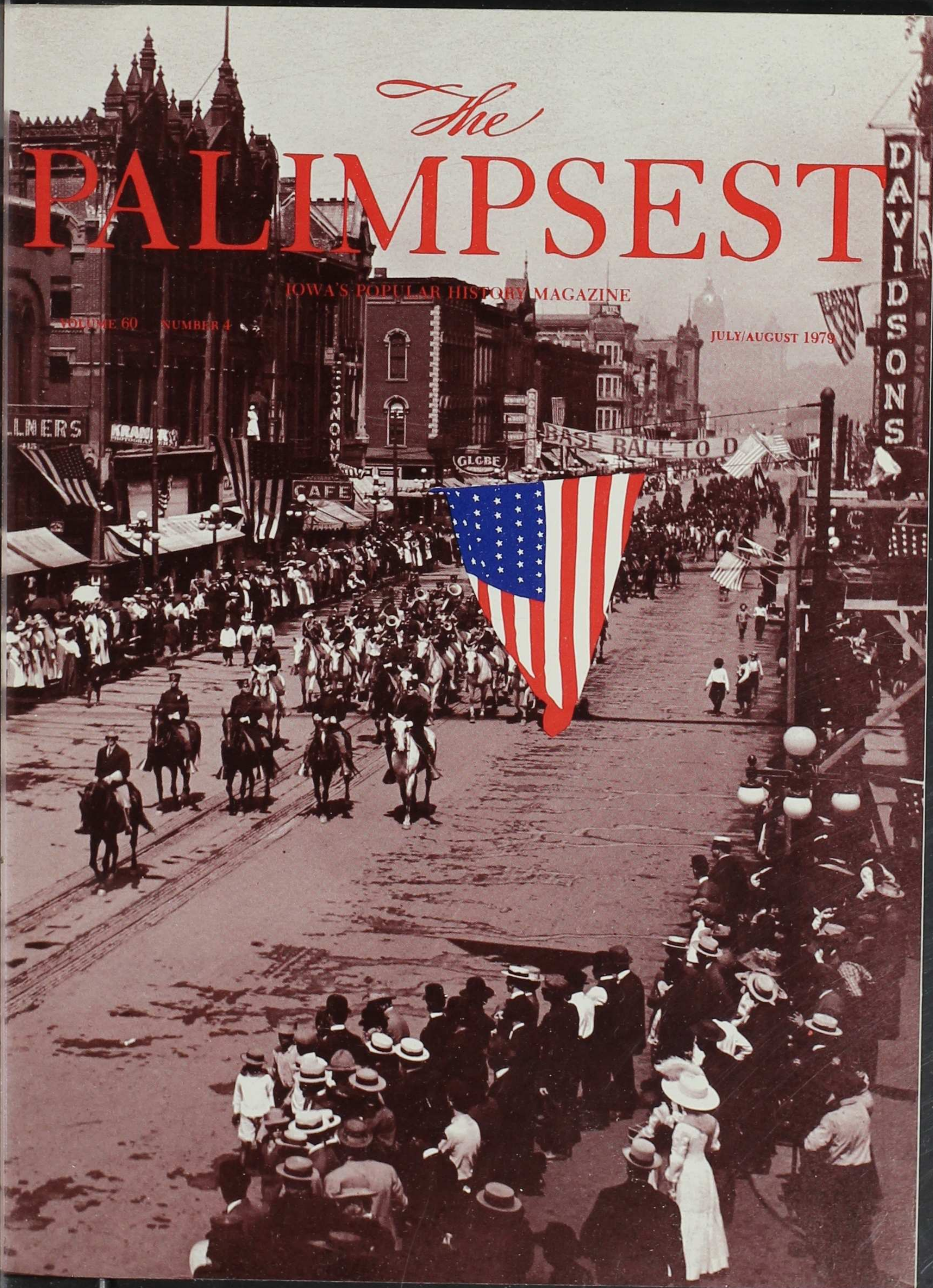


The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 60 NUMBER 4

JULY/AUGUST 1979



**The Division of the State Historical Society and
the editor are not responsible for statements of
fact or opinion made by contributors.**

**PRICE—Free to members. Single Issue \$1.00
MEMBERSHIP—By application. Annual dues—\$5.00
LIFE MEMBERSHIP—\$150
HUSBAND AND WIFE JOINT LIFE MEMBERSHIP—\$200
ADDRESS INQUIRIES TO: State Historical Society,
402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240**

The code at bottom of the first column of each article in this magazine indicates the copyright owner's consent to reproduction of the article for personal or internal use. The consent is granted, however, on the condition that the copier pay the stated per-copy fee of \$1.00 through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc. for copying beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law. The consent does not extend to other kinds of copying, such as copying for general distribution, for advertising or promotional purposes, for creating new collective works, or for resale.

THE PALIMPSEST is published bi-monthly by the State Historical Society in Iowa City. It is printed in Waverly and distributed free to Society members, depositories, and exchanges. This is the July/August 1979 issue and is Number 4 of Volume 60. Second Class postage paid at Iowa City, Iowa and at additional mailing offices. Editorial assistance for this issue provided by Alan Axelrod, Katherine Prunty, and Ginalie Swaim.

The PALIMPSEST

(ISSN 0031 — 0360)

©Iowa State Historical Department/Division of the State Historical Society 1979
Peter T. Harstad, Director

VOLUME 60 NUMBER 4

JULY/AUGUST 1979

Charles Phillips, Editor

CONTENTS

- The Babel Proclamation
by Nancy Derr 98
- The Homefront: Hamburg, Iowa
by Margaret E. Davidson 116
- The Cherry Sisters
by Steven J. Fuller 121

Cover: *Armistice Day in Des Moines* (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives)



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.



William L. Harding (courtesy Sioux City Public Museum)

©-1925-Moffett
CHICAGO

The BaBEL Proclamation

by

Nancy Derr

*One of the great ironies of the Great War was that in fighting to make the world safe for democracy America made democracy a little less safe for itself. As a direct result of the war effort and its need for centralized command and control, standardization became a banner value in American life. Despite the enormous benefits of this standardization, it had its drawbacks, drawbacks that led to some of the more shameful incidents in our history. For decades "Progressives," mostly within the Republican Party, had been calling for a strong federal administration capable of attacking America's social problems and redressing its social inequities. Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, was elected by the constituency their agitation created. In Wilson, Progressivism had its man; with the First World War, it had its opportunity. But things did not work as the Progressives had planned. In her forthcoming book, *Iowans During World War I: A Study of Change Under Stress*, Nancy Derr traces the political rise of progressive forces in Iowa through its wartime flowering into very unpleasant results. She writes of things we would perhaps like to forget but are the better for remembering, for facing squarely, and for learning from. The following is adapted from a chapter of Ms. Derr's book.*

—Ed.

In July of 1918, Iowa Governor William L. Harding confided to the State Bar Association: "I have information that a dozen foreign language preachers on the last Sunday of the Red Cross drive told their congregations that the Red Cross nurses go abroad to act as companions for our soldiers." Harding offered no further proof for his claim despite calls by newspapers to either produce the guilty and

prosecute them or "admit he was talking for effect." Harding needed no proof, and he often talked for effect. He saw the invisible hand of conspiracy working through the foreign-language ministers who he claimed undermined trust in the nation with their indecent tales, communicated in code, led fanatically loyal followings, and ultimately posed a strong threat to the Nation.

Since the beginning of America's entry into the World War, Harding had lambasted the lazy and the indifferent for their unpatriotic lassitude, but he saw the foreign language ministers as a far more powerful group than he could control with mere words no matter how strong his rhetoric. Majority opinion in Iowa shared Harding's fears and would support whatever action he deemed necessary, but the traditional separatism of foreign-stock ministers and congregations made them unresponsive to the pressures of community disapproval. So Governor Harding resorted to his power of proclamation: he distinguished himself by becoming the only American governor ever to make it a crime to speak any language but English in his state.

In the newspaper controversy that followed his edict, the only "legal" language allowed in Iowa was often referred to as "American." Despite a few pleas for tolerance and a few demands for proof of the need for the proclamation, the native-stock majority in Iowa thought a ban on foreign tongues was a patriotic necessity. The edict and the terminology surrounding it were the culmination of a concentrated effort by civil authority to homogenize citizens of all ethnic backgrounds into flag-waving patriots who identified solely with the nation and

its might and power. The leaders of the "100% Americans" assumed that the United States was the apex of the hierarchy of nations. They thought gratitude and eagerness to sacrifice should be the proper attitude of recent immigrants toward their benefactor, their new homeland, America.

Pre-war nativism became out-and-out chauvinism when it was officially sanctioned by the war. "Hun"-baiting, forced Liberty Bond purchases, dousing with yellow paint the homes and businesses of suspected slackers, all of which the legal authorities tolerated if not encouraged, failed to satisfy the emotional demands of war fanaticism. Harding's language ban came a step closer to satisfying these demands by legitimizing and expressing the desire to suppress all foreign traits, a desire that had been evident before the war in the movement to restrict immigration. The method adopted to suppress these traits was to force on the pluralistic pockets of foreign-speaking groups a public affirmation of nationalistic fervor, partly as punishment for their independence, partly from fear that they had the power to subvert the war effort.

The unfortunate result of the war—obvious later throughout the 1920s—became tragically apparent during the last months of conflict. The pressures it put on Iowa's society led to the virtual obliteration of the self-confident, aggressive German-American community.

The movement toward the language proclamation proceeded in stages. German language instruction was forbidden in public schools, followed by a spate of book burnings. Communities forced parochial schools to close and then outlawed church services in German. People speaking German on the street were attacked and rebuked. German-Americans began to Anglicize or change their names. Most German-language newspapers had to close their offices. Finally, in May, 1918 Governor



(Culver Pictures)

Harding gave prejudice the force of law and forbade the public use not only of German, but of any "foreign" language.

Before Harding's attack on foreign language, Iowa's diverse ethnic groups from nations neutral or friendly to the Allies had themselves joined in the growing hatred of all things German. But now, non-English-speaking groups became identified with the scapegoated German-Americans. Their protest that their loyalty had been unfairly impugned came to nothing, and their institutions, bereft of the vital bond of language, started to crumble. Harding was riding the crest of a wave of intolerance, and all objectors were silenced.

Iowa went further than any of the 48 states. It enforced its anti-foreign bias by arresting foreign-language speakers. After the so-called Babel proclamation of May 14, 1918, only En-

glish was legal in public or private schools, in public conversations, on trains, over the telephone, at all meetings, and in all religious services. (Most of the arrests were made for violations over the telephone lines, detected by the operator or by party-line users.) Harding argued that the language ban was legal under the First Amendment, which, the proclamation noted, does *not* "entitle the person who cannot speak or understand the English language to employ a foreign language, when to do so tends, in time of national peril, to create discord among neighbors and citizens, or to disturb the peace and quiet of the community." Reflecting the extremism that would nearly cost him the November, 1918 election, Harding justified his ban as an effort to harmonize the discord which foreign language use aroused in communities.

The issue of teaching German in public schools was the first to surface after the United States declared war in 1917. At its November 23, 1917 meeting, the state council of defense resolved "that the public schools of Iowa, supported by public taxation, should discontinue the teaching of the German language . . . in the interest of harmonizing and bringing our people together with a common language, believing thus they would act more patriotically and more essentially with a common purpose." Chairman Lafayette Young, Sr., editor of the *Des Moines Capital*, considered this his special cause. When uniform compliance was not immediate, Young's state defense council repeated its order in late January, 1918, and Governor Harding emphasized his support. In April, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, A.M. Deyoe, once again insisted on the immediate cessation of German instruction. In May, he "conducted a campaign" to get German out of all Iowa schools. By the end of May the opposition was decimated. The success of the spring campaign caused sudden

unemployment among German teachers. In Davenport, 27 teachers were precipitously fired in May.

Next, a rash of book burnings filled the news. Book burners needed no more encouragement than that given them by the State Superintendent by making German textbooks superfluous. In State Center, Gladbrook, Vinton, and a dozen other towns, students broke into schools at night and made bonfires of the books.

Lafe Young did not feel uncomfortable with the destruction of certain books. As state council chairman he wrote to librarians all over the state requesting the "elimination" of books "written to defend Germany's course in the war." Young apparently was aware that book disposal was an extreme measure, for he reasserted the apocalyptic nature of the struggle: "The present war is between the divine right of kings and the rule of the people."

