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Southwestern Oklahoma State University

“No Man Is Tolerated Who Does Not Do Honor To That Flag”

**A View of German-American Oppression
In Western Oklahoma During World War I**

A Paper Submitted To

Dr. Roger Bromert

Historical Research Class

By

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Elk City, Oklahoma

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“NO MAN IS TOLERATED WHO DOES NOT DO HONOR TO THAT FLAG”

German-American Oppression in Western Oklahoma During World War I

“There is disloyalty in the United States, and it must be absolutely crushed. Are you going to...see to it that no man is tolerated who does not do honor to that flag?”¹

Thus stated President Woodrow Wilson at the base of the Washington Monument during a Flag Day speech to the nation in 1917. Although this statement is not widely remembered outside of academic circles today, the actions that these words sparked created a paranoia and suspicion that spread through many parts of the nation.

During World War I, German-Americans in Western Oklahoma had many of their civil liberties suppressed through an extra-legal entity known as the Oklahoma Council of Defense which was a creation of federal and state authorities and gained strength through the press. To several men and women of this area who were persecuted during this time because they spoke the German language, were members of a religion that practiced pacifism, or simply held unpopular views, the tone of President Wilson’s speech created a patriotic fervor that gave legitimacy to many of the oppressions they had to endure.

Oklahoma had only been a state for ten years upon the United States’ entry into the First World War. The state population in 1910 was 1,657,155 of which over 10,000 were born in a German-speaking nation.² German-Americans constituted the largest single minority group in the state. Many of these immigrants were farmers who settled in

¹ Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926),207

² Douglas Hale, “European Immigrants in Oklahoma: A Survey,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 53, no. 2 (Summer, 1975):182.

north-central and west-central areas of the state. Traditionally, these people were heterogeneous and often bonded together in communities around a common religion.

German cultural influence early in the century was evident from the names of several Oklahoma towns including Berlin, Bismarck, Hamburg, Kiel, Korn, and Meno. Several communities also had financial institutions that carried the name "German State" or "German National Bank." There were also a large number of German-language newspapers operating throughout the state. During the late 1800's and early 1900's there were fifteen weekly and one daily publishing in Oklahoma.³ Even second-generation German-Oklahomans held on to many of the cultural traditions that had been handed to them. It was not uncommon for the German language to be spoken on the streets of several western Oklahoma cities and towns in the 1910's. Among the German Lutheran and German Mennonite Churches, it was normal for religious services to be conducted in the German language.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 began to produce strains on Oklahoma society even as early as the period of U.S. neutrality. Persons of Anglo- American descent were inclined to sympathize with Great Britain and her allies, while there was an early tendency for German-Americans to have affection for their former homeland. Not that there was support for the militarism pursued by the Kaiser, but a cultural bond transcended the Atlantic. Because there were more recent foreign immigrants in Oklahoma during this time than there are today, loyalties tended to be stronger to European homelands than is generally understood today. Intense feelings often lead to conflict and intolerance as the war came home to many Oklahomans.

³ Edda Bilger, "The Oklahoma Vorwarts': The Voice of German-Americans in Oklahoma During World War I," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1976):246.

One of the most important institutions that brought Germans together in community and spirit was religion. The largest religious sects were the Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics. But it was the Mennonites that were deemed by many Oklahomans to be the most different from all the others. Many Catholics and non-Mennonite Protestants were suspicious of the Mennonite's because of their tendency to form tight-knit communities with little outside interaction. The Mennonite's pacifism would also mark them for scorn when conscription started.

