

German-language paper under suspicion during WW I

When the U.S. entered the First World War in 1917, German-American residents in Bloomington and elsewhere were warned: “Get right or get out.” The local German-speaking population came under official and vigilante “superpatriot” harassment, and its churches and schools were ordered to abandon spoken and written German.

Also targeted were German businesses, most visibly the Bloomington Journal, the city’s German-language weekly newspaper.

By the late nineteenth century, Germans were arguably the largest and most influential ethnic community in Bloomington. The city’s first German newspaper was likely the Anzeiger, established in 1868. Others followed, including the short-lived Deutsche Volks-Zeitung and the McLean County Deutsche Presse. The Journal began publishing in the late 1870s and would survive well into the 20th century.

During the anxious years of World War I, the Journal’s publisher and editor was John B. Gummerman. Born in Bavaria in 1878, Gummerman came to the U.S. in 1893, his family settling in Aurora, Ill. Some four years later, his parents returned to Germany, though a now 17-year-old John decided to stay behind in America. A U.S. citizen by 1901, Gummerman learned the printing and publishing trade in Aurora, and for 18 years worked for the Volksfreund, a German newspaper from that city.

In early 1912, Gummerman purchased the late Julius Dietrich’s printing business in Bloomington, Dietrich having been the Journal’s previous publisher. From his new home in Bloomington, Gummerman carried on the Journal as a German-language weekly (and, at least for a while, continued to publish the Aurora Volksfreund as well). He also ran a print shop, doing all sorts of jobs in both German and English.

Two years later, Gummerman purchased the attractive commercial building at 217 East Front Street (today occupied by the A. Gridley Antiques), and that became home to the Journal and the family printing business. At this time the Journal’s readership extended beyond Bloomington-Normal to include rural McLean County (and its not-inconsiderable number of German-speaking farmers), as well as some surrounding counties. The Pantagraph called the Journal “one of the leading German newspapers in the state.”

The U.S. declared war on April 6, 1917, though it wasn’t until the following spring that anti-German sentiment on the U.S. home front picked up a full head of steam. On April 1, 1918, the McLean County Executive Committee of the State Council of Defense declared it “an act of disloyalty to the United States to print any paper or other publication in the German language,” with the Journal specifically ordered to cease “forthwith” printing in German.

This meeting of the Council of Defense took an even more ominous turn when committee member R.C. Baldwin suggested that the seizure of property might be in order when dealing with unpatriotic Germans in the area. Although the local anti-German campaign never stooped to

such dangerous extralegal action, the council was busy with other dubious measures, such as banning German textbooks in area schools.

In early April 1918, Gummerman ran a feisty editorial announcing the Journal's switchover to English. Although there was little choice but to carry out the ban (short of shutting down the press), he made sure readers knew he was none too happy about it. "The Journal will keep on being a champion of true democracy and liberty," said Gummerman. "We shall make our greatest efforts to bring to light persons who claim to be patriots, but when it comes to genuine patriotism from the heart of man, are found wanting, and commit undemocratic acts to cover up their own selfish motives."

Fortunately, in the ensuing months the overheated anti-German campaign began to cool as all but the more blinkered superpatriots realized the local German community posed no threat whatsoever to national security. With the August 16, 1918 issue, Gummerman began publishing part of his newspaper in English and part in German. He defended the change, noting that it made no sense to suppress the Journal when local residents had easy access to other German-language newspapers from Illinois or elsewhere. To add insult to injury, a number of these competitors were having success luring local readers away from the hometown Journal

Apart from the bottom line, Gummerman said he had contacted authorities in Washington, D.C. and learned that the local defense council's executive board, by ordering him to stop printing in German, had acted contrary to the views of the national council, making the ban unsupportable.

The Journal remained an ongoing concern until 1939, though it had stopped publishing in German in 1931. When Gummerman passed away in 1961 at the age of 82, his son Bernard and his family kept the printing side of the business going into the early 1990s.