If one had to guard children from the German language, and to keep citizens from suspect books, it followed that parochial schools, in which the entire course of instruction might be in German, should be an object for attack. But to attack the parochial schools was to challenge the separatism of ethnic communities directly. Controversy over the receipt by parochial schools of tax monies had raged sporadically over midwestern states, especially in the 1880s and '90s. The animus toward parochial schools had an anti-Catholic as well as an anti-foreign bias, but the attacked groups had weathered these outbursts by effective organization and emphasis upon the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion. Parochial schools had helped maintain the aloof identify of ethnic groups by a combination of religious and cultural instruction and by the relative isolation of their youth. Mennonite communities and the Amana colonies were especially wary of outside influences upon their communities. Most German Evangelical and German Lutheran churches had parochial schools; Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish



Liberty Bond salesmen (Culver Pictures)

groups were, at some places, concentrated enough to support parochial schools; Catholic parochial schools were familiar. Pressure to ban German-language instruction in public schools increased to include schools in which all instruction was in German, then spilled over to include all foreign-language parochial schooling, but did not focus upon English-language Catholic parochial schools.

The well-publicized arrest of a German Lutheran minister, Rev. William Schumann of Pomeroy, on sedition charges in December, 1917, provoked a virtual campaign which Lafe Young began the next month against these groups. Not only were most German Lutheran ministers disloyal, he claimed, but further, any person who appreciated German literature and music had to be loyal to the Kaiser. "Lafayette Young of Des Moines," wrote David Brant, editor of the *Iowa City Republican*, "would crucify every person of German descent."

Young only waxed more intemperate. In a blistering speech to the Dubuque Commercial Club in March, after warming to his subject with atrocity stories and an emphasis upon the "one hundred and twenty-five babies" drowned when the *Lusitania* was sunk, he struck out again at German Lutheran ministers, claiming the "Kultur" they were so proud of was "hogwash," and their music and literature worthless. Young claimed that he had a German background himself, but in judging patriotism, he looked for action. "If he's for America—I am his friend. If he is against America, I am the *sheriff!*"

Angry responses came from ministers so maligned, who noted that most Germans were in America because they had opposed German militarism, or who pointed out that the Kaiser was a Calvinist, not a Lutheran, but most churches moved to conform to community pressures.

Not only was the use of German outlawed in public and parochial schools, but in church services as well. The cruelest restriction forbade funeral services in the language of the mourners—even funerals for Iowa soldiers. In early January, 1918, prior to the ban, Private Eilert Johnson died of pleurisy at Camp Pike, Arkansas. He was born near Hampton in 1892 but had grown up in the Alexander area west of the county seat. One of the pastors at the ecumenical funeral service felt compelled to publish in the county newspaper this "Statement to the Public: . . . I sincerely regret the unfortunate use of the language of the country with which we are at war" at the funeral for Eilert Johnson. "It grates most harshly upon the ears of most of our people, and tends to engender discord. . . ." The editor, though noting that the service contained "much to comfort the sorrowing relatives," also considered the German language "odious to all liberty loving citizens . . . it is the tongue in which the autocratic rulers of Germany are issuing orders . . . which have shed the blood of innocent women and children . . . it is difficult to disassociate a person who uses it with one who sympathizes with the commands and enforcements which are conveyed in its wording." Private Johnson was among the last Iowa soldiers whose relatives would be comforted in their native tongue.

Many German-stock people responded to the intense community disapproval of being German by changing their names. Communities forced changes in institutional names. In present-day Iowa, a township named Liberty or Lincoln usually was named "German" before 1918. A "German Savings Bank" had been a fixture of small town main streets: the "American Savings Bank" was its replacement in Lowden, Carroll, and Muscatine; it became "Liberty" in New Liberty, "Union" in Dubuque, "United States" in Dyersville, and "Lincoln" in Tama County in a town that changed its own name to Lincoln from Berlin.

The Carroll bank capitulated to a name change in September, 1918 after threats that worse than yellow paint would occur. In August the German Savings Bank there was covered "with three batches of yellow paint" for the third time: "its stubborn refusal to change its name is arousing countrywide feeling."

The state council of defense, whose feelings were easily aroused, expressed "unqualified disapproval of the word 'German' in connection with the names of financial, industrial and commercial enterprises. . . ." In most towns, signs bearing the name "German" or "Berlin" had already been vandalized, even when they were part of the names of churches. The German Telephone Company of Dillon and the German Mutual Insurance Company of Tama County changed their own names; in Bellevue city firemen tore down the sign of "The Bismarck," and in the night a landmark of Dubuque, the old sign over Germania Hall, was removed. German measles during the war months were called "liberty measles." German fries were called "American Fries" until after the war when they denationalized into "home fries." Many towns had had Germania Halls for dancing and large meetings (for example, Lowden and Manilla). Local newspapers in passive resistance often refused to use the new "American" or "Liberty" labels on a town institution, and dances were announced for the "hall" or speakers for the "opera house," bereft of a name. Changes in street names and township names usually caught hold, though the loss of Bismarck Street and Hanover Avenue in Muscatine was not compensated for by Bond Street or Liberty Avenue, and Berlin Township had stronger associations than Hughes, its new name in Clinton County. But it was difficult to change a town's name, despite the disappearance of a few tiny Berlins. The town council of Guttenberg changed the name of the city to Prairie-la-Porte, the original French name of the old Mississippi River town before German settlers arrived. Having made the pa-

triotic effort, the council gave up when no one used the name, and Guttenberg endured.

Family names were changed and given names, particularly Fritz and Franz, dropped from favor. Names spelled in one way in the 1915 census appeared Anglicized in the 1917-18 newspapers, with the considerable variation in spelling expected in a transition. In towns and cities where the German-named population was so large and established that all shades of war opinion might be encountered, a German name tended to lose the stigma of the "disloyal" label. Nevertheless, in the inflamed atmosphere of the war, a German name often seemed a business disadvantage and a burden. In Charles City, attorney Frank Ligenfelder, his son, and his brother "cast off all connections with their Teutonic origin and . . . had their names changed to Linnell." Vowels were dropped, "sch" changed to "sh," and assimilation in external appearances was accomplished almost overnight.

German was not spoken in stores; sermons were no longer heard in German; the word "German" disappeared from letterheads and storefronts; German was not taught in schools. Thus it is no surprise that the number of German newspapers in the state declined from 46 in 1900 (behind only five other states in number of papers) to 16 in 1920, even though reading German was not illegal. Foreign language newspapers were required by Postmaster General Burleson to translate their news and to file a copy prior to street sale with postal authorities. This added burden was enough to put tiny papers out of existence. Once a single issue was confiscated, second class mailing privileges were denied for future issues.

There were efforts prior to Governor Harding's proclamation of May 14, 1918 to ban the speaking of German altogether. The Pocahontas War Service association organized itself

and proclaimed that "all persons suspected of disloyalty will be summoned before it." Further: "We condemn the use of the German tongue, a language which has come to be that used by the traitor and the spy, and shall see to it that it is neither taught in the schools, spoken from the pulpit, over the telephone, or used in trade." The *Manson Journal*, immediately south of the Pocahontas county line, noted that Pocahontas was the first county in the state to forbid the use of German in public and that the protest against this move led to a boycott of county business. The *Journal* reprinted a Pocahontas County newspaper's accusation that "towns in adjoining counties were bidding for our trade and thus fanned the flame of division until it became a serious problem." Plymouth County, like Pocahontas County, had a sizable foreign-speaking population in 1918. These signs were posted all over the town of Le Mars in April and May:

If you Are An American At Heart
Speak OUR Language
If you Don't Know It
LEARN IT.
If you Don't Like It
MOVE.

The majority insisted on conformity. It was especially provoked when the use of a foreign language seemed designed to exclude the majority, to evade, even to mock, its power. F.S. Wright and T.A. Wilson, secretary and president of the Buffalo Center Commercial Club, wrote to H.J. Metcalf of the state defense council about their problems with "a very strong German and Pro-German community in and around Buffalo Center. . . . There is a click [clique—*ed.*] of the German retired farmers that gather each day in the Post Office lobby and talk over their troubles in German. We put up one sign to the effect that the Post Office was an American Institution and that all those who could not talk English better keep still, but it was taken down for fear the United States Government would not sanction it. Now, we would like to . . . go a step farther and forbid the

speaking of German on the streets and in public places. We would like to have your advice as to the best methods to pursue. . . ." Metcalf replied that enacting an ordinance prohibiting German was "not going too far" but was still "rather a drastic step." He encouraged calling "the ministers of the German churches and prominent Germans in your community . . . together in a meeting of your council of defense, and ask them as a favor and as a matter of protection to themselves to discontinue preaching and talking of German during the period of the war."

It was not only in counties with a high proportion of foreign-born that language bans

were proposed. The editor of the Winterset newspaper wrote that he heard two "immigrants from Prussia . . . conversing with each other in the German language. . . ." It made my "American blood boil with indignation." They should be sent back to Germany "where they can bow before the kaiser to their heart's content." We won't permit the "use of the tongue of the enemy . . . on our streets."

A ban was, in such an instance, a ceremonial way of combatting the enemy on the home-front. To speak German at all was to "bow before the kaiser." The phrase also suggests the fear that by speaking German some Iowans could express anti-American sentiment with-



Round-up of World War I draft-dodgers, New York (Culver Pictures)

out worry about eavesdroppers. And frustrated eavesdroppers took for granted that one who spoke German was pro-German. A ban was also a way to punish and chasten old fellows who idly hung around the post office and failed to be properly enthusiastic about defeating the old country, or who seemed to sneer at signs warning them their very language might be considered seditious. At the very least, German speakers clung to an ethnic "otherness," in itself unnerving. Why were these people so self-contained? Why didn't they blend into the larger community? Why did they insist upon trading exclusively with each other and intermarrying and staying so close to home? And especially: Why did they keep talking in an alien tongue, generation after generation?

Today a community using a foreign language is no longer perceived as a threat to American unity. For example, the Mennonites' right to violate state school attendance laws has been upheld in Iowa. This greater degree of tolerance exists because of the relative political ineffectiveness of unassimilated communities, as well as a more secure national identity. We no longer feel comfortable forcing the habits of the majority upon minority groups, an attitude that developed concurrently with a shift in the national viewpoint on civil rights for the Black minority.

The World War I era, in contrast, had numerous unassimilated—and potentially powerful—ethnic groups. Such groups were often predominant in rural areas. German communities had demonstrated their great unity and political aggressiveness in several successful campaigns they mounted against prohibition. While great waves of national confidence in world affairs would follow the Second World War, at the outset of the First World War many questioned the nation's ability to fight at all because of the debilitating effects of diversity. Further, the rights of

minorities found few defenders in a time of extensive racism. Minority groups had to champion themselves, and to do so in wartime was to be vulnerable to a charge of disloyalty. The resounding victory of the anti-pluralist opinion so weakened the foreign-speaking communities in World War I that when, two generations later, opinion began to reverse, the communities to benefit were of different national origins than German.

The final encroachment on the rights and the traditions of foreign speakers came when Governor Harding proclaimed four rules governing language use in the state of Iowa for the duration of the war. "First," he declared, "English should and must be the only medium of instruction in public, private, denominational or other similar schools. Second, conversation in public places, on trains and over the telephone should be in the English language. Third, all public addresses should be in the English language. Fourth, let those who cannot speak or understand the English language conduct their religious worship in their homes."

The justification for this proclamation was nothing more than the imperative to conform to majority community sentiment. "Every person should appreciate and observe his duty to refrain from all acts of conversation which may excite suspicion or produce strife among the people, but in his relation to the public should so demean himself that every work and act will manifest his loyalty to his country and his solemn purpose to aid in achieving victory for our army and navy and permanent peace of the world." Paradoxically, the proclamation warned against the mob violence its message tended to incite. Harding urged that all disputes be settled "by those in official authority. . . . Voluntary or self-constituted committees or associations undertaking the settlement of such disputes . . . are a menace to society and a fruitful cause of violence." By "authorities," Harding meant the quasi-legal *ad hoc* county councils of defense and the



Registering enemy aliens, New York City (Culver Pictures)

Liberty Loan kangaroo courts. The councils of defense were composed of volunteers and appointments down the hierarchy from the state's war leaders to the township's. Successful, established citizens, they supported the war. Well-intentioned, law-abiding and respectable, they consciously desired to adjudicate and pacify. But, like Harding with his edict, they were all-too-eager to demand order at the expense of liberty. Rather than counseling patience and forbearance to those whose "blood boiled" upon hearing German, they decided to eliminate the language that "caused" the boiling. By moving against the victims of community aggression rather than the aggressive mob itself, they were defeating their own attempts to maintain order. In fact, they often aided mobs by identifying recalcitrants.

