

# 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.

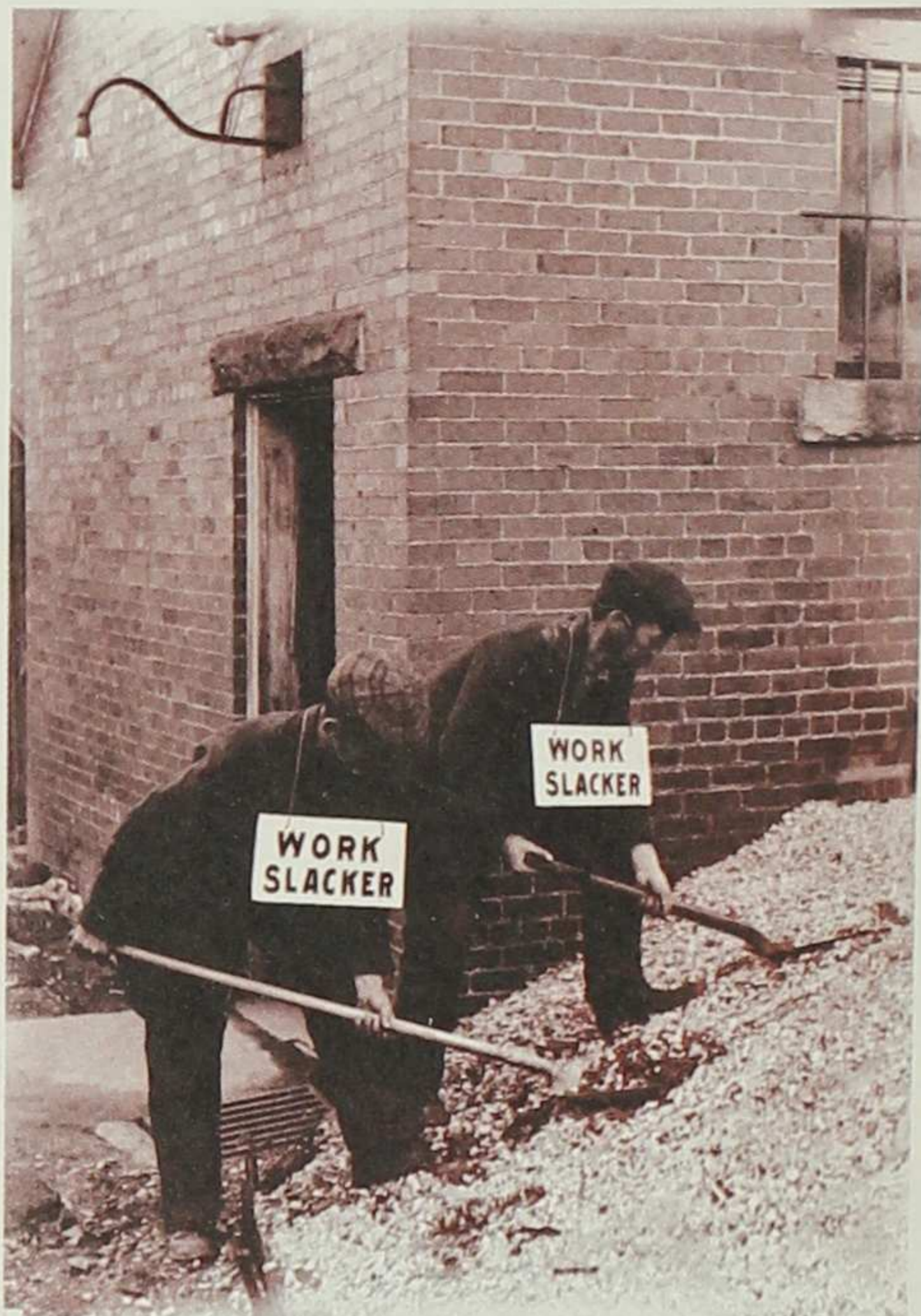
In the newspaper controversy that followed his edict, the only "legal" language allowed in Iowa was often referred to as "American." Despite a few pleas for tolerance and a few demands for proof of the need for the proclamation, the native-stock majority in Iowa thought a ban on foreign tongues was a 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.