At the onset of the American declaration of war in April 1917, the feeling in many western Oklahoma communities was apprehension to the European conflict and mild opposition to the draft. The United States had not initiated conscription for military service since the Civil War. During that time there were draft riots and a sense of a "poor man's fight and a rich man's war," due to the fact that wealthy individuals could pay for a substitute if their number was called. The feelings of unfairness in this form of conscription still permeated much of American society in 1914. An example of this early anti-draft feeling is an article from the *Elk City News-Democrat* of April 12, 1917, on a community meeting on the conscription issue:

All but one of the speakers. . . were against the Conscription Law, and when the vote was taken it was found that only three of about 500 present were for the law. A telegram was sent to our representatives at Washington, stating the number opposed to this proposed law.⁴

The federal government was not ignorant to this underlying feeling across the nation to a conscription law. Efforts began in an attempt to make mandatory wartime service seem more equitable than it had been fifty-four years ago and institute a local authority to oversee its implementation. Local draft boards would be made up of

⁴ "Many Do Not Believe In Conscription," *Elk City News-Democrat*, 12 April 1917, p.1.

community leaders who would decide the fitness of young men to serve in the military and hear and decide questions of exemption. The program would be intended to create more confidence and acceptance of conscription.

Besides a popular feeling of unfairness in the draft, the other major obstacle for the Wilson administration to place the United States on a war footing was to instill a sense of need and urgency in defeating the Central Powers in Europe. This task was given to the Committee on Public Information headed by George Creel. Often referred to as the “Creel Committee,” this organization’s purpose was to foster hatred for an enemy most people knew little about.

Creel’s mission was to disseminate information, but his actions were pure propaganda. According to Dr. David M. Kennedy of Stanford University, “the paramount ideal in Creel’s mind . . . was the ancient American longing for a unanimous spirit, for a single, consensual set of values that would guarantee the social harmony. . . .⁵ In an attempt to breakdown the ethnic ties among many immigrants to their native lands, the CPI and Creel began a campaign for “Americanization.” This effort began with the formation of “Loyalty Leagues” and the employment of university professors to monitor foreign language publications in the country.⁶

As the war progressed, and it became apparent that many American men would not return home, Creel and his group began to unleash a propaganda backlash against persons in the United States who did not appear to be completely loyal to the cause. But the Creel Committee alone should not receive the responsibility for actions that infringed on civil rights in this country. There were other groups that promoted wartime

⁵ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980),63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

propaganda and xenophobia that resulted in discrimination against those who were not considered “100 percent American.” These organizations were the state and county Councils of Defense.

In August 1916, Congress passed the National Defense Act, which authorized the creation of the Council of National Defense. Under its auspices, each state was directed to form state and local councils. On May 16, 1917, the Oklahoma State Council of Defense began its operation under an executive order issued by Governor Robert L. Williams. Fourteen prominent Oklahomans were named to this group, which began to work on forming a committee for each of the state’s seventy-seven counties.⁷

Since the Oklahoma Legislature had adjourned in 1917 and would not meet for another two years, the authority for the operation of the State Council rested with the governor. Governor Robert L. Williams appointed the executive committee of each county with advice from the local postmaster.⁸ This group almost always consisted of the “leading banker, editor, and attorney of the county.”⁹

One cannot overstate the importance of the participation of newspaper editors on council boards. In a time before television or commercial radio, the local newspapers provided isolated, rural readers with most of their information on outside events. Most communities had at least two newspapers that operated on a weekly basis. During these early years of Oklahoma’s existence, most local newspapers served as organs of promotion for their hometowns. But as the war progressed into 1918, most of these local papers took a turn towards advancing the war cause.

⁷ O.A. Hilton, “The Oklahoma Council of Defense and the First World War,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 20, no. 1 (March 1942): 19-20

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

In early 1918, the *Custer Courier*, published in Custer City ran the following article:

At the mid winter meeting of the Oklahoma Press Association . . . resolutions were adopted in which the editors of the state pledged their unlimited support to the government in the prosecution of the war and in which they condemn disloyalty of every nature. The columns of the Oklahoma press will be open to . . . campaigns which will be conducted in the future in the interest of the government.

The editors went on record as opposing disloyalty in any form or fashion, including the practice of some draft registrants who seek to avoid military service by claiming exemption on frivolous grounds¹⁰

The *Courier's* statement clearly shows the path most Oklahoma newspaper editors would take during the war. This support and patriotic fervor from the print media will give more credibility and brashness to the local Council's of Defense as they begin to operate across Oklahoma.