William Harding's style was like the wartime Teddy Roosevelt's without the redeeming reputation for verve and intelligence. Harding

was bombastic. He spoke in slogans and shibboleths and avoided complexity. Among those who agreed with him, he was immensely popular.

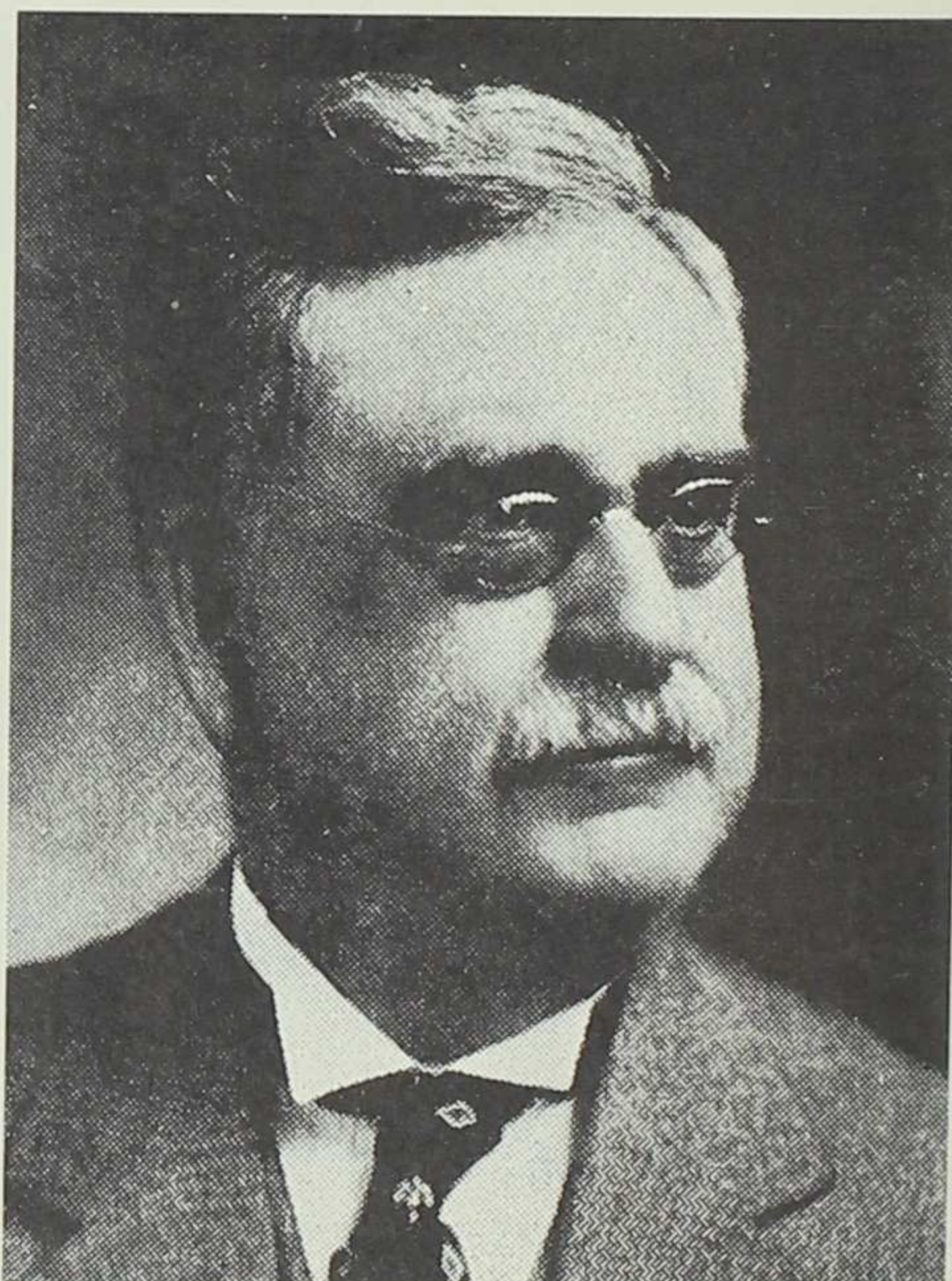
Harding's proclamation may well have been his own idea. He betrayed the quality of his logic about the language ban in a screaming-eagle speech reprinted in the pages of the *Sac Sun*. The *Sun* editor later remarked, "[the speech] hardly becomes the dignity of the chief executive of Iowa."

Harding spoke in the rain to a huge Fourth of July crowd on the Sac County fairground. Most of his speech was devoted to a defense of his proclamation which was stirring up much opposition. He quoted two legal precedents to prove that English was the "official" language of the United States. As his proclamation had stated, "we're going to have one language in Iowa and one only and that is the English language. . . . I don't want any schools in Iowa where the everyday language is anything but English. As long as I am governor . . . I won't stand for it. I would rather work in a packing house than to be governor of Iowa with a tow-string backbone." This was one ill-chosen example, and Harding embarked upon another one. People have said to him, in opposing the proclamation, look how much, for example, the loyal Danes have done for Audubon and Shelby counties. He replies to them, he told the crowd, that he knows a man whose ancestors on both sides are solid American from way back, who fought in every war. "That man owns a section of Iowa land and he owes the United States every dollar he has and every drop of blood that is in his veins. The state of Iowa and the United States of America don't owe that man anything except protection under the law. Now, think of a man who was brought from the filth of Denmark and placed on a farm, for which he paid perhaps three dollars an acre. Ye gods and fishes, what Iowa has done for him he can never repay!" The governor repeatedly denied that he had used these words. "Filth,"

he said, was not in his vocabulary. Danes from all over the state wrote to the *Des Moines Register*, a paper very sympathetic to their position and adamantly in opposition to the governor, and to the *Dannevirke*, a Danish newspaper published in Cedar Falls, to express their dissatisfaction. The Jacob A. Liis League of Cedar Falls demanded a retraction from the governor.

The language ban particularly aroused the pro-war communities of Norwegians, Swedes, Bohemians, and Danes. Danes were insulted further as they read the account of this Fourth of July speech, which was soon broadcast around the state. Swedish and Norwegian communities had tended toward neutrality on war issues, some German communities had been obviously reluctant to support the war, but Denmark and Bohemia had historical reasons to support the Allies, and those ethnic groups in Iowa had been outspokenly in support of the war. Bohemians wanted independence from Prussia and Austria. Their concentration in Cedar Rapids helped explain that city's emphatic pro-war coloration. In Iowa City, the Sokol lodge of 35 "Bohemian-speaking" men had sent a third of its members into the army. There was no division in Danish communities regarding the issues of the war in Europe since the overwhelming motive for Danish immigration after 1878 had been to escape German rule of Schleswig, but success in coercing German-speakers so fired the zeal of the enforcers that the small gap from anti-German bias to antagonism toward all foreign groups was easily jumped, even though the United States was not at war with the world.

In June, Harding tried to soothe feelings. No other ethnic group was being classed with our enemy, he claimed, but he cautioned that German propaganda could be spread in any foreign language. He announced that Des Moines Italians, Sioux City Scandinavians, and



Lafayette Young, Sr.

Cedar Rapids Bohemians had withdrawn their protests and curbed their defiance. He called the loss of their native language a small sacrifice compared to the good it could do saving the lives of American boys overseas by curbing sedition at home. Harding warned foreign speakers, yet to be convinced of the patriotic necessity of speaking English, that his proclamation would stand, and be strictly enforced.

The Babel proclamation became the major political issue of Iowa politics of 1918. Since the ban included all foreign speakers, not only Germans, defenders of the ban could not legitimately accuse its opponents of being the Kaiser's agents. With less fear that the onus of disloyalty would spread to them, enemies of the governor closed in around him, led by the

Des Moines Register. The press debate continued throughout the summer at fever pitch. The *Register* was charged with undermining authority and promoting anarchy by ridiculing and disputing the governor's proclamation.

But in the summer-long attack on the proclamation, the *Register* and other opponents of the language ban made these points: First, men of many languages and nationalities were fighting for our country. "Americanism is not a matter of race or . . . of language." Second, it is "undemocratic, un-American, and oppressive to try to force" segregated foreign communities into American habits. Third, it is a hardship to impose a new language on old people. Fourth, the United States should be proud of its diversity, since we are all immigrants. Fifth, Governor Harding acted from political motives, attacking the loyalty of defenseless minorities merely to maintain his leadership of a small cadre of violent patriots. Sixth, many states had larger foreign-speaking populations than Iowa but none had such a language ban. Last, it was an embarrassment to have such a governor. His language proclamation, the *Register* claimed in an overused 1918 insult, was worthy of the Kaiser himself.

Discussion of these arguments appeared in the newspaper debate all over the state. Rebuttals took these forms: The foreign names of many Iowa servicemen was no proof of patriotism since military service was compulsory. Although "race" (used on both sides of the debate to denote "nationality") might not determine loyalty, language did. Certain "treacherous interests"—most foreign language preachers, some business firms, and some politicians—want "to prevent the adoption of American customs . . . language and . . . sympathies. . . ." Lafe Young believed that "the basis of disloyalty . . . in such Iowa towns as Lowden, Hubbard, Sully, Denison, Carroll, and others, is the power of the foreign language."

The pro-Harding faction argued that it was

necessary for patriots to coerce segregated ethnic communities, particularly German ones. By forcing people into a predetermined mold, the coercers felt they were creating "Americans." Actually the coercers were less interested in making good citizens than in increasing their own power. Forced flag-kissing, for example, did not promote actual patriotism, but it clearly demonstrated what behavior they required for community acceptance. The question of what defined "America" was left at the level of respect for the flag and enthusiasm for the war. Even the *Register*, which had once called the denial of free-speech "un-American," was reluctant to pursue the debate. "Un-American" remained merely an epithet, amorphous but lethal, for all to hurl at any opponent.

The plight of older people, who the language ban opponents had protested should be allowed to keep their ethnic identity *and* their social standing, deserved no such consideration, according to the Harding faction. (It was an attack that prefigured the ridicule of the "bleeding heart" liberal.) Anyone who had been in the United States for decades and still could not speak the language deserved to be made uncomfortable. And those who pity such people, the Harding forces argued, sanctioned personal irresponsibility.

The American "melting pot," if interpreted to mean that the dominant culture could absorb white minority groups without damage to itself, was questioned by ever-growing numbers of people. The waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the four decades before the war introduced habits and values often at odds with those of the more established "native" citizenry. Demands for restricting immigration mirrored a fear that the old-stock Protestant values, considered identical with national values, would be swamped. Drunkenness and criminality would undermine the family and the efficiency of the work force. Ethnic loyalty to the family would halt

the mobility so characteristically American. Influence—the result of ethnic voting “blocs”—would replace the merit. On the other hand, the new immigrant’s passivity toward authority, so valuable in a work force, might smother the local initiative crucial to a democratic society.

German-Americans, far from being the most threatening ethnic group, were rural as well as urban, industrious, thrifty, and generally upstanding. They challenged dominant values only in their opposition to prohibition and their clannishness. But the glare of the enemy-at-arms label during World War I brought down on them all the anxieties and hatred aroused by newer, stranger immigrants.

Language ban supporters lost faith in assimilation. It seemed to them there were elements which simply would not dissolve in the melting pot. Some went so far as to claim that Germany had been covertly establishing supply bases for treason, all over the country. To use the metaphor they used, those in charge of the melting pot must either remove the lumps from the pot—jail or deport the uncooperative—or make them melt—assimilate them by putting them next to the fire.

In this argument, national chauvinism hit ludicrous lows. Lafe Young’s July editorials on the proclamation exhorted all foreign speakers to “support the American language.” Like Young, Governor Harding pointedly avoided calling the legal language “English” in his early defenses. The *Des Moines Register*, they said, deliberately used the term “English” instead of “American,” implying that our language was borrowed, and therefore any European tongue would be as legitimate as English. These “Patriotic Citizens,” as they called themselves, had a ready rebuttal to anyone so lost in the remote past as to cherish American connections to an older English-speaking culture: “We are today the leaders of the peoples speaking technically so-called English and we shall dominate in this leadership more and more in

the future. It is *our* language—remember that.” One-hundred-per-cent Americans would not let themselves be caught speaking British English.