**T**he 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.

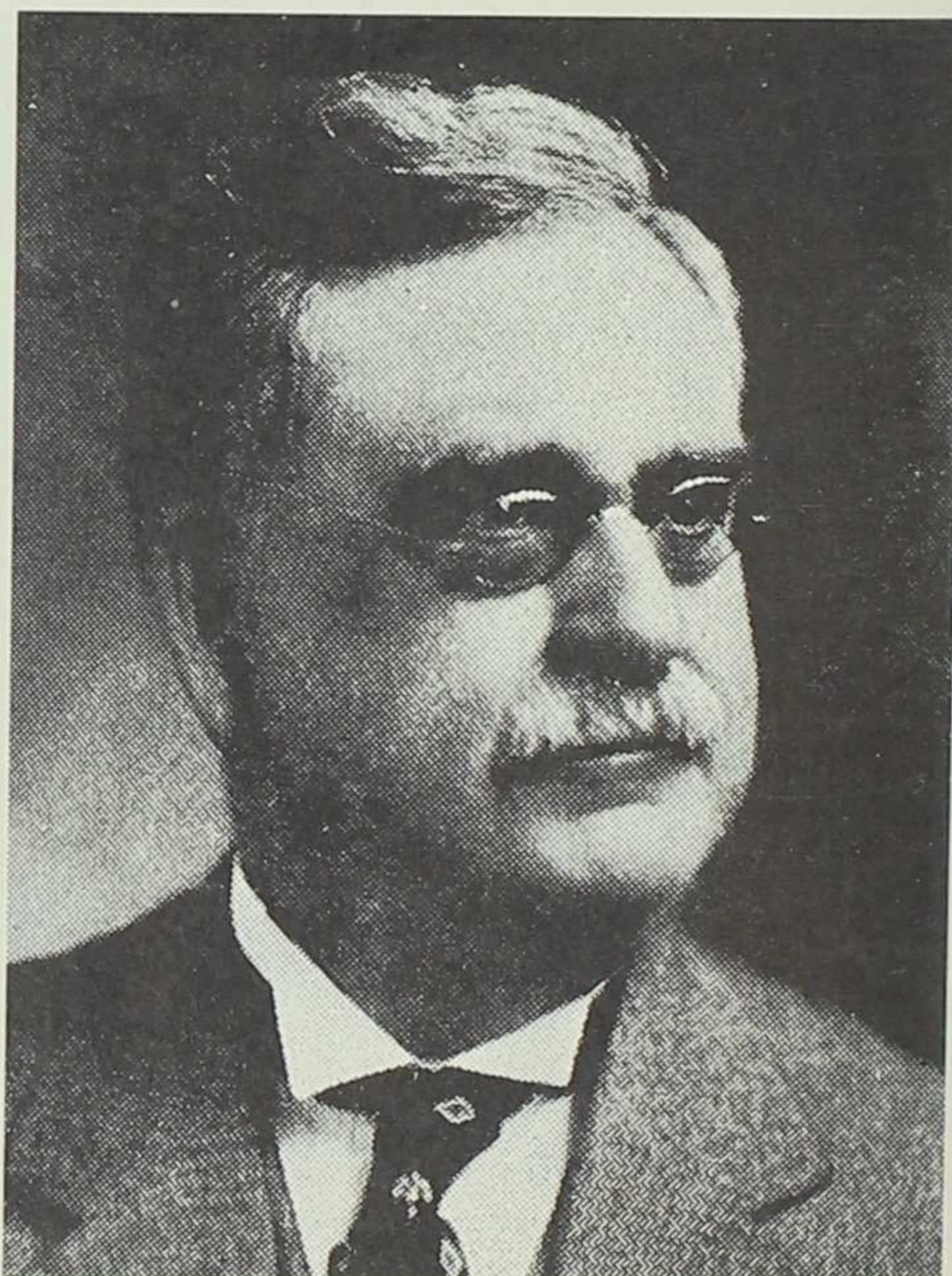
Harding's proclamation may well have been his own idea. He betrayed the quality of his logic about the language ban in a screaming-eagle speech reprinted in the pages of the *Sac Sun*. The *Sun* editor later remarked, "[the speech] hardly becomes the dignity of the chief executive of Iowa."

