

St. Michael Historian



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St. Michael's Loyalty Questioned in WWI

by Bob Zahler

Convincing a nation to go to war was rarely easy unless it had been attacked, as was the case with the United States' entry into World War II after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor; but prior to our entry into WWI the US had not been directly attacked. While some Americans did die when a German U-boat torpedoed the British ocean liner Lusitania; many, if not most, Americans were still not convinced that the fight among Europe's monarchs was worth the sacrifice of American soldiers. After Germany announced that it intended to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917, President Wilson and a majority of Congress came to the conclusion that American interests were at stake in the European conflict. Consequently, war against Germany was finally declared in April 1917. Nonetheless, it was still necessary to rally the public for what could be a long, drawn-out conflict that would require great personal sacrifice. For St. Michael and surrounding Frankfort Township, that sacrifice would take many forms.

The years immediately leading up to America's entry into WWI were, in many ways, the best of times for St. Michael. The world-wide shortage of wheat brought on by the start of the war in Europe in 1914 meant higher prices for farmers in Minnesota. Wheat prices, along with livestock prices, doubled between 1915 and 1918. Even prior to this, things in St. Michael seemed generally positive indicated by the completion of a new modern rectory for the parish priest in January 1915 and the opening of Dr. Ludemann's large, brick hospital later that same year. The established men in the community, those running the farms and businesses, were now mostly second generation Americans, that is, people who had been born in the United States to the German immigrants. These people considered themselves more American than German, yet German was still the primary language spoken in the homes, especially on the farms of Frankfort Township. While English was being taught in the schools, and business with travelers was largely conducted in English, we know that German was still the primary language based on what was reported by people who lived at that time and based on the evidence of things like funeral cards which continued to be printed in German through the 1920s. German Catholics, especially, felt that cultivating their German culture was part and parcel to cultivating their Catholic faith. Prior to World War I, St. Michael was living in what many believed to be the perfect hybrid of German and American cultures.

Around Wright County, however, St. Michael was often viewed with some suspicion. The town had a reputation for being unwelcoming of non-Germans and especially of non-Catholics. For many in St. Michael this reputation was of little concern, whether it was true or not; they were content to stick to themselves and to not worry what others thought of them. But as newspapers, telephones, and especially automobiles increasingly connected everyone, quiet isolation would no longer be possible. When the US declared war on Germany in April 1917, many around Wright County began to ask the question, "Are the people of St. Michael and Frankfort loyal Americans?" While descendants of those St. Michael citizens might scoff at the accusation, in the overly-charged atmosphere of 1918, it seemed like a legitimate question. After all, the people of St. Michael and Frankfort did stubbornly stick to themselves and their German ways.

In 1917 and 1918 anti-German sentiment spread across the country. Anything with a German-sounding name became tainted. Sauerkraut was renamed "liberty cabbage" and hamburger, "liberty steak". South Dakota banned the speaking of German on the telephone. Towns with German-inspired names changed them to something more patriotic. Berlin, Iowa for example, changed its name to Lincoln, and East Germantown, Indiana was

Don't Miss Seeing The
K A I S E R
The Beast of Berlin

Eagle Theatre Buffalo
Thurs. June 20th

THREE SHOWS
Matinee 3:30 all seats 25 cents.
Night 7:30 and 9 p. m. 25 & 50c.
No War Tax.

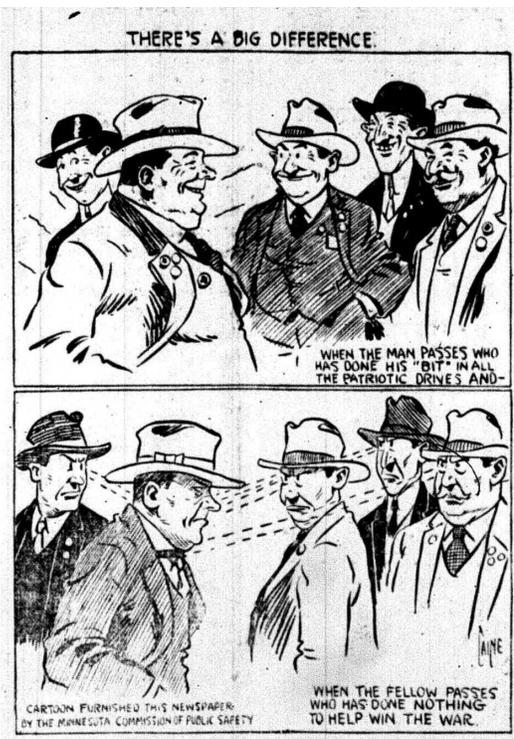
An example of anti-German propaganda from the June 13, 1918 *Buffalo Journal*