Two more arguments remained to be answered. The governor could not have acted for political motives since his proclamation would “cost him a vastly larger number of votes than it would gain for him.” This turned out to be a sound prediction. The *Register* might call the proclamation “precipitous,” they said, but how can one act too hastily to stop evil? The defenders of the proclamation, in all their war activities, saw themselves as warriors on the homefront, no less vital to the outcome of the war than the front in Europe. They fought their war to make Good triumph over Evil. They saw it as a struggle between opposing absolutes, between Democracy and Autocracy. To make the world “safe for democracy” was to make the world more American. And to curb the treachery of foreign tongues, by any means—however undemocratic—was to be closer to the boys in the trenches. As the group calling themselves “Patriotic Citizens” declared: “We, who remain at home, should have the republic

Note on Sources

Among the principal sources for this article are the contemporary accounts of war activity in Iowa found in various issues of the *Ames Evening Times*, *Cedar Falls Record*, *Cedar Rapids Republican*, *Clarence Sun*, *Dannevirke*, *Davenport Democrat*, *Des Moines Capital*, *Des Moines Register*, *Estherville Vindicator and Republican*, *Franklin County Reporter*, *Iowa City Republican*, *Manson Journal*, *Monticello Express*, *Pomeroy Herald*, *Rock Rapids Reporter*, *Sac County Bulletin*, *Sac Sun*, *Shelby County Reporter*, *Sioux City Journal*, *Vinton Review*, *Wayland Times*, and the *Webster City Freeman-Journal*. William Harding’s war proclamations are collected in *War Proclamations by Governor Harding* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1918). Two manuscript collections were of great value in preparing this article, the papers of the American Protective League on deposit at the Putnam Museum, Davenport, and the H. J. Metcalf papers in the Iowa Council of National Defense Collection at the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City. Two unpublished University of Iowa theses were helpful, Hildegard Emile Frese’s “German-American Journalism in the State of Iowa” (M.A., 1935) and Thomas Peter Christensen’s “History of the Danes in Iowa” (Ph.D., 1924).

A fully-annotated version of this article is on file at the State Historical Society in Iowa City.

well cleaned up of treason and all other un-American influences and properly prepared for a homecoming welcome to democracy's victorious heroes."

Pro-Harding forces dismissed their opponents' comparison of Iowa to other states as petty. Iowa was not content to be average during the third Liberty Loan campaign, they pointed out, and therefore emerged first in the nation. But no matter what they said, the urge to conform to the national pattern made the defenders of the Babel proclamation vulnerable to the charge of over-reaction when other states did not go as far. South Dakota, for example, prohibited German over the telephone and in conversations of more than three persons. German was banned in schools or in churches except during funeral services. But only German speakers were affected. In the several states which banned some uses of German, motives ranged from vicarious retaliation against the enemy, to punishment of anti-war communities, to sincere belief that espionage by German agents was thereby diminished. Only in Iowa did the scapegoating intent of the language ban forbid all non-English dialogue.

The governor did not make his proclamation lightly. It was strictly enforced. However, in most reported cases, county patriotic organizations—and *not* the state—levied fines against foreign language speakers. These local groups took the ban as legal license for their actions. For example, the so-called Bureau of Military Affairs in Lake View fined farmer John B. Roesign \$25, payable to the Red Cross, for speaking German on the streets of Wall Lake after he had been warned not to. In a case that received wide publicity, four women from LeClaire Township in Scott County were fined for speaking German together over their party line. The operator reported them to Sam T. White, chairman of the county defense

council. A block-lettered pencilled tip to the Davenport American Protective League in October read "THE DUTCH STILL FLYS" along a rural party line. But defense-council chairman A.J. Faerber's assiduous efforts to catch it failed. Mrs. Lura Parker reported that she picked up her phone regularly to listen as Faerber instructed but heard no German. APL operatives warned a Mrs. Wolfe and August Neidorf of Allens Grove, and Mrs. Herman Thee and Miss Margaret Grell of Davenport, that they must speak only English. In Clarion citizens painted the local telephone company yellow for letting the German language go over its wires without breaking in and stopping it.

Editor Jim Pierce of the *Iowa Homestead*, the state's major defender of civil rights, became indignant when "party-line patriots" interfered with German conversations:

A few years ago these good American citizens were honored and respected . . . [now] these people are humiliated, insulted and abused—for what? Why, because some of them cannot understand English! Their only sin is that the older ones came, at America's welcoming invitation . . . to escape the very evils against which America is fighting today. Born under the black eagles of Prussian darkness, they turned to the Statue of Liberty's beckoning light . . . they have prospered here and received much from America, but they have also given much, and what ever obligation exists is mutual. . . . Perhaps they have appreciated what a free America means more than those of us . . . who have not had to struggle to attain it. . . .

Two kinds of people caused "such cruel pain and unnecessary suffering." There were the "smart-alecks," cases of "arrested development," the kind who would set fire to cats, who enjoyed "harassing" the "unfortunately situated." The other kind were "the hard of heart, the calloused and brutal . . . who are acting through motives of personal spite and envy." Pierce discounted love of country as a motive—tormentors of German-Americans have no love in their hearts for anything. Pierce allowed: "It may possibly be that there is a third and very limited class who have a mistaken idea

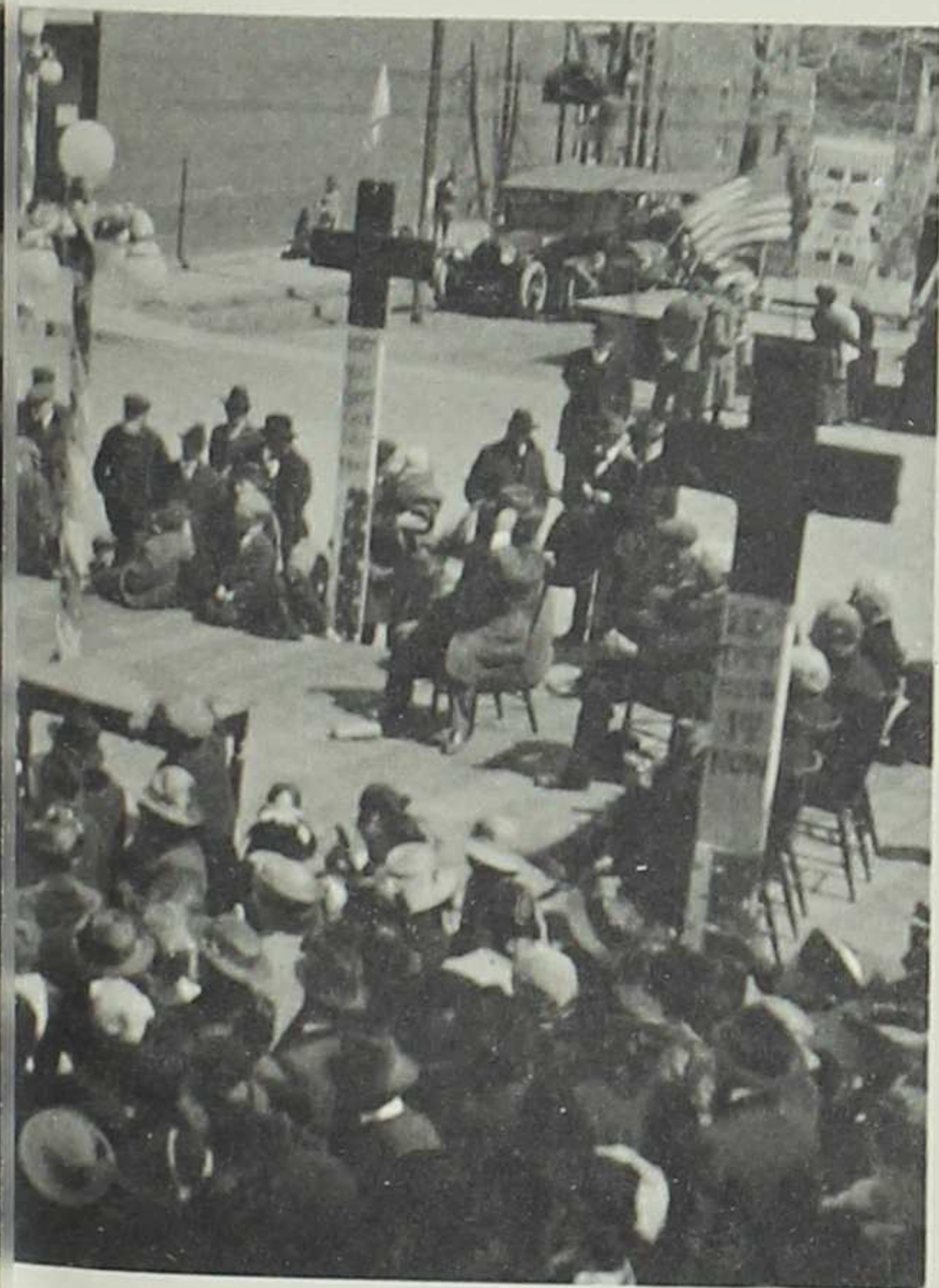


Three poses of William L. Harding, one addressing a crowd in Lake View, Iowa (courtesy Sioux City Public Museum)

that they are acting patriotically in mistreating their good neighbors, and are serving their country in this way." Pierce reminded these latter of Wilson's condemnation of vigilantes and the U.S. Attorney General's call for domestic tolerance. He had to use examples from federal authorities, because all the state officials, whether governor, state council, or judges, gave explicit encouragement to the harassment of minorities. When Pierce de-

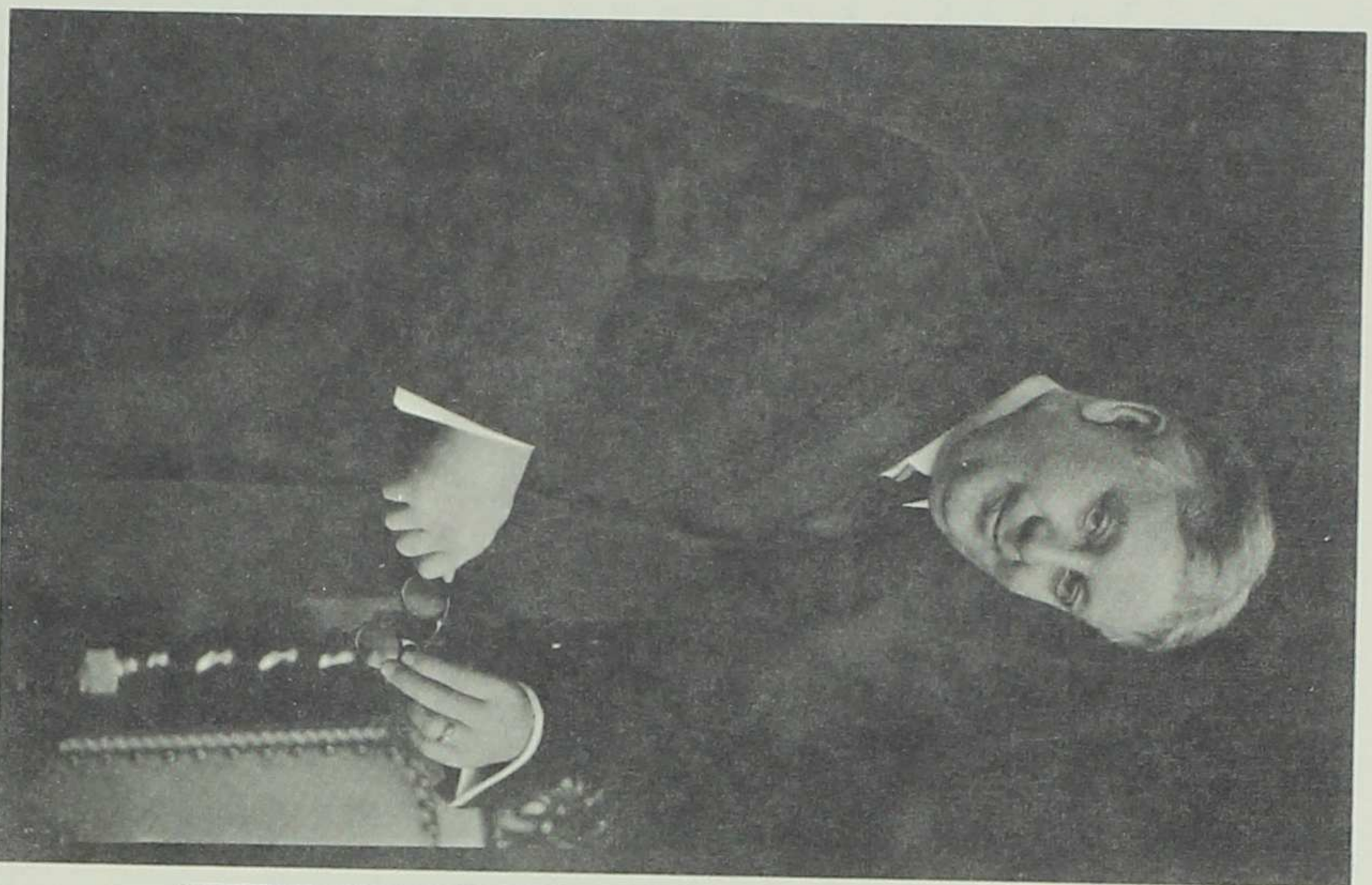
cided to criticize these authorities, he did not say they were misguided. He said they "duped" others. Yet they were in a slightly different category from the gratuitously cruel or the cat-torturers. He saw them as people who fostered and exploited hatred for ethnic minorities in order to consolidate their power and weaken their political enemies.