In early 1918, the Oklahoma Council of Defense requested newspapers throughout the state to publish a weekly article entitled "We Must Win The War." Most papers in western Oklahoma ran the articles, which were long on patriotism and short on factual information. On November 8, 1917, this "Win The War" article ran in the *Cordell Beacon*:

"A blank wall and a firing squad may soon be the remedy for pro-Germanism in Oklahoma. . . . We must realize that a disloyal remark is an assassin's shot at every boy wearing khaki. Those living in America can be of but two classes, Americans or enemies. . . . The careless statement you make today will arise like a spectre (sis) at some future date and brand you as a murderer among your neighbors whose sons have been killed in battle."¹¹

The state council sent out a letter to editors across the state appealing for their help, "It is our task to aid citizens to do all of which they are possibly capable in bringing

¹⁰ "Editors of State Pledge Aid to Nation in Crisis," *Custer Courier*, 24 January 1918, p.1.

¹¹ "We Must Win the War," *Cordell Beacon*, 8 November 1917, p. 10.

the war to a speedy and victorious end.”¹² This group provided more than ten thousand columns to state newspapers.¹³

The county councils of defense were also to be instrumental in organizing the Liberty Loan drives held during the war. Every state in the Union would have a monetary quota of war bonds to sell by the U.S. Treasury. Unofficially, the loyalty and commitment of each state, county, community, and individual would be measured by the Wilson administration on the success of their sales. In Oklahoma that situation took on an increased meaning because of two important factors: the “Green Corn Rebellion” and socialist activity in the state.

The “Green Corn Rebellion: was a draft riot that occurred in August 1917 among tenant farmers in southeastern Oklahoma. Local authorities quickly put down this incident, but the press it generated across the country gave what many considered a “black-eye” to the state.

Before World War I, Oklahoma had one of the strongest socialist movements in the United States. In 1914, Oklahomans elected 174 Socialists to county and local offices and six members to the state legislature.¹⁴ There were several socialist newspapers publishing in the state, many of which did not support the war or conscription. For these reasons, many state government leaders believed that Oklahoma needed to show its loyalty to the war effort by meeting or exceeding its quota in the Liberty Loan drive.

The Oklahoma Council of Defense for counties, cities, and school districts throughout the state set purchase quotas. Newspapers pushed the effort, but difficulties

¹² Hilton, 27

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Von Russell Creel, “Socialists in the House: The Oklahoma Experience, Part I,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 72, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 146

are encountered and frustration starts to build. Refusing to buy a war bond is viewed as a sign of disloyalty and a long period of persecution begins against anyone who is the least bit hesitant.

This outpouring of anger focused on certain groups of people and institutions throughout the state. Although socialists, labor organizers, and pacifists were all suspect, the bulk of the negative war propaganda came to rest on German-Americans around Oklahoma.

One of the core rules in war is to rally the home front against the enemy by creating the perception that they are less than human. The German enemy is portrayed during the First World War as a militaristic, unethical “Hun” who has no morals and whose ultimate goal is to enslave the world. Many Oklahomans of German descent knew this was not true and some tried to defend their former homeland. Individual stands are no match for the federal and state government’s propaganda machine that is carried out by the local press.

As the war wore on, tolerance declined for people who spoke German, attended a church that had pacifist leanings or could not or would not participate in a bond drive. A push began to prove loyalty to the war effort. In January 1918, the Oklahoma Council of Defense designed a loyalty pledge for every man and woman in the state to sign. It read as follows:

MY LOYALTY PLEDGE

I hereby pledge renewed allegiance to my Flag and to the Republic for which it stands. I pledge myself as a true, loyal American to be active in the support of my government in all its plans and effort. I recognize the danger that arises from the slacker who opposes the country. I realize that every breeder of sedition is as great a menace to our homes and freedom as are our enemies across the seas. I therefore pledge myself to report to

the chairman of my school district of defense or to my county defense chairman any disloyal act or utterance that I may know of. I will help stamp out the enemies at home whose every act or word means more American graves in France.