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.

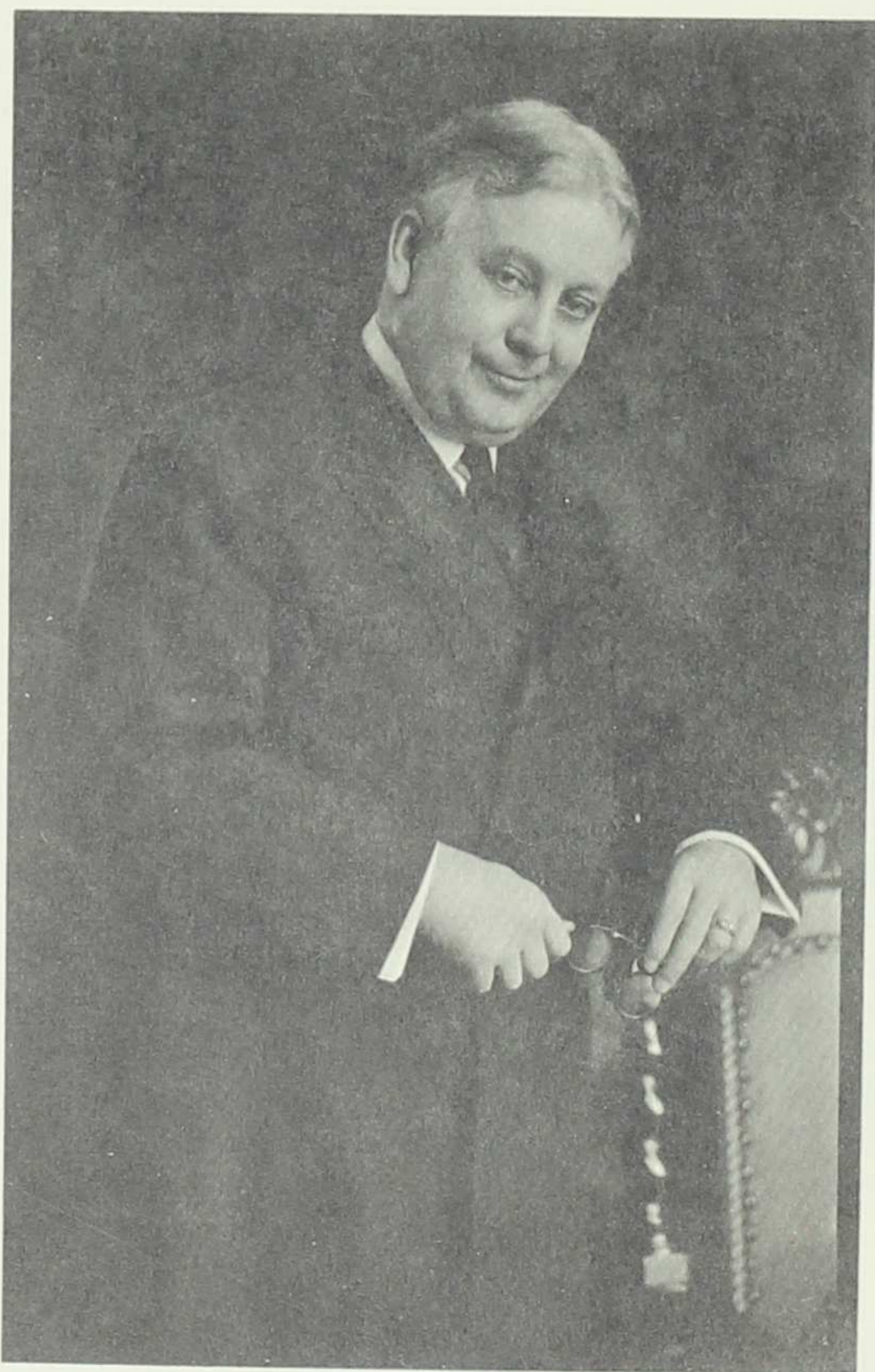
**T**he governor did not make his proclamation lightly. It was strictly enforced. However, in most reported cases, county patriotic organizations—and *not* the state—levied fines against foreign language speakers. These local groups took the ban as legal license for their actions. For example, the so-called 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