The hardships of people who could no longer speak freely to their friends on the street, or



who could talk on the telephone only haltingly if at all, or whose children's schools were closed, paled before the pain of people who wanted to find religious solace in these difficult days. Humanitarian considerations aside, Harding's proclamation was manifestly unconstitutional. It infringed upon freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state. But Governor Harding read the Constitution differently. Though the

extremity of his public statements may seem comical to us nowadays, they were anything but funny in his own day. He was the governor of Iowa. His opinions could easily become law. The right to pray in a language other than English would not be protected in Iowa, he decided. It was unpatriotic as well as futile, Harding thought. He addressed the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce meeting of June 1, 1918: "Everyone is now beginning to



Three poses of William L. Harding, one addressing a crowd in Lake View, Iowa (courtesy Sioux City Public Museum)

that they are acting patriotically in mistreating their good neighbors, and are serving their country in this way." Pierce reminded these latter of Wilson's condemnation of vigilantes and the U.S. Attorney General's call for domestic tolerance. He had to use examples from federal authorities, because all the state officials, whether governor, state council, or judges, gave explicit encouragement to the harassment of minorities. When Pierce de-

cided to criticize these authorities, he did not say they were misguided. He said they "duped" others. Yet they were in a slightly different category from the gratuitously cruel or the cat-torturers. He saw them as people who fostered and exploited hatred for ethnic minorities in order to consolidate their power and weaken their political enemies.

The hardships of people who could no longer speak freely to their friends on the street, or

who could talk on the telephone only haltingly if at all, or whose children's schools were closed, paled before the pain of people who wanted to find religious solace in these difficult days. Humanitarian considerations aside, Harding's proclamation was manifestly unconstitutional. It infringed upon freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state. But Governor Harding read the Constitution differently. Though the

extremity of his public statements may seem comical to us nowadays, they were anything but funny in his own day. He was the governor of Iowa. His opinions could easily become law. The right to pray in a language other than English would not be protected in Iowa, he decided. It was unpatriotic as well as futile, Harding thought. He addressed the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce meeting of June 1, 1918: "Everyone is now beginning to

see that English is the official language of the country and that the constitution doesn't allow a man to talk or pray in any other language. . . . There is no use in anyone wasting his time praying in other languages than English. God is listening only to the English tongue."

And he meant it. Foreign-language ministers came under particular indictment from Governor Harding and from *Des Moines Capital* editor Lafe Young. Their muzzling was one of the chief intentions of the edict. Hardingites watched ministers carefully for compliance, and refused to dignify rare protests about freedom of religion with any response other than a perversion of the "higher law" defense—since God Himself speaks only English, He cannot hear a German prayer anyway. Occasionally, enforcement of the proclamation was modified to conform to reality. Even in pro-proclamation Page County, virulently antagonistic to its Swedish speakers, a compromise was effected by late summer for Swedes in Essex who could not understand English and who took great comfort in church attendance. The county council of defense allowed "special church services in mid-week which English-speaking Swedes" could not attend. In Sac County, the quasi-legal Bureau of Military Affairs allowed a foreign language service to be held after an English one, provided that the earlier one was well attended. The town of Little Rock in the far northwest corner of Iowa posed a unique problem for churchgoers since none of the town's ministers spoke English.

In many churches, the minister could speak English, but most of his parishioners could not. Some churches actually shut their doors for the duration of the war. Others seized upon the solution the Amana colonies found—the congregation sat in silence during the entire "service," since even German prayers were specifically forbidden, rising, at the appropriate intervals, to sing their German hymns. Detailed as Harding had been, he had not thought to

outlaw singing in a foreign language.

The Norwegian Lutheran church sponsored a college at Jewell. In early July, it closed its doors. There was little point to its teaching in English. Vacation church schools were halted throughout Emmet County on advice of the County Attorney. They were also, in a sense, untranslatable. The cultural institutions of church, school, and family maintained the security of the ethnic bond only through the tie of language. Without their native tongue, assimilation was assured, and assimilation meant grievous loss. The gulf widened between the young, who could yet profit by integration into the community, and the old, whose lives were set in the ways of a now forbidden culture. Generations were divided and ethnic communities were badly demoralized.

The language ban supplied ammunition to the already overstocked arsenal of the majority culture. When Mr. Gavert of Pomeroy complained that he was handicapped in selling his farm because he was prevented from negotiating in his native tongue, Rev. T.J. Pettitt of neighboring Palmer angrily replied that such transactions are easily accomplished without using any language. Furthermore, if Gavert's eagerness to sell his farm was proof of his antagonism to the language ban, then good riddance. W.C. Hoelscher, the mayor of Hubbard, took out a full-page ad in the *Hubbard Review*, ordering everyone in town to speak English or keep silent. In Lowden, Henry Mowry checked the stores on Main Street to make sure that everyone was speaking English.

Many justified their support for the language ban on the basis of its being a legal proclamation. The *Monticello Express* approved of the proclamation on the peculiar grounds that it would be easier for Iowans to fight off "Russian Socialism" when it came to the United States if

we all spoke the same language. The native-stock community, with the exception of a few opinion-leading newspapers, endorsed or at least acquiesced in the destruction of pluralism in Iowa for the next generation. Most of the responsibility for this destruction rests with Governor Harding, since he used the weight of his position to command respect for the proclamation. Iowans were not civilly disobedient, particularly in wartime. Therefore, Harding had an obligation to be prudent and responsible, restraining rather than encouraging the war fever. But, Harding held Europe in low regard, and this contempt reinforced, as it was reinforced by, the provincial attitude of much of the Midwest. Harding amply demonstrated, as have many politicians before and since, that elevation to public office does not necessarily confer wisdom or discretion. It *was* unusual, however, for a governor to express his biases in legal form without the normal political regard for constituency.

The opposition the proclamation aroused

against Governor William L. Harding in communities of the foreign-born with pro-Allied sympathies aggravated the antagonism he had already aroused in loyal German communities by his constant and extravagant aspersions on their loyalty. He was gratuitously offensive. If voters had come to the polls in November, 1918 in the numbers that had come in 1916, Harding would have been defeated by a combination of ethnic groups. The fact that the number of voters dropped precipitously saved Harding. The decline came among ethnic voters, and it was probably caused by the demoralization Harding had effected by his strident undermining of the validity and significance of an ethnic heritage. Thus, ironically, Harding maintained his office, despite the disappearance of a large part of his previous constituency. Attempting to erase the ethnic heritage of which they had once been so proud, these minorities retreated even from the basic American right of voting, and became casualties of the war on the homefront. □

HOMEFront: HAMBURG, IOWA

by

Margaret E. Davidson

Margaret E. Davidson was born in Hamburg, Iowa in 1910. She spent her childhood in the area before her family moved to Ames. She majored in bacteriology at Iowa State University. In 1930, she attended the University of Wisconsin on a fellowship and took her Masters in bacteriology before going to work for the Bureau of Animal Industry. Her father was a newspaperman-editor and owner—and her mother a librarian, as were a number of her female relatives. As she says, being a librarian was “in the blood,” and she went on beyond her Masters of Science to Library School at Wisconsin, then to work in the Traveling Library in Des Moines, as a reference librarian in Waterloo during the Second World War, as head of the Kendall Young Library in Webster City, and finally as a librarian in the Ames Public Library until her retirement in 1975.

When the armistice was signed ending World War I, Margaret Davidson was still a girl in Hamburg, Iowa. What follows is her recollection of Armistice Day and the feelings that led up to it. The story is a pithy eyewitness account of the problems created by the war on the Iowa homefront.

The names of a few individuals in the article have been deleted to protect their living heirs from unnecessary embarrassment.

—Ed.

© Iowa State Historical Department/Division of the State Historical Society 1979 0031—0036/79/0708—0116\$1.00

My earliest recollection of the war is a chilly August evening in 1914 when my father sat reading the paper to my mother. They always read the paper separately, but this night they were reading the “second coming” headlines together and they looked grave and concerned. As a four-year-old I didn’t know what it was all about, but I knew it was important because they forgot to put me to bed.

But the news quieted down again in a few days. Life settled back to normal in Hamburg, Iowa and so did my bedtime. But before I would reach eight, my hometown would become as confused and shaken as the rest of the world over the Great War.

But for a while at least Hamburg nestled back into the southern end of the Missouri bluffs lining the western edge of Iowa. In those days the population of 2,500 was an odd assortment. Prospering merchants and professional men lived in varying degrees of wealth. There were about a half-dozen Confederate colonels and several more Southerners who had migrated from northern Missouri—all clinging fiercely to their Southern accents and flying Confederate flags from their houses on Confederate Memorial Day.

Then there was a rather sizable group of what

was called "the rough element." Hamburg was an attractive place for those who lived on the margin of the law, because it was so quick and easy to flee a few miles to either Missouri or Nebraska.

The Law in Hamburg at this time was Town Marshal Snowball R-----, so named because of his perfectly round head topped by a thatch of short white hair. He had served a term in prison for assault with intent to commit murder, and before that had operated a saloon and gambling boat on the Nishnabotna (pronounced Nishneybotney) River just this side of the Iowa-Missouri state line. When threatened by action of the sheriff (and he had always had advance notice) he simply untied the boat from its dock and let it float a mile or so down river into Missouri. Extradition proceedings were slow, difficult, and expensive, so nobody bothered. You'd have to admit that Marshal R----- had a background of experience with the law.

Although Hamburg had been settled by Germans, there were relatively few of German ancestry left in town. And in the days ahead, those few German descendants were to find that Hamburg was no place to show pride in the Fatherland. Anti-German sentiment was rising steadily in the community, fired by the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May, 1915. In the high school German classes ended. Students heard horror stories of German atrocities in Belgium and France. Little children were taught to hate the Kaiser. Citizens held Belgian Relief drives and Wilson was re-elected in 1916 because "he kept us out of War."

But by the time America entered the war in 1917 the pent-up emotions of the citizens of

Hamburg exploded. Red Cross chapters knit khaki sweaters, balaclava helmets, and socks, rolled miles of bandages, and made outing flannel nightgowns. The Draft Board began calling up and sending off young men. And the patriots became more vociferous than ever.

At school we learned all four verses of "The Star Spangled Banner" and sang them every morning along with "The Marseillaise" (one verse in English), and "God Save the King." We sang other patriotic songs reaching clear back to the Civil War and also, of course, "Tipperary," "Keep the Home Fires Burning," and "Over There." Surely no group of kids ever knew so many patriotic songs as we—I believe relatively little of this went on in World War II.

Early in 1917 vandals struck the Lutheran Church, breaking windows and splashing yellow paint inside and out. Yellow was the color for slackers, and slackers were anybody not fervently pro-war. Only a few people were really shocked or indignant at this incident. This was the only Lutheran church in town and it was not uptown among the other churches but far out on the east side.

Mr. Hoover was urging us all to conserve sugar and flour. Sugar was sometimes hard to obtain and recipes calling for sugar substitutes—like sorghum and molasses—were widely published. We were also told to Fletcherize—to chew each bite of food 30 to 40 times before swallowing. Supposedly, this would increase the utilization of food and make it possible to eat less for full nutrition.

At the same time German dolls, the only

really pretty dolls, disappeared from the market. U.S. textile manufacturers no longer used German dyes, and their hastily concocted substitutes caused the black ribbed cotton stockings we wore to school to turn a loathesome blackish-green after one washing.

