to newspaper reports, some fifteen hundred persons came to the meeting, of whom perhaps half were hostile. Both ministers sought to calm the waters, and the anticipated violence failed to materialize. The *Clarence Sun*, meanwhile, assured Mowry that the fighting forces of a half-dozen Legion posts would keep him from being incarcerated at Fort Leavenworth.

Henry Mowry acted to bring suit, charging the fifteen organizers of the mass meeting with conspiracy, aiming to destroy his reputation in the community. He retained Charles Lynch of Mechanicsville, Jim France of Tipton, and Elmer Johnson of Lisbon to represent him. All of the defendants were older men. Their counsel consisted of Charles Dutcher and Don Barnes, both of Cedar Rapids, assisted by young Otto Schluter, recently of Lowden. Judge Atherton B. Clark granted their motion for a change of venue only as far away as contiguous Jones County. During the course of the three months of courtroom testimony in 1922, hundreds of persons arrived in Anamosa to observe the spectacle.

At the outset, Judge Clark ruled that the defense could not attempt to demonstrate that Mowry's actions warranted ostracism and withdrawal of respect. Limited by the judge's ruling, the defense concentrated on two matters. First was the evidence of unshakable patriotism among Lowden's veterans. One witness after another gave firsthand accounts of battlefield experiences to demonstrate how unlikely it was that they could be influenced to hold a German celebration. The message seemed clear: Mowry, if sincere in his fears of a resurgent *Kriegerfest*, was carried away; he was an alarmist, an extremist.

Second, the defense directed attention to Mowry's character, on aspects unrelated to the war. The suit had introduced a secondary libel charge against Hubert Hoeltje and the *Lowden News* for articles impugning Mowry. The defense's only argu-

ment was its claim that the statements were true. "Mr. Henry W. Mowry's patriotism has been mixed with a strong percentage of whiskey. . . . if the public . . . could have seen that gentleman sprawled dead drunk upon a sand pile in a local lumber yard, the sport of small boys . . . their admiration would be as lukewarm as . . . here at home." Unfriendly witnesses were called forward to recount in vivid detail their memories of Mowry's inebriations.

The plaintiff tried to establish that the defendants had planned—conspired—to withdraw their respect if, in attorney Johnson's words, Mowry "didn't go down on his knees to you fellows." As the motivating force behind the alleged conspiracy, Johnson suggested reasons for the defendants to resent Mowry, thus inserting much material on the hard feelings existing during wartime. To Lou Rixe he pointed out that it was Mowry who was "responsible for someone going out and getting you and bringing you to town on Armistice Day." In reply, Rixe consistently indicated that he had lost no respect for Mowry: "I have not paid any attention to him before or since." Why had Rixe signed the resolutions? "Well, I saw that it was a step towards peace, that there would be no more mobbing going on in town."

The plaintiff asked for fifty thousand dollars in damages because of the self-evident damage of five hundred signers of the petition whose respect had been shaken. Also, the *Lowden News* articles were libelous on their face. Then, Elmer Johnson delivered an extended closing statement, which the defense lawyers were instructed not to interrupt. In a rambling, folksy manner, Johnson went overboard. He stressed the Germanness of Lowden by reiterating the traditional meaning of the *Kriegerfest*, its uniforms and martial character, thus introducing into the case the attitudes of people who were not defendants, even persons who lived and died in Lowden years before the onset of the European war. He brought up Reverend Reichardt without trying to connect him directly to the case at hand, saying, "What Churches were there that anybody ever heard of . . . raising up over the Government and disputing its right? Did the Catholics or the Methodists or any other decent Church?" As for Mowry's bouts with drink, "they should have had more of that kind of whiskey in Lowden during the war. . . . Oh, yea, Men and Women of America, don't forget Henry Mowry. He

may have had his shortcomings, and he may have got drunk, but he got over it, and he was an American even when he was drunk." Johnson dealt with the Legion post's patriotism in two ways. He claimed the defendants "are hiding behind this Post as a shelter and defense in a time of storm." As to who was really patriotic, "They have spoken to you of Christ Deerberg and Frank Lillis. . . . Henry Mowry was the best friend those fellows had in Lowden. While Christ Deerberg was in the shell hole over in France it was Henry Mowry who was carrying the flag forward . . . and now they cry 'crucify him!'"

Throughout his summation, Johnson alluded to the arrogance of the defendants, appealing in bald, nativist fashion. "We hold out our arms to these men who come across here, but when they come over here we don't want them to . . . put their Prussian laws on American necks—that will never do." About Albert Licht, who had been born in Springfield Township, Johnson noted, "if you come up to him and say '*Deutschland Uber Alles*,' you're all right." Johnson's concluding statement, referred to Rev. Van Dyck, saying, "Give Henry Mowry such a verdict as will show this learned Dutchman from Prussia that he can't come in here and destroy an American, who fought a war, such as Henry Mowry fought for ours."

The jury deliberated for three hours. Mrs. Alma Erb announced its judgment: guilty. The defendants were assessed forty thousand dollars, an enormous sum in 1922. Judge Atherton Clark was not prepared to redress the wartime absence of due process; his role in the case allowed the plaintiff considerable latitude. Thus, the intemperate atmosphere of wartime was allowed to continue. Court records over the next decade reveal that Judge Clark denied motions for a new trial on three occasions. In 1927 the case was reviewed by the Iowa Supreme Court. In 1928 a judge who replaced Clark presided over a new trial. Don Barnes, for the defense, sought another change of venue away from Jones County, due to the longtime residence of Henry Mowry there after he had resigned as mayor of Lowden. Though Barnes claimed that he had found "active prejudice and hate toward these defendants . . . caused by the activities of the plaintiff," this trial also took place in Anamosa. The new judge may have seen merit in the defense's brief that since the evidence for actual damage to Mowry was

minimal, the balance of the money for punitive damages was excessive, or else he may have agreed with its other claim, that the 1922 verdict resulted from a prejudiced jury. In any case, in 1928, following a short trial, a judgment of three thousand dollars, all actual damages, was returned against the defendants. Albert Licht and August Freund, fellow store owners, paid the judgment to Mowry on June 9 of that year.

Many years later, Henry Mowry's daughter, Bessie, told me that her father regretted the suit; that the expense of it cost him all three farms that he once owned. One man prominent in the case, the Lowden postmaster and the first man to enlist, Lambert Meier, committed suicide in the year of the final verdict. The editor, Hubert Hoeltje, had a career as an English professor at the University of Iowa. Al Mensing worked as an auto mechanic and became a state legislator. Of the two storeowners, Albert Licht died at fifty-four in 1931, while August Freund lived to be eighty-nine. Until the late 1970s their storefronts bore their insignia, but now those signs are gone, and the Lillis-Deerberg sign has been removed from in front of the American Legion post. Remaining memories of the notorious trial are second-hand ones. Although German cultural influences are still evident in Lowden, the changes brought by the twentieth century have undermined Lowden's self-sufficiency, and the fierce contest over power that raged during the war and postwar years has disappeared.

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