

Independence Day 1917 marked by war, labor unrest

One-hundred years ago this Tuesday area residents celebrated a rather subdued Fourth of July.

Looming over Independence Day 1917 was the World War, which the United States had entered three months earlier. By early July, several thousand area residents were under arms and in training camps and bases scattered across the land, preparing to head overseas as part of the American Expeditionary Forces.

The year 1917 offers little solace for those pining for some mythical American past of a unified, flag-waving nation free of dissent and disorder. Rather, 1917 embodies the inherent messiness—the tragedies and triumphs alike—of the American story.

On the home front, African Americans from the Deep South poured into northern cities eager to fill factory jobs vital to the war effort. They also faced an increasingly hostile racial climate that would lead to several of the bloodiest race riots in the nation's history. Pacifists (including local Mennonites), socialists and others who silently opposed the war, or actively spoke out against it, were marginalized or jailed. Likewise, German-American communities in Bloomington and elsewhere faced a heavy handed crackdown on their language and culture.

And the nation was riven by labor unrest of a kind and scale we can scarcely imagine today. In Bloomington-Normal, a bitter strike against the company operating the streetcar system threatened to turn violent. And it did, in a big way, on July 5.

Boy, those sure were the good old days!

Although the World War began in the summer of 1914, the U.S. didn't join the fight for nearly three years. By early 1917, though, it was apparent to most observers that America's entry into the "War to End All Wars" was not a matter of if, but of when. The Bloomington chapter of the Red Cross, which had organized in 1916, was placed on war footing in February 1917. And by March 28, Bloomington-based Co. D of the Illinois National Guard began staging drills on city streets

The U.S. declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. The first American troops then landed in France on June 25, nine days before Independence Day.

Bloomington Mayor Edward E. Jones issued a rather somber July 4, 1917 proclamation. "The event this year carries with it more than the usual significance owing to the Great World War

and the crisis which our country now faces,” he said. “The event will be marked, no doubt, with a greater degree of solemnity than usual and there will be absent the usual hilarity.”

In this instance, “hilarity” meant raucous celebratory behavior. “The discharge of firearms of every description within the City of Bloomington, whether or not blank cartridges are used, will not be permitted on the Fourth of July,” added Mayor Jones “In times like these, when our country is at war, there are any number of ways to express patriotism that are not in conflict with the law.”

Communities large and small, including Bloomington, also cancelled their public fireworks shows, there being a growing consensus that the explosives used in such displays should instead be diverted to the munitions industry.

During the World War, The Pantagraph often printed letters from local soldiers. On July 4, 1917, Fred E. Murray’s recent letter his peacetime boss of six years, Bloomington undertaker P. W. Coleman, appeared in the newspaper.

“I wish I could leave here, if only for a few days, and go home and visit my folks and friends before we leave, as it may be a long time before we meet again,” wrote Murray, who at the time was stationed at Fort Snelling, Minn. Fortunately, he survived the war and returned to Bloomington, where he eventually opened his own funeral home.

As a rule, Independence Day was a quiet time at the Chicago and Alton Railroad shops, Bloomington’s largest employer at the time. In normal years, the holiday meant the suspension of freight traffic excepting those railcars carrying U.S. mail. But with the outbreak of war and the urgent need to move men and war materiel, slow days were few on the mainline between Chicago and St. Louis. “Freight traffic is so heavy that ... as many trains will be handled today as normally during the busy periods of the fall,” reported the Jul. 4 Pantagraph.

Much like today, Miller Park on the city’s west side served as the summertime gathering place family, friends and neighbors representing all walks of life. “Miller Park is most beautiful just now,” noted The Pantagraph several days before Independence Day 1917. “Swimming, bathing and boating have begun with much interest and the several hot days and evenings bathers were numerous. Many come in the early morning hours to bathe.”

What this newspaper ignored was the ugly fact that the park’s beaches and bathhouses were segregated by race, with African Americans consigned to not only separate but grossly unequal facilities.

Much of the talk at Miller Park that Fourth of July had to do with the ongoing streetcar strike, which was led by conductors and motormen who were fired by the Bloomington & Normal Railway and Light Co. for attempting to organize a union.

The tense standoff reached a climax with the Jul. 5 appearance of the national labor leader Mary Harris “Mother” Jones. The 80-year-old firebrand called on the strikers and their supporters to shut down the streetcar system. After a night of street battles, some 1,400 National Guardsmen from Chicago and Peoria arrived by rail to restore order. They camped out on the courthouse square and powerhouse building in the warehouse district, where curious residents found rows of pup tents, parading soldiers and machine gun emplacements.

Within days management recognized the union and agreed to a pay hike and a reduction in the workday. Incidentally, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 752, which represents Connect Transit drivers, mechanics, and other employees, traces its beginnings to this strike. That means Local 752 is celebrating its 100th anniversary this month.

To commemorate Independence Day 1917, The Pantagraph printed “To Our Natal Day,” a poem by Bloomington versifier John Francis Myers. Although mawkish to a fault, a few lines from Myers’s paean to all things red, white and blue still resonate today, these 100 years later:

Yes, glorious day thou gavest birth
The greatest nation on the earth.
A glorious haven did prepare
For the oppressed from everywhere.