

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.

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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 backyard, 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. □