Liberty Bond Rallies at the Opera House featured out-of-town speakers reputed to be real rousers who could coax money out of the pockets of even the none-too-willing. I'll never forget the rally presided over by Juh Billy Juh Brown and Miss Dell Sykes. Juh Billy was a seedy, down-at-the-heels real estate man who had the bad habit of saying "juh" before each word or group of words he uttered. Everyone called him Juh Billy Juh Brown. He was not overly bright but he was undoubtedly Hamburg's most public-spirited citizen. He may even have been mayor at this time. Dell Sykes taught music without really knowing any. She had one of those hooting sopranos that set your teeth on edge. She was the only Christian Scientist I ever knew in Hamburg, and she was the only person I ever saw who actually wore a lace jabot with one of those high-boned lace collars.

So there were Juh Billy and Dell Sykes on stage, and Dr. Coy, a young dentist, waiting in the wings to introduce the main speaker. Juh Billy stepped to the front of the stage and announced, "Juh Miss juh Dell Sykes will juh sing juh one verse of the juh Star juh Spangled juh Banner and juh we'll juh all juh join juh in on the juh chorus." At this point even I knew we were in trouble. Dell rose majestically and sang the first verse. There being no chorus, we couldn't join in, so she sang the second verse. The audience was restless and Dr. Coy was frantic. He called in a loud stage whisper, "Stop her, Billy, stop her." Billy rose and walked over to the wings where he said "Juh juh juh Stop her! Juh hell! You juh never juh oughta juh started her." She sang all four verses, but we won the war anyway.

One lovely fall day in 1917 some super patriot had the bright idea that all the German

books in the town should be burned in a public bonfire. The idea attracted instant support and the event was arranged for just as soon as school was out that afternoon. I heard about it when I went home for lunch. My sister Letha was away at college. She had studied German four years in high school and owned a half-dozen or so German books. I hid them where my mother couldn't find them. At seven I didn't have any opinions or principles about burning books, but I did have a strong feeling that these books belonged to Letha and that it was for her alone to decide what to do with them. The bonfire blazed in a vacant lot across from the post office. A large crowd waved flags, yelled, and danced as they threw more books into the fire. I hung at the back of the crowd, watching with distaste as the grownups made fools of themselves.

We were thousands of miles away from the war, here in Hamburg. We read about the battles, rallied over our troops, and grieved for our boys who died. But it was all so far away. Then in the middle of 1918 influenza struck our town, and we learned firsthand about suffering and tragedy.

People began to die in great numbers in Hamburg—not of influenza but of the pneumonia which developed in nearly every case. Those still on their feet worked constantly helping in homes, where in many instances, everybody was sick. My mother did her own work in the morning and went out in the afternoon to nurse, cook, and clean wherever she was needed. Nobody in our family had the flu but me, and I had such a mild case it was scarcely noticeable. Mother called the doctor, who, like all the others, was working 24-hour days. He said, "Keep her in bed for three days whether she wants to stay or not." I didn't want to. When my mother came home from one of her missions of mercy and found me out of bed she spanked me soundly. I tried to feel bitter about

a woman who would spank a poor sick child, but I couldn't even convince myself.

Tragedy touched close. I remember a triple funeral in a family where all the children were my schoolmates. Mother and a family friend spent a day at our house sewing a white *crêpe de Chine* shroud for a local girl of 15 or 16. I had never seen nor heard of a shroud and I was grimly fascinated.

On the road along the west side of the bluff lived three or four families who had only a few acres of land and were desperately poor. One of them called Dr. Richards one day and said they hadn't seen any smoke from the chimney of one of the houses for a couple of days and thought the family probably had the flu. So Dr. Richards drove out there. He knocked, but no answer. He tried to open the door, but something was blocking it. With a tremendous push he got the door open enough to reveal a five- or six-year-old child with her long blond hair frozen right to the floor. She was still alive but the other four members of the family were dead. He took the little girl back to town and ultimately saved her life.

On an unusually balmy evening, November 7, word came through that an armistice had been signed and the war was over. Jubilant people poured out of their houses to share the news with their neighbors. Some inspired soul played "America" on the steam whistle at the light plant. And yet, the celebration was subdued because people weren't quite sure it was true. They were right—it wasn't true.

A few days later definite news arrived that an armistice had been signed and the firing would cease at 11 AM on November 11—the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918. Hundreds of troops were quite unnecessarily killed that morning because the generals were so infatuated with the clever timing of their arrangement.

I didn't hear about the armistice until I got to

school where we were told that school would be dismissed at 11 AM. We were crazy with excitement and I don't know how the teachers ever lined us up ten abreast to march down the schoolhouse hill singing "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean." I was looking forward to a wild and wonderful day with my Dad who always took me with him to all events that promised to be important and exciting. Suddenly from nowhere my father appeared, snatching me roughly from my line, and pulling me over to the edge of the street. He said, "I want you to go right straight home, and don't go out of our yard again today NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS." He was a fairly indulgent parent but he had a way of saying things so that you knew he meant exactly what he said. He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared. I went right straight home.

By that time a sizable crowd of men had already gathered in Main Street ringing the fire bell. The shrill, piercing sound terrified me. They didn't stop ringing it until nearly midnight. All afternoon, in the safety of our back yard, I could hear that accursed bell and the angry roar of a crowd. It was unmistakably angry, but I didn't know what it was all about until later in the day.

Charlie C----- had the biggest store in town—a department store. Most people disliked him because he quite openly kept a mistress—and yet he was bold enough to sing in the Presbyterian Church choir every Sunday. My father disliked him for these reasons and also because he wouldn't buy enough advertising or pay his bills. What very few people knew was that his wife knew about his mistress and didn't object.

About ten that morning, a gang of tough guys swept into C-----'s store and told him all the stores in town were closing at eleven in honor of the armistice. Charlie said, "I'm closing at noon." They said, "You're closing at eleven, and if you don't we'll close it for you." He argued with them, and they roughed him up a

bit. Shouting threats, they left. But they were back soon smearing yellow paint all over his store. Charlie was stubborn, but he knew enough to be scared now. He ducked kitty-corner across the street and into Leon Smalley's clothing store. Smalley was my Dad's best buddy and he called Dad in at once. Two other solid citizens joined forces, so there were the four protecting quivering Charlie from the crowd which was rapidly turning into a mob. The crowd knew where Charlie was and tried to storm into the store, but my Dad and the three others had already gotten Charlie out through a hatch on the roof.

The crowd grew larger and uglier and drunker until the whole block was packed solid with raging, screaming men shouting, "Hang him, hang him, hang him." Somebody appeared with a rope tied neatly in a hangman's knot. The roar grew louder. Part of the mob kept charging the stairs to the rooftops. But each time the four defenders and Charlie would slip over the roofs into another building

just ahead of the mob. They were on every roof and into every building on the block many times that long afternoon. The mob was too crazed to think of anything but catching Charlie. They never saw Mrs. C----- and the mistress on a side street, weeping in each other's arms.

By eight that night the mob was still raving. Exhausted and starving, the defenders recognized they couldn't hold out much longer. They decided to call the governor and ask him to send in the National Guard. But before the call was made one of them thought he noticed a slight slackening in the frenzy. Some of the crowd had passed out. Some were driven home by hunger. The four decided to wait and watch a little longer. The whole uproar faded away into that balmy November night of the armistice. By midnight the streets were nearly clear. The four men took Charlie home and headed for their own beds. Peace descended on Hamburg. The Great War was over. □

The Cherry Sisters

by
Steven J. Fuller



(courtesy Cedar Rapids Gazette)

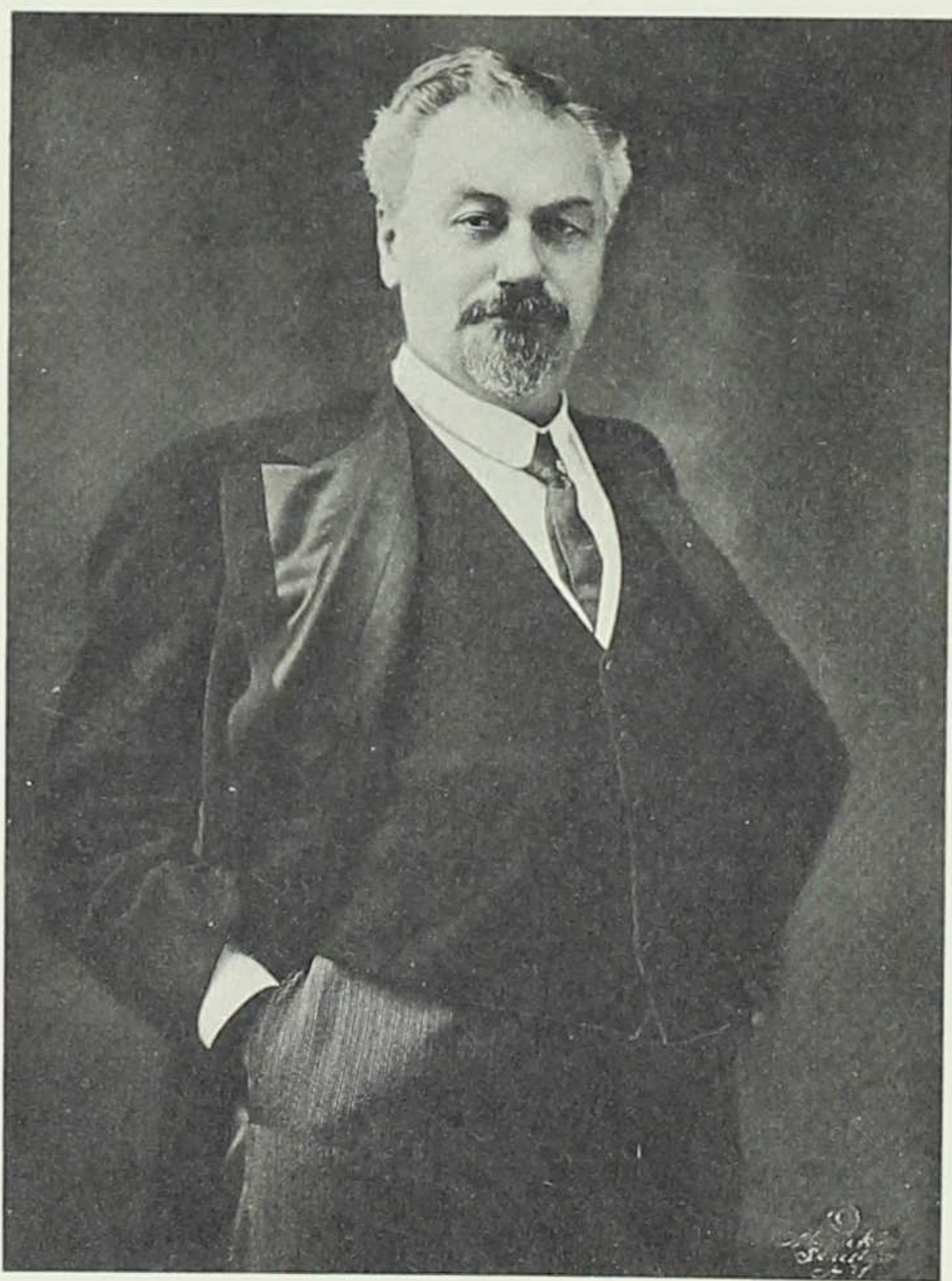
In New York City that month Maurice Barrymore starred in "Roaring Dick & Co." Wilson Barrat introduced his new play, "The Sign of the Cross." Down at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, where the summer before motion pictures made their Broadway debut, New York fire fighters rushed from frame to frame saving lives, all in wonderful Vitascope. But the Olympia Music Hall in November of 1896 was trying something completely different.

There at the Olympia the five Cherry sisters from Iowa—Ella, Elizabeth, Addie, Effie, and Jessie—gave their first New York performance. Opening with their theme song, written to the tune of "Ta-ra-ra-Boom-de-ay," the sisters took turns in the spotlight. Jessie sang a solo called "Corn Juice"; Addie and Elizabeth rendered duo an Irish Ballad in a Midwest twang; and Addie recited an essay of her own composition

entitled, "The Mystery of the 19th Century." A skit written by the sisters—"The Gypsy's Warning"—came next. Addie, as a sinister Latin lover, donned a moustache and declared her love for the Lady, played by Elizabeth. Suddenly, a gypsy—Effie—leaped out to warn the Lady of the crude Don Juan's evil intentions and to give her sound moral advice.

At first, the audience sat in stunned silence, unable to believe the astonishingly bad performance. But in no time, they were screaming and howling at the sisters. They had begun to enjoy the worst show they had ever seen.

