

## *Curator's Corner . . .*

By CLAUDE R. COOK

An Iowa episode of World War I, which has never been published or recorded, occurred in Audubon county, near the town of Gray, during the winter of 1917, just a few nights before Christmas.

A minister of the German Lutheran church southwest of the town had been accused of being pro-German. Rumor had it that German Red Cross stamps were found in his home by state agents. This and other inflammatory accusations led to the minister being called before the Council for Defense, an organization created during World War I. It was sort of a Mother Hubbard affair, in that it covered about everything from applying pressure to buy bonds to investigation of alleged treason.

On the day the minister appeared before the council in Audubon another case, also notorious and which wound up in Federal court, was heard, but since that did not contribute to any appearance or act of mine, I leave that for other recorders, at least for now.

I was the minister of the Methodist church in Gray and my wife and son, not yet two, were living in an upstairs apartment down town, while a parsonage, which was started after our arrival, was being built on the church ground.

On the evening of the day during which the German Lutheran minister had been before the Council For Defense, in Audubon, one of the younger merchants rushed down to our residence and told my wife "They have gone out to hang the German preacher." I was on my way back from the post office, which was in a general store and open evenings. I met the young merchant, a partner in one of the two hardware stores, who told me what he had related to my wife. To say he was excited is an understatement. He wanted to know if I would go along to help stop the hanging. I most certainly would.

We sought others, but not many, for time was short as the crowd had already gone. One of the two general merchants went along. The other general merchant was confined to his bed with the flu, which was bad that winter and in itself constitutes a story. So the three of us left for the Lutheran minister's home about four miles southwest of town. En route we were stopped by a sentry inquiring if we were the doctor from Manning. Doctors, we learned were summoned from Audubon and Manning. Thus we decided we were too late, but went on.

Arriving we drove into the back yard to find a milling throng of over 800 men, mostly young, but not all by any means. Automatic guns, and rifles were stacked against a fence post. Our first act was to place those in our car in the back seat, which they filled.

I should say here, parenthetically, that if I ever operated under control (or lack) of mingled emotions it was then. In the first place it was tragically true no one really cared if the hanging took place. Such was the general community mind. And any argument to the contrary would have been useless to that assembly. Then I was for taking the load of guns to town and let the owners get them there. But the wise counsel of my two companions convinced me that would be taking the law into "our" hands, which we were there to prevent others from doing. O shades of "mote" and "beam!" What inconsistencies thou dost lead to! As I write this, it comes to me with humorous force, that there was very little danger of my committing the crime of larceny, since there was precious little three men could do with a crowd of almost a thousand—except talk—and that we did. I have weighed words many times, including the writing of this, but never more carefully than on that cold December night under a bright moon and a star-studded sky. One never knew when those men might decide on other necks for their rope.

But we soon learned what had happened. The crowd could see the minister through the windows. He wore the customary stiff-bosomed white shirt from which collar and cuffs were detached. They sent a committee to the door and inquired for the Reverend. They were told he was not at home. During this time the object of their call, escaped from a basement window, hatless and coatless, and started down the road south, his white shirt gleaming in the moonlight. Shots were fired over his head and he halted. Leaders placed a rope around his neck and led him back to a tree right near the corner of the house. I was told he said: "You are doing your patriotic duty, boys!" Duty or not they were proceeding when his wife ran from the front door, hair streaming, and screaming she threw her arms around his knees and fainted.

That did it. Every man, young and old, and not a criminal, nor a criminally-inclined one, in the crowd, thought of his own mother. They forgot the minister, picked his wife up, carried her into the house and phoned for the doctors I told you about earlier in this story.

I said above she fainted. That was what they thought and they were allowed to keep on thinking it. But I saw one of the doctors the next night, and he said her pulse was just as normal as his all the time.

Well, I talked to the men in the yard for quite a long time, weighing, as I have said, every word. I used the Benjamin Franklin method which was, "I agree with you, but—" I had known earlier in my life some men who had participated in a hanging, so I undertook to show them that while in their own minds they might be justified, that the time would come when they would be ashamed and they would establish a permanent stigma on their names.

How successful I was or might have been, I probably will never know, for about this time the announcement was made that the sheriff had arrived from Audubon

and was in the house. I asked them to call him and he came out. I said to him, "Sheriff Wilson"—it was Frank Wilson, later state agent—"I have been holding this crowd for over an hour. Now you are here. I am going home." He thanked me and we left.

When we got back to the hardware store of one of my companions, we got a beautiful going over, for some of the crowd had preceded us. It looked for awhile we were in for more trouble than we had just come from. We were bitterly criticized for interfering, being told we should have let the hanging proceed as "he had it coming." But among some of those men in that hardware store that night I count today some of my best friends, as subsequent events demonstrated. But it was quite a long time before I ever knew whether my action was popular. In fact I was pretty certain it never was with some.

In World War II whenever I saw a "second front" developing in a community I did my best to prevent it, for the fires of patriotism burn hotly and fiercely, and reason is completely submerged. I agree with Decatur "My country, right or wrong," but I hope she may always be right.

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### SIGNIFICANT IOWA HISTORICAL FACTS

Every foot of land comprising the Iowa area was purchased from the Indians by the United States government upon terms of a valid treaty.

Iowa was admitted to the Union as the first free state carved out of the Louisiana Purchase.

Early in its development there was established in Iowa, a predominantly agricultural state, the Iowa State College of Agriculture, which grew to be the greatest institution of its class in the world.

Fifteen years after its admission as a state, Iowa enlisted and equipped forty-eight regiments of Federal troops for service in the Civil war.

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