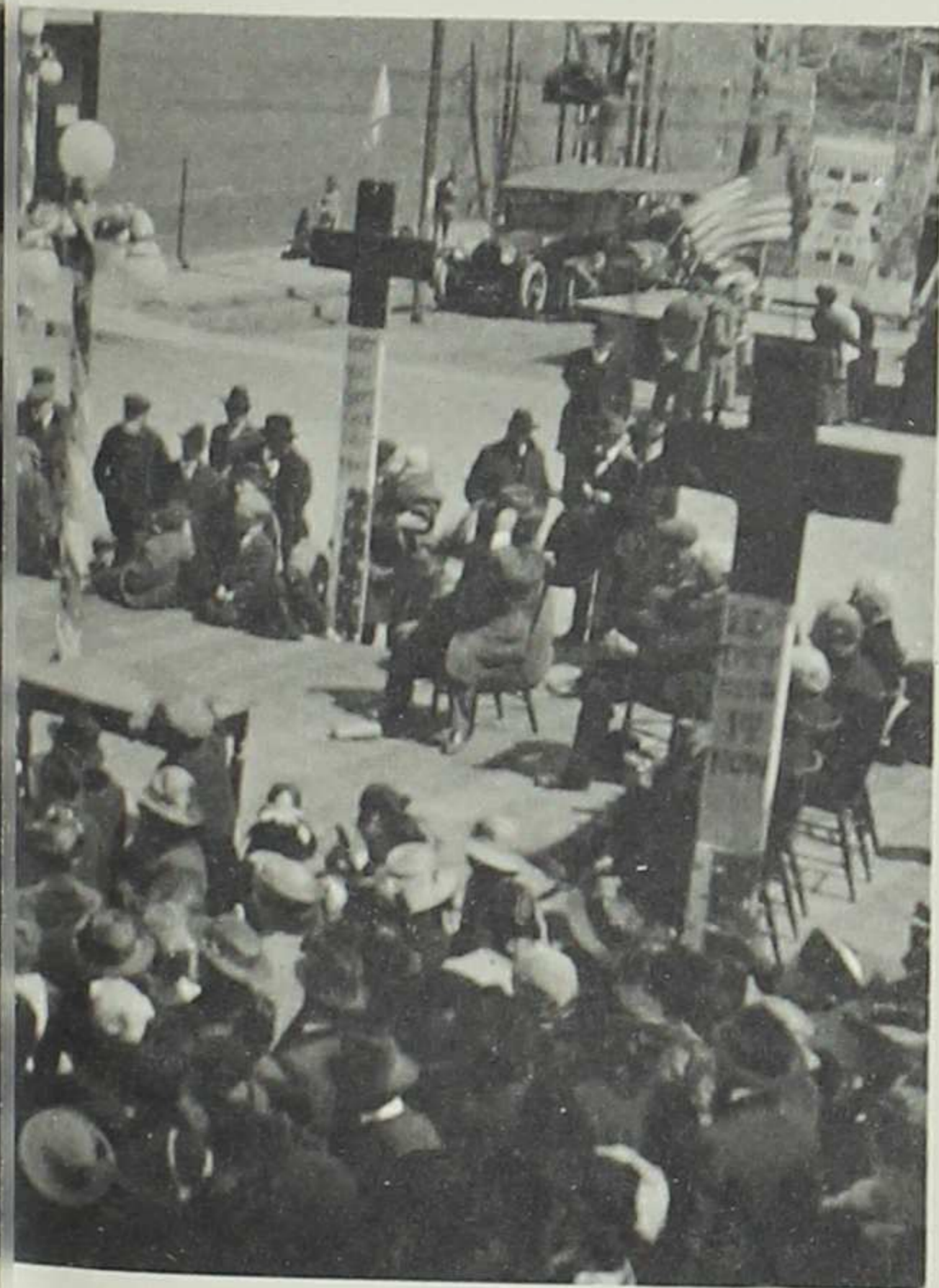


*Three poses of William L. Harding, one addressing a crowd in Lake View, Iowa (courtesy Sioux City Public Museum)*