Critics also enjoyed themselves, competing to see who could give the luckless ladies from Iowa the worst review. *The New York Times* wrote, "It was a little after 10 o'clock when three lank figures and one short and thick walked awkwardly to the centre of the stage. They were all dressed in shapeless red gowns, made by themselves almost surely, and the fat sister carried a bass drum. They stood quietly



Oscar Hammerstein (Culver Pictures)

for a moment, apparently seeing nothing and wondering what the jeering laughter they heard could mean. . . . None of them had shown a sign of nervousness, nor a trace of ability for their chosen work." *The New York Tribune* summed up the sisters' appearance: "Miss Jessie narrowly escaped being pretty, but her sisters never were in any such danger."

Oscar Hammerstein, grandfather of the musical comedy librettist, deeply in debt from unsuccessful attempts to produce operas in English, had hired the sisters to see if the "world's worst act" could rescue him from bankruptcy. In October, 1896 he had sent his stage manager Al Aarons to book the Cherry Sisters, and according to an account written later by Effie, Lizzie signed the contract while the other sisters were away on tour. Aarons signed on all the sisters except Ella for \$100 a week, railroad fare and hotel expenses in-

cluded. Though the offer did not appeal to the sisters, who thought the salary was too small, they felt honor-bound to go since Lizzie had signed the contract.

Although critics looked upon the Cherry Sisters with distaste, New Yorkers packed the Olympia, possibly rescuing Hammerstein from bankruptcy. Twelve days after the sisters opened at his theater, the *New York Herald* reported Hammerstein had paid off his debts. For six weeks the sisters played to a packed house, the audiences bombarding them with rotten vegetables. Newspapers reported the city's vegetable retailers could not meet the demands of their regular customers because truck raisers and commission men were selling their vegetables directly to the patrons of Hammerstein's theater.

The girls were raised on a Linn County farm, but their father told them they were nobility. Thomas Cherry claimed to have been the gardener for the family of an English earl. He fell for the earl's daughter, with whom he eloped across the Atlantic, settling in Massachusetts. As if this lineage were not impressive enough, Effie Cherry also claimed her mother was a direct descendant of Edward Rawson, Secretary of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for 30 years.

In the mid-1850s, Thomas, his wife Laura, and their infant daughter Ella left Massachusetts for Iowa. Cherry called himself a landscape painter, but, so far as any of his Linn County neighbors could tell, he was really a farmer. The family grew, and by 1871 Thomas and Laura had six girls and two boys, though one son was to die in infancy and a daughter from a childhood illness. Then Laura Cherry died, and Ella, Elizabeth, Addie, Effie, and Jessie, with their brother Nathan, had to help their father manage the farm. Soon Nathan left—without saying where he was going—and Thomas died in the mid-1880s. Most accounts

of the sisters' lives call the girls young orphans—but at least three were past 20 by the time their father died.

For several years the sisters were content to manage the farm, but in 1893 they were determined to try something new. As schoolgirls, they had shown a certain flair for skits and recitals. One classmate remembers that the five sisters did not mumble through the Friday afternoon recitals as students usually did: "one time Ella gave something in which she was supposed to be a hunter. What did she do but throw a dummy pigeon of some sort in the air and then shoot at it. It scared everyone including the teacher, half to death."

They decided to give a performance at Marion. Perhaps they needed money in order to search for their brother Nathan, who had not been heard from since he left home. Or maybe, as one rumor has it, they desperately wanted to see the Chicago World's Fair. More likely, though, they simply needed the money to support the 40-acre farm that circumstances had forced them to manage.

Effie, who quickly became the leader of the group, rented Daniel's Opera House in Marion for five dollars a night. The sisters made all of the arrangements for the production, even distributing handbills with crude portraits of themselves in the streets of Marion. Tickets sold for 10¢, 20¢, and 30¢ each. On January 21, 1893 Ella, Effie, and Jessie made their debut, appearing on stage with hair painted a bright gold—an effect created with left-over sign paint—and attired just as ludicrously. Effie sang a solo, followed by Jessie who played the harmonica. Next Ella acted the part of a black-face minstrel in a comic ballad. The show lasted slightly over an hour, and netted the sisters \$250.

The account of the performance in the next day's issue of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* was one of the best reviews the sisters would receive for many years: "The entertainment given at Daniel's Opera House by the Cherry

Concert Company was a polished and recherche affair. The people of this handsome overgrown village on Indian Creek absolutely crowded and jammed, pushed and hauled, and literally walked over one another in wild efforts to procure seats. . . ."

Although the *Gazette* was not overly critical of the performance, neither was it overwhelmed by the sisters' talent. The reviewer did note that "the sisters had a keen appreciation of Uncle Sam's legal tender," concluding that "The public wanted fun, the public got it; the young ladies wanted money and they got it."

Confident after this success, the ladies made plans for a repeat performance, obtaining booking at Greene's Opera House in Cedar Rapids, one of the largest theaters between Chicago and Denver.

The Marion audience had been composed of neighbors and friends, whose theatrical standards were limited. But some of the most distinguished citizens of Cedar Rapids, accustomed to performers such as Lillian Russell and Otis Skinner saw the show at Greene's. The *Gazette's* review undoubtedly reflected their reaction: "Such unlimited gall as was exhibited last night at Greene's Opera House is past the understanding of ordinary mortals. They are no doubt respectable girls and probably educated in some few things, but their knowledge of the stage is worse than none at all . . . if some indefinable act of modesty could not have warned them that they were acting the parts of monkeys, it does seem like the overshoes thrown at them would have conveyed the idea in a more substantial manner. . . . Possibly the most ridiculous thing of the entire performance was an essay read by one of the poor girls in which she plead for the uplifting of the stage and hoped that no one would be harmed by anything they may have witnessed during the evening."

Angered by the review, but not too angry to

seize an opportunity for free publicity, the sisters visited the *Gazette* office, demanding the paper print a retraction. The *Gazette* editors told them to write their own letter. The girls obliged: "The Cherry Sisters Concert That appeared in the *Gazette* the other evening was intily a mistake and we take it back The young ladies wer refined and modist in every respict And their intertanement was as good as any that has been given in the city by home people. The noise and tumult that was raised in the house was not done as stated by the Cedar Rapids people but by a lot of toughs that came down from marion with the intention of creating a disturbance. . . ."

Supposedly this was to have ended the affair, but three days later Addie Cherry swore out a complaint against the city editor of the *Gazette*, Fred P. Davis, charging him with libel. The *Gazette* took it calmly, suggesting the trial be held at the sisters' next performance.

Many people believed the suit against Davis was not in earnest, and when the authorities agreed to hold the trial at Greene's, they suspected the sisters and the paper of collusion. They grew more suspicious as articles concerning the sisters appeared in the *Gazette* each day leading up to the performance. On the day before the performance, the paper urged its readers to attend the trial, and suggested a



Effie, Jessie, and Addie Cherry

screen be placed in front of a jury bound to contain some bald-headed men, since "there was nothing in the world, except the Cherry Sisters, that would hypnotize the small boy in the gallery and cause him to fling cabbage like the shining mark of a bald head." The *Gazette* warned: "Promiscuous running about the house is prohibited, although there is no penalty for violation of that rule."

The performance was held in March, 1893. The manager made a rare appearance at the beginning of the show, asking the members of the audience to restrain themselves. When he reminded them that the sisters were fellow citizens, the crowd reacted with cries of "No! No! Not for a minute!"

Lizzie and Effie appeared on stage as the curtain rose, and were greeted with kazoos, horns, and whistles. After a few moments the sisters could not be heard above the roar of the crowd. The trial was swift; the verdict severe. Davis, the city editor, was found guilty and sentenced to:

proceed at once to the said (Cherry Sisters) farm and diligently manage the same, especially see to it that the pigs are fed at the proper time, that cows do not go past their milking without due attention, that the ducks are regularly driven to water, and that the chickens are penned at night.

The verdict continued:

We further find that when the said Cherry Sisters shall return from their triumphal tour, the said Davis shall submit himself to the choice of the said sisters, beginning with the eldest, and the first one who will consent to such an alliance to that one shall be then and there joined in the holy bonds of matrimony.

Although the *Gazette* gained almost as much publicity from the performance as the sisters, it did not like the idea of their representing the culture of Cedar Rapids and Iowa to the rest of the nation. Immediately following the huge, one-page article on the performance and trial was an editorial:

Now that this foolishness is over there is another matter to consider: these girls intend to go to Chicago and give an exhibition. That might be a great deal of fun for the people of the World's Fair city, but wouldn't it be a pretty black eye for Iowa?

Their statewide reputation assured, the sisters got billing at the Burtis Opera House in Davenport. The *Davenport Democrat* dubbed this engagement the "coup de maitre" of the season, adding that the audience did not restrict itself to showering the sisters with applause. Almost anything that could be concealed under a coat was hurled at the ladies. At the request of the theater's management, the *Democrat* printed a notice that revolvers had to be left at the door, and rocks that would not pass through a two-inch ring were to be prohibited.

Since three of the sisters had to stay in Marion to nurse "Old Boss," the family cow, only two made the trip to Davenport. The morning after the performance the *Democrat* reported the audience indulged in nothing more than a little rank horseplay "that exactly comported with the unutterably rank show."

The reception at Davenport was mild compared to what the girls were met with a few months later at the Grand Opera House in Dubuque. Box seats sold for \$1.00, general admission tickets for as much as 50¢, the sisters receiving half the gate.

As usual, the audience accompanied the opening songs with potatoes, onions, tin cans, and cabbages. But later someone went too far, squirting a Babcock fire extinguisher into one of the sister's faces. She fled, her blue gown, black slippers (with gaudy buckles), and white stockings drenched. The other sister appeared in a denim shirt and matching overalls, reportedly carrying a shotgun, but was driven back by a "volley of turnips." "A meek and much subdued" youth attempted to secure order, but he also fled when an old tin wash boiler was thrown on the stage. William Roehl, the the-

ater manager, had hired the marshal and nine of his men to maintain order, but none of the officers attempted to quiet the crowd. As the Cherry Sisters fled, their carriage was battered with eggs by a group of young boys.

The mayor of Dubuque, fearing a lawsuit and hoping to use the situation for political advantage, ordered a full-scale investigation of the incident. Witnesses were summoned to a meeting at the city marshal's office, where one of the city aldermen assumed the role of prosecutor.

The first witness was Manager Roehl, who testified that instances of audience violence had occurred during previous performances by the sisters. He claimed that everyone entering the gallery had been searched. Roehl accused the marshal of attempting to extort money from the sisters for protection, and stated that, although he did not order the marshal to stop the disturbance, neither did he tell him to wait until the audience had ripped up the seats before intervening. Only after the wash boiler was thrown upon the stage, did the marshal stop the performance. That was when the audience began throwing vegetables with a vengeance. Roehl concluded that, had Marshal Rice arrested some of the ringleaders, the "violence" would have been averted.

Marshal Rice was called to the witness stand. There were seven policemen in the opera house, he told the committee, and each understood that vegetable throwing and general rowdiness were expected by both the sisters and Roehl. His men were under orders not to interfere unless the crowd damaged the theater. Any mention of money for police protection, he said, had been made strictly in a joking manner, and he pointed out that if Roehl had ordered him and his deputies to stop the performance, they would have done so at once.

By the next meeting of the council, a committee had prepared an eight-page document fixing much of the blame on advance publicity, which led the crowd to believe obnoxious be-

havior was not only to be tolerated, but was expected. Roehl himself, the report alleged, contributed to this impression, and made little effort to quell the disturbance once it had begun. The committee gently admonished Marshal Rice for relinquishing the supervision of his men to Roehl.

Since the police had no reason to expect that people would continue to harass the sisters after they had left the theater, the committee decided the police were not negligent in their failure to prevent the egg assault on the ladies' carriage. The report was approved by the council, but the sisters were not placated, and sued the city of Dubuque. The suit failed, and the matter was forgotten.

The Cherry Sisters continued to tour the state, making appearances in Jefferson, La Porte City, and Grinnell. They traveled to Kansas and Illinois, then to New York, in October, 1896, where they were enthusiastically received by East Coast audiences, who, much like their Midwestern counterparts, hissed, booed, and threw rotten vegetables. But New York critics mistakenly assumed that Iowans took the sisters seriously. As one suggested, the ladies were "probably respected at home and ought to have stayed there."

