

Local German-Americans told to “get right or get out” during World War I

During World War I, anti-German hysteria swept the American home front, with German soldiers portrayed as bloodthirsty Huns eager to rape and pillage their way through France and onward to America.

Once the U.S. entered the war in April 1917, federal, state, and local government officials moved aggressively to stamp out German “Kultur,” especially the use of German in newsprint, school textbooks, and church services. German-Americans, including those in central Illinois, found themselves under suspicion and often persecuted by this “superpatriot” hysteria.

Communities established local defense councils dedicated to “unification,” a euphemism for a wide range of anti-German activities that included the “prosecution of citizens who, by their expressions, appeared to be disloyal.” The slogan of the McLean County Council of Defense said it all: “Get right or get out.”

At the time of the “Great War,” or what would be mistakenly called “The War to End All Wars,” Bloomington was home to a thriving German community. There were German churches, including St. Mary’s Catholic, Trinity Lutheran, and the Jewish synagogue on N. Prairie St. There was a German-language weekly newspaper called The Bloomington Journal, as well as highly visible German organizations, such as the Turners, or Turnverein, an athletic and social club with a spacious hall on S. Main St. Furthermore, local church services, school classes, and meetings were often conducted in German.

The local Council of Defense, chaired by Bloomington Mayor E.E. Jones, formed in January 1918, though it didn’t begin persecuting German-Americans in earnest until the spring.

On April 1, the council passed resolutions making it a crime to print any paper or publication in German. “The race hatred has reached a new point in our city,” noted Bloomington Journal Editor John Gummerman in his paper’s final German-language edition.

As the hammer fell on The Bloomington Journal, the stockholders of the German-American Bank, located on the 200 block of N. Main St., agreed to “conform to the spirit of the times” by becoming “100 percent American.” They did this by changing the name of their institution to the American State Bank.

Feeding this anti-German frenzy was a steady diet of propaganda. In April, the Irvin Theatre, Bloomington’s finest movie house, showed the film “The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin.” “See with your own eyes what this monster has done,” urged the print campaign, adding, “who are you if your patriotism is not whipped into white hot heat by this

demonstration of kaiserism versus world democracy, of the Madman of Europe trampling on your country's flag.”

In late June, the small but active German communities near Colfax and Anchor in northern McLean County came under attack by “superpatriot” mobs. A crowd of several hundred residents from Colfax and the outlying countryside descended on Immanuel's Evangelical German Lutheran Church in Lawndale Township, demanding the end to German in church services and school classes. There were threats that the school would burn and that a teacher would be “roughly handled.”

Another church and school, St. John's German Lutheran located southeast of Anchor, also faced the threat of mob violence over its use of German.

During the war, Mennonites came under frequent suspicion, primarily because of the church's commitment to nonviolence. In July 1918, Rev. C.R. Egle of the Central Mennonite Church near Flanagan was hauled before a federal official in Bloomington for alleged pro-German activities. The Pantagraph labeled Egle's church a “veritable nest of anti-war intrigue,” all because several young men drafted from the congregation became conscientious objectors.

In September 1917, Joseph Hauptman of Bloomington attempted to enlist in the U.S. Army, but the recruiting officer refused to accept Hauptman because he was born in Hungary (during the war the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany fought together). Undaunted, he enlisted in Peoria, this time telling the recruiting officer he was born in New York.

Hauptman became a sergeant in Co. G of the 35th U.S. Infantry, and on June 6, 1918, he was killed by a German shell. He was the first Bloomington resident killed in battle during the war.