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-

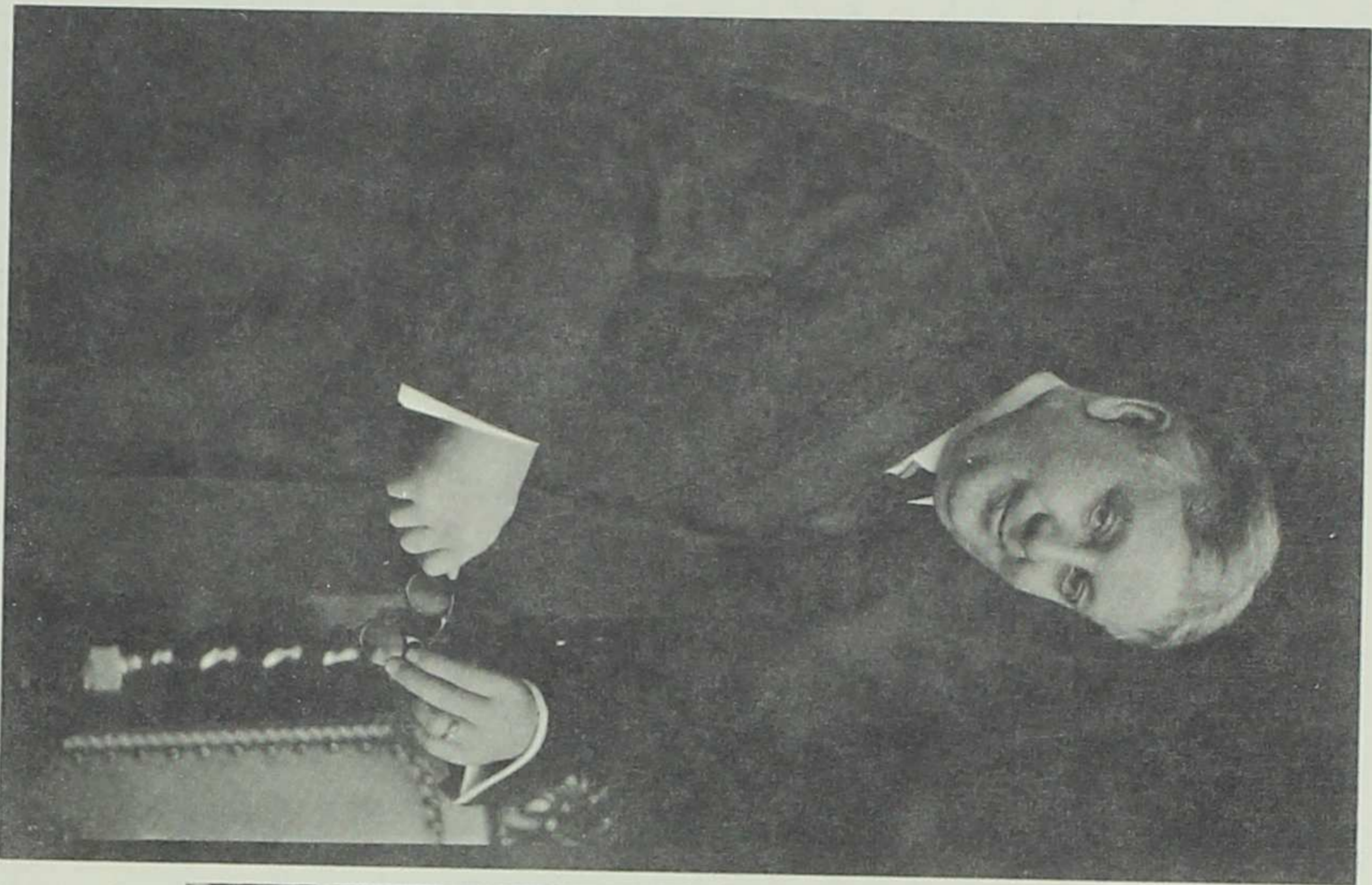
ecided to criticize these authorities, he did not say they were misguided. He said they "duped" others. Yet they were in a slightly different category from the gratuitously cruel or the cat-torturers. He saw them as people who fostered and exploited hatred for ethnic minorities in order to consolidate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

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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. □