After finishing their engagement in the East, they traveled to California, stopping in towns and cities along the way. One of their first engagements after returning to Iowa in the spring of 1897 was at Foster's Opera House in Des Moines. The *Iowa State Register*, shrinking from the light they cast on Iowa, vigorously attacked the sisters. "They have toured the country as productions of Iowa, but until now the capital city of the fair state they have humiliated has been spared the affliction of their presence on the stage." After debating whether the performers or their audience should be the more pitied, the *Register* quickly summarized: "It was the most insipid, stale,

weary, tiresome, contemptible two hours work we have ever seen on the stage. Every man who laughed or jeered or hooted or howled at them reviled himself."

Perhaps the reviewer was unaware that his own boss, Richard P. Clarkson, owner and editor of the *Register*, had been in attendance at the performance. According to the *Montezuma Republican*, Clarkson fought a vegetable duel with future Iowa Senator Lafayette Young. The fight began when he accidentally hit Young with a poorly-aimed cabbage. It took State Printer Freeman Conaway to reconcile the two men, who had turned from the sisters on stage to bombard each other with rotten vegetables. By the time the curtain had been rung down, "they were all three wrapped in each others embrace, weeping."

The sisters continued performing around the state, their critics tirelessly keeping pace, inventing new phrases and images to describe what they could hardly believe. Billy Hamilton of the *Odebolt Chronicle* wrote:

Effie is an old jade of 50 summers, Jessie a frisky filly of 40, and Addie, the flower of the family, a capering monstrosity of 35. Their long skinny arms, equipped with talons at the extremities, swung mechanically, and anon waved frantically at the suffering audience. The mouths of their rancid features opened like caverns, and sounds like the wailing of damned souls issued therefrom. . . . Effie is spavined, Addie is stringhalt, and Jessie, the only one who showed her stockings, has legs with calves as classic in their outlines as the curves of a broom handle.

When the *Des Moines Leader* reprinted the review, the sisters sued for \$25,000. Judge C.A. Bishop of the Polk County District Court asked for a performance of selections from their act, and after witnessing the display, decided in favor of the *Leader*. Undaunted, the sisters appealed to the State Supreme Court. Under examination, Editor Hamilton described the show as "the most ridiculous performance I ever saw. There was no orchestra there. The pianist left after the thing was half over. She could not stand the racket and left." The court

reaffirmed the district court's decision.

The sisters lost the trial, but won publicity. They continued to appear in Iowa and the nation until 1903. Jessie died suddenly that year, while on tour in Hot Springs, Arkansas, from the combined effects of typhoid and malaria. She was 33.

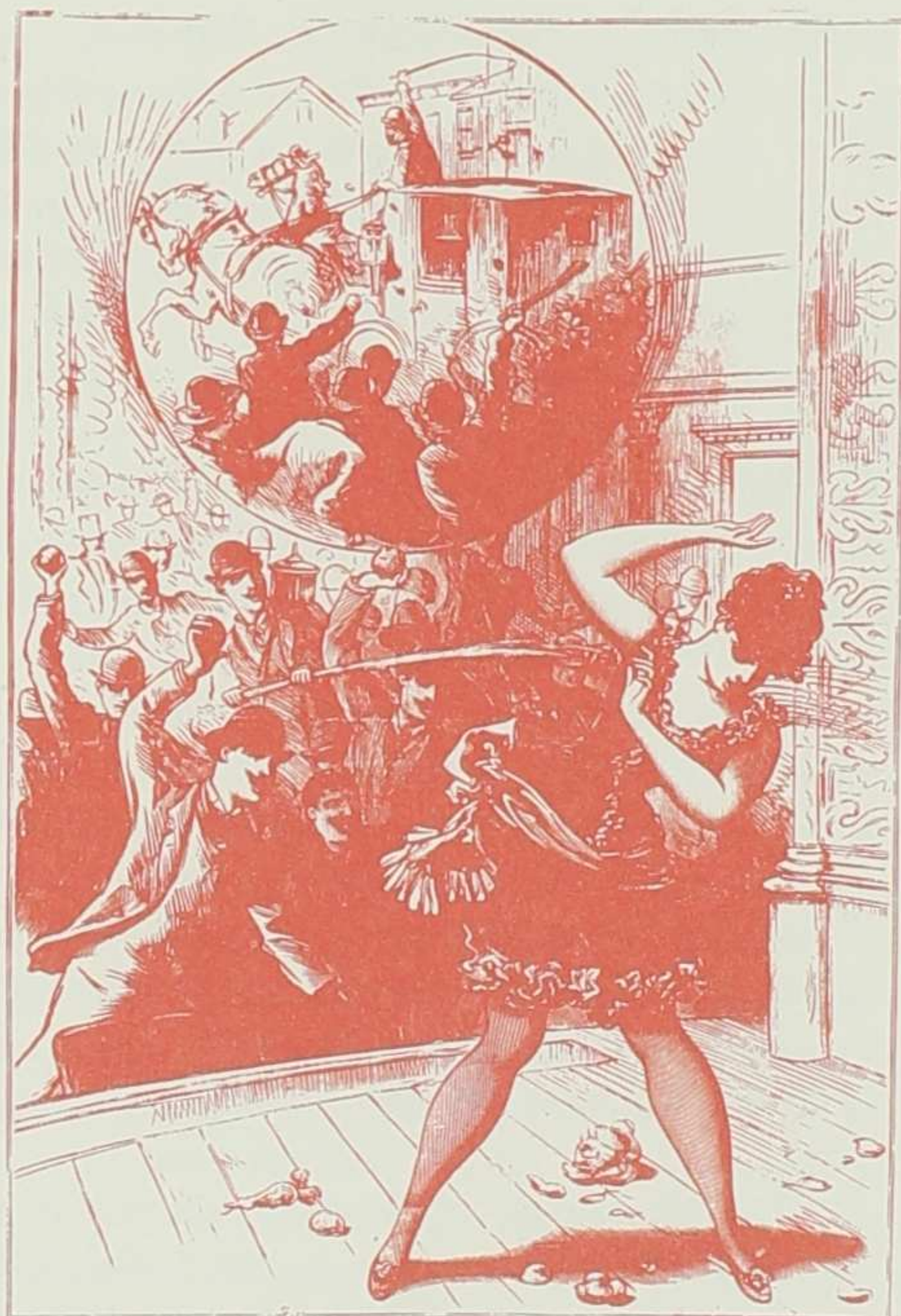
Her funeral was held in Cedar Rapids on October 7, little noticed, and with only brief mention in the personals column of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. During the next few years, Addie and Effie made infrequent appearances near Cedar Rapids. They opened a bakery—specializing in cherry pies—there during World War I, Elizabeth doing the baking, Effie managing the business end, and Addie helping wherever she could. The sisters converted part of the bakery into living quarters and set up housekeeping there in 1921.

The bakery was moderately successful, and in 1924 Effie Cherry ran as an independent candidate for mayor in Cedar Rapids. Her platform included an 8 PM curfew for children and a 9 PM curfew for adults in the winter. She promised to look into the problem of garbage, which she felt should be hauled away "before it walks away by itself." She also advocated the prohibition of profanity on the streets. Too many parks, she claimed, were also damaging the moral fiber of the community. "I like beautiful parks, but the young folk are going to them times when they shouldn't and in a way they shouldn't."

Wearing a long sweeping skirt with a high-necked waist, black hat, and black gloves, Effie launched her campaign in the familiar territory of the Majestic Theater. She thanked the

Note on Sources

The newspaper and manuscript collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa were the primary sources of information contained in this article. Other sources include the files of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and the Cedar Rapids Public Library.



"Played the hose on her. A wild and disgraceful scene in the Grand Opera House, Dubuque, Ia., during a recent performance given by the Cherry Sisters," June 17, 1893 (from *The National Police Gazette*: New York)

newspapers for the notice she and her sisters had been given in the past, but declared that the stories about a screen being used to ward off vegetable assaults were untrue.

Effie received 805 votes from a total of over 10,000. Undiscouraged, she ran again two years later, on a platform of cleanliness, thriftiness, and morality. The *New York Times* reported that Effie was counting on the farm vote, and hoped the mayoralty would lead to the governorship or a senate seat. This time she received less than 5% of the primary vote.

But, even while they were managing the bakery, the sisters did not entirely neglect their stage career. In fact, they attempted countless comebacks, the earliest in 1918 when they appeared as a special feature with the Williams Stock Company at the Majestic The-

ater. The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* had mellowed toward the girls, referring to them now as "distinguished local artists," and reporting ticket sales so brisk that steps had to be taken to prevent scalpers from buying up huge blocks of tickets. Although the article noted that the fortune the Cherry Sisters made at the height of their career was lost through extensive litigation, the sisters made it clear that they were not appealing to charity. They wanted the performance to be judged on its merits.

After the performance on June 20, the *Gazette* critic tersely observed that the sisters "were applauded last evening instead of having things thrown at them." Following this successful — if not overwhelmingly triumphant — comeback, the sisters were satisfied with running their bakery. But when the bakery failed during the depression, they returned to the stage.

Early in 1933 they appeared in Des Moines, the *Des Moines Register* reporting that their act had withstood the ravages of time: "business boomed and the audience booed." But the women had not swallowed their pride. When the theater manager attempted to pick them up at the station in an old, two-horse shay, Addie insisted on a conventional taxi. At Addie's request the theater posted notices warning the other performers not to smoke, swear, or in any way annoy the sisters. The only other act on the bill featured a burlesque queen and "ten sweethearts."

Late in 1934, the *Gazette* received a letter from Carl Whyte, the Cherry Sisters' manager. He claimed the sisters were appearing with burlesque acts throughout the nation, and were back in the "big dough" because of his shrewdness.

He also said he had proposed to Effie, and though she was twice his age, she had not yet declined. In fact, he claimed, she wouldn't allow him to speak to another girl, and forbade his drinking anything stronger than milk. The sisters denied all of his claim, including his

responsibility for their success. He was, in fact, only one of many managers — the sisters hired six in seven years.

But Whyte's claims were partially true, and the sisters did travel extensively in 1934, appearing in New York (on a bill with Gracie Allen and Tallulah Bankhead), Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and many towns in Iowa. One of their last appearances was with Little Johnny, Philip Morris's famous page boy, at a radio station WHO barn dance, held at the Shrine Auditorium in Des Moines. Interviewed after the performance — which was attended by 2,500 — the sisters denied having ever performed behind a screen. There had been problems with some audiences, they admitted, but "you are always apt to run into some ignorant people."

With the death of Ella in 1934, and of Elizabeth in 1936, the two remaining sisters, Effie and Addie, were reduced to meager circumstances. They had been living in what was left of the Cherry estate — a basement — before being taken to the county nursing home in the winter of 1934. When Elizabeth died in 1936, her personal assets consisted of \$45 and a quarter interest in the family farm, which was

involved in litigation. The Cherry Sisters' claim was dubious.

Addie and Effie struggled on into the 1940s, moving from one location to another in Cedar Rapids.

Addie was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 83 in Cedar Rapids, and in 1944 Effie died of heart failure.

Both were buried in Linwood Cemetery, Cedar Rapids.

New Yorkers, who never forgot the Cherry Sisters, were told of Effie's death in a full column obituary in the *Times*. An editorial later appeared in the *Times* calling the sisters, "one of the strangest episodes in American vaudeville."

If a person isn't too sentimental about the vanished glories of vaudeville, he must admit that the Cherry Sisters had competition. There must have been times when other acts going around the circuits were almost as bad as theirs. During the ten years when they were on the stage the sisters must have had to fight hard to keep from learning something about dramatic technique, or to keep from putting into practice what they couldn't help learning. What had been naive in them at the beginning must have been pretty sophisticated at the end. Maybe the laugh was on their side. Maybe the Cherry Sisters knew better than the public what was really going on. Be this as it may, they left behind an imperishable memory. And they gave more pleasure to their audiences than did many a performer who was merely almost good. □

CONTRIBUTORS

Born in Chicago and raised in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, NANCY DERR attended Oberlin College and received her B.A. in English there in 1968. In 1979 she was awarded her Ph.D. in American Studies from George Washington University. She teaches American History to adults at the University of Maryland and lives in Washington, D.C.

STEVEN J. FULLER, a native of Russell, Iowa, is working toward a degree in History from the University of Iowa. He serves in the Field Services section of the State Historical Society of Iowa as a volunteer.



The State Historical Society of Iowa is a Division of the Iowa State Historical Department, a state agency created by the Sixty-fifth General Assembly. Along with the Society the Department includes a Division of Historical Museum and Archives (formerly Iowa Department of History and Archives) and a Division of Historic Preservation.