(Signed)

If person solicited, refused, or did not wish to sign the Loyalty Pledge, give below reasons given and statements made.¹⁵

It is clear with the ending statement of the pledge that intimidation is the key in getting Oklahoma citizens to sign the document.

County Councils of Defense operated as extra-legal entities that heard testimony of suspected disloyalty or subversion, passed judgment, and carried out punishments. Even though there was no legal authority for this power, it was tolerated and supported by almost all communities in the state. Oklahoma newspapers related actions taken by these county councils. In Weatherford, the following occurred in May 1918:

A great deal of excitement was stirred up at the hearing of one of our farmers who had been accused (sic) of unpatriotic attitude in general and incriminating language when he was solicited to sign the loyalty pledge and buy a liberty bond. His demeanor and statements to the committee were so unsatisfactory that a great deal of indignation was aroused among the members of the committee and spectator. The accused was forced to sign the loyalty pledge and was taken in a parade, with the U.S. flag flying, to one of the local banks where he made arrangements for the purchase of a bond.¹⁶

Newspapers throughout Oklahoma will run similar stories like this throughout the rest of the war.

Near Cherokee in northern Oklahoma, a German farmer named William Hoefler had apparently refused to harvest his wheat crop. Under the direction of the Alfalfa

¹⁵ "Minutes of the Oklahoma State Council of Defense Meeting, Saturday, March 30, 1918," *Sooners in the War: Official Report of the Oklahoma State Council of Defense*, 1 no. 19 (1919): 20.

¹⁶ "Local Council of Defense Keeps Busy," *Weatherford Booster*, 9 May 1918, p. 1.

County Council of Defense, a group of men went to his field, threshed his crop, and sold it. The council then required that Mr. Hoefer take the money from his crop, donate \$50 to the Red Cross and purchase \$750 worth of war bonds.¹⁷

Some councils and local newspapers published the worth of individuals who they felt had not contributed enough to the bond drives. A Roger Mills County farmer, John F. King, made the statement that he had only \$700 on deposit at the Cheyenne State Bank and could not participate in the local loan drive. The directors of the bank released a statement that Mr. King had \$3,000 in cash and they refused him the privilege of depositing future funds in their institution.¹⁸

In July 1918, one of the leading weekly newspapers in Oklahoma defended the actions of these entities:

Each county council of defense has become a court with all the dignity and power of a legally constituted tribunal. It knows nothing but the law of patriotism and justice, and if, in any case, these unwritten statutes are enforced with too much vigor the fault lies with a spirit of over-zealous patriotism instead of any intention to do an injustice to anyone.

Where a slacker is encountered or a disloyal citizen makes remarks which do not make him liable to any existing law but show that he is not supporting this government in its fight with Germany, then the "strong-arm squad" or the "go get 'em" committee, . . . proceeds to the home of the delinquent and attempts to set him right without the necessity of a public hearing. If the disloyalist proves defiant he is placed under arrest and taken before the county council of defense, where he is given a full opportunity to be heard. If he is found guilty he is usually dismissed with a fine which he is ordered to pay some war fund and a warning that if he repeats the offense the state of Oklahoma will prove too small a place for him, as there is no room on its soil for anyone who is not 100 per cent loyal.¹⁹

In another instance, the *Cordell Beacon* published the name of a Canute resident

¹⁷ "Drafted Men Thresh Alien Farmers Wheat," *Daily Oklahoman*, 11 August 1918, p. 1.

¹⁸ "Wealthy Citizen Branded Disloyal," *Cheyenne Star*, 27 June 1918, p. 1; "Oklahoma and the War," *Harlow's Weekly*, 24 July 1918, p. 13.

¹⁹ "Oklahoma and the War," 17 July 1918, p. 12.

as being a deserter because he failed to return a questionnaire to the local draft board. It was later found out that the reason this “deserter” had not returned his question form was that he was fighting in Europe.²⁰

The State Council of Defense soon began a campaign against the German language and institutions. In May 1918, the Council forbade the use of the German language in all public meetings, churches, and schools.²¹ *The Daily Oklahoman* wrote in an editorial a few months later that, “If they come here, they must come (sic) as Americans, to learn our language and our ways (E)ven German-Americans . . . should not be permitted to resort to the language of their fatherland in conducting their ordinary affairs.”²²

The use of the German language in Oklahoma was most apparent in church services, primarily in German Lutheran and German Mennonite Churches. In Major County, the editor of the *Fairview Leader* led an effort to post the following statements on the doors of German churches in April 1918:

GOD ALMIGHTY UNDERSTANDS
THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE
Address HIM only in that Tongue
DO NOT REMOVE THIS CARD²³

Institutions and towns with German-sounding names began to change in 1918. Kiel in Kingfisher county became Loyal and Bismarck in McCurtain County became known as Wright City after William Wright, the first county soldier to lose his life in the

²⁰ “Source of Trouble for the Local Board,” *Cordell Beacon*, 24 January 1918, p. 1.

²¹ James H. Fowler, II. “Tar and Feather Patriotism: The Suppression of Dissent in Oklahoma During World War One,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1978/79): 425.

²² “An English-Speaking Nation,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10 August 1918, p. 6.

²³ “The Press on Loyalty Question,” *Harlow’s Weekly*, 17 April 1918, p. 6-7.

war.²⁴ In Elk City the German State Bank soon became the Farmers State Bank.²⁵

No place in Oklahoma seemed to match the oppression and persecution that occurred throughout Washita County. The focus of much of this attention was on the Cordell Christian College and the German and Mennonite communities located primarily in the northeastern part of the county.

The Cordell Christian College was founded in 1907 and sponsored by the Churches of Christ.²⁶ This denomination was largely pacifist as were many of the faculty and students at the institution. This situation did not sit well with many in the Cordell community as the war sentiment began to build. In early 1918, the local council of defense began a campaign to close the college.

On July 12, 1918, the Washita County Council of Defense held a hearing concerning the college and its president, J.N. Armstrong. Two days later the council announced that the institution should conform to a policy of support for the war effort and the removal of Armstrong.²⁷ Although there was no legal authority to enforce these edicts and a subsequent court hearing cleared the institution of any possible improprieties, the college closed that fall never to reopen.

Another religious group with pacifist leanings were the Mennonites. A large Mennonite community, most with German names and backgrounds, resided around the Corn and Herold communities. Mennonites made an easy target for patriotic fanatics because of their refusal to purchase Liberty Bonds. They viewed contributing financially to the war effort as directly participating in war activities. Magnifying this situation was

²⁴ Kent Ruth, *Oklahoma Travel Handbook* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 250.

²⁵ Oklahoma State Archives, Banking Records, Dept. of Libraries, Oklahoma City, Okla.

²⁶ Michael W. Casey, "The Closing of Cordell Christian College: A Microcosm of American Intolerance during World War I," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 76, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 21-22

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 "Defense Council Closes College," *Daily Oklahoman*, 18 August 1918, p. 1.

also their refusal to salute the American flag; this practice was seen as idolatry.²⁸ But refusal to participate in the draft was the ultimate “sin” to most non-pacifist Oklahomans. As Dr. Marvin Kroeker wrote in his essay on the persecution of Mennonite pacifists in *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before*, “Most Oklahomans were totally ignorant of the Anabaptist theology on non-resistance. . . . Conscientious objectors, therefore, were slackers, cowards, disloyal, and anti-American.”²⁹

Many historians and students of history are aware of draft resisters fleeing to Canada during the Vietnam War, but very few know of the outward migration of entire families from Washita County to Canada due to oppression encountered because of their religious beliefs of nonresistance. One of the most startling incidents occurred in the Herold community between Corn and Bessie. Michael Klaassen was an elder of the Herold Mennonite Church and had asked the local draft board for an agricultural deferment for his son, Johannes. The board refused and the younger Klaassen took a conscientious objector status for which he was court-martialed. He was convicted and sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for imprisonment. There, Johannes Klaassen contracted Spanish influenza and died in October 1918.³⁰

The elder Klaassen traveled to Kansas to retrieve his son’s body for internment in Oklahoma. On his return, he discovered that Johanne’s corpse had been dressed in a military uniform. Michael Klaassen’s reaction was detailed in an unpublished autobiography in which he exclaimed, “Why have they done this to you? . . . If you

²⁸ Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty* (De Kalb: North Illinois Univ. Press, 1974), 274.

²⁹ Marvin E. Kroeker, “‘In Death You Shall Not Wear It Either’: The Persecution of Mennonite Pacifists in Oklahoma,” in *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before*, ed. Davis D. Joyce (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 87.

³⁰ Gerlof D. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1994), 155; Kroeker, “In Death,” p. 85.

would not wear this uniform in life, you shall not wear it in death!”³¹ The citizens of Cordell apparently did not care for the Klaassen’s redressing their son’s body or the removal of the U.S. flag from his casket. Within a few months the Klaassens moved to Canada.

One of the largest exoduses of Mennonites from the U.S. to Canada came out of Oklahoma. As much as one third of the Herold Mennonite Church congregation left with several other families from the Corn and Weatherford areas following suit.³²

Although passions surrounding the war dissipated after the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, anger and distrust continued between the Mennonites of the Corn community towards people from the Cordell area for several years afterward.³³

By late 1917, it became difficult for many editors of German newspapers to exist. Federal regulations made it mandatory for German-language papers to print a “truthful and complete translation” into the English language alongside any commentary on the government or the war in German.³⁴ Businessmen began to fear repercussions if they advertised in these papers. As advertisements and subscriptions began to fall, many German-language newspapers folded.

The small community of Bessie was home to one of several German-language newspapers published in the state. The *Oklahoma Vorwärts* (Oklahoma Forward) was owned by Julius Hüsey who published the paper to this Washita County town in 1915 after previous stints in Weatherford and Cordell.³⁵ In October 1918, the *Oklahoma*

³¹ Ibid., 156; 86.

³² Allan Teichroew, “World War I and the Mennonite Migration to Canada to Avoid the Draft,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 45 (July 1971): 233.

³³ John Flaming of Corn, Oklahoma, interview by author, 3 October 2001, Corn, Oklahoma, tape recording.

³⁴ Bilger, “Oklahoma Vorwärts,” 257.

³⁵ Bilger, Edeltraut L. “The German Americans in Oklahoma During World War I As Seen Through Three German-language Newspapers.” Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1976, p. 3.

Vorwärts office was closed after some fifty local men visited Mr. Hüsey and demanded as much under threat of violence.³⁶ Within a few months, all the German-language newspapers in the state had ceased publication.

What precipitated Oklahoma becoming a hotbed of oppression during World War I? The answer involves several factors. First and foremost was opportunity. The German communities that dotted Oklahoma provided ample opportunity to target an identifiable group.

The second issue was the guilt that Oklahomans felt due to early socialist leanings and the national dishonor resulting from the ill-fated “Green Corn Rebellion.” These two incidents caused many people outside of the state to ridicule Oklahomans and cast doubt on their loyalty to the nation. State leaders believed they needed to show beyond a doubt that Oklahoma was not a “slacker” state.

Finally, the creation of the local councils of defense and their unqualified support by the newspaper editors throughout the state was a major element in this scenario. These two entities exacerbated the xenophobic backlash that was brewing in many communities and gave it an outlet and legitimacy.

There are few people alive today that can personally recall the First World War. There are fewer still that are aware of the persecution and oppression endured by the people of this region due to unpopular customs, relationships, or origins. This is why it is important to remember that the true strength and test of a democracy is how it treats its most vulnerable citizens in times of national distress.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

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