renamed Pershing (in honor of General Pershing). A bill was even introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives to change all names of German-named municipalities (like Frankfort and Hanover) to something more "American". The bill obviously did not pass, but the fact that it was proposed gives a sense of some of the anti-German sentiment in the country. It was a direct result of this hysteria that the German American State Bank in St. Michael's sister village of Albertville dropped the "German" in October 1918. The *Buffalo Journal* noted that the bank "was the last one in the county to do so," implying the question "What took you so long?". German-Americans were not just held in suspicion, in several incidents they were harassed, forced to kiss the flag, beaten and even tarred and feathered. Robert Prager, a German-American miner in Collinsville, Illinois, was lynched by a mob based on a rumor that the Germans had plans to sabotage the mine. While no actual acts of sabotage were ever found in the US, the rampant fear put every patriotic citizen on the lookout for any signs of disloyalty. The suspicion cast on German-Americans was more than a fear spread by naive Americans afraid of the unknown, it was orchestrated by both the federal and state governments. The federal Committee on Public Information and Minnesota's Commission of Public Safety sponsored posters, films and lectures aimed at galvanizing hatred toward Germany and support for the war effort. All local newspapers were expected to publish this information to make sure the messages reached into rural America.

It was amidst this atmosphere that an article appeared in the April 25, 1918 edition of the *Buffalo Journal* titled "St. Michael and Frankfort Respond to the Kaiser in Strong Terms". The article reported on the success of a recent war bond drive, but the choice of words by the author speaks volumes about the allegations that must have been made previously: "No one shall point his finger at St. Michael and Frankfort any more. The people there have reported their views on the war in the strongest terms possible by the following figures: St. Michael's allotment in the 3rd Liberty Loan was \$6,800 and she reported \$12,300 already, says W. J. Elliott, the local chairman of the loan drive. Mr. Elliot feels proud and so does every man, woman and child in St. Michael and Frankfort and they have a perfect right to entertain that feeling, the rest of us are proud of them too." Had the anti-German sentiment encouraged the people of St. Michael to not only meet their bond obligation but to nearly double it? One can only speculate. After giving the final figures for Frankfort Township, the author of the article commended the people of St. Michael and Frankfort by stating "the whole United States hails them as brothers." No doubt the people of St. Michael felt some sense of hope that their loyalty, in the eyes of others, had been buoyed by their Liberty Loan Drive response.

While anti-German sentiment continued throughout the war, by 1918 it took on the additional tone of hyper-Americanism where the attitude was that only those who spoke openly in favor of the war were loyal Americans. As stated in a report by the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety "the test of loyalty in war times is whether a man is wholeheartedly for the war and subordinates everything else to its successful prosecution." The concern that some portion of the large German-American population might actively try to sabotage the United States' war efforts led Congress to pass the Espionage Act in the fall of 1917. While this act was limited to prosecuting those who took specific actions to interfere with the US prosecution of the war, the act was amended in the spring of 1918 with what became known as the Sedition Act. After its passage, it was also illegal to teach or encourage others not to participate or fulfill their military obligations in the war.

The first prosecutions in Wright County under the Espionage and Sedition Acts took place in July of 1918 in which two German-Americans were convicted of Sedition. The first, Theodore Claessen of Buffalo, plead guilty to making the remark that all the boys in khaki ought to be shot. According to the newspaper editor, "Mr. Claessen, who saved the county the expense of a trial, accepted, with good grace the fine. He really has the sympathy of the entire community as he is rather kind hearted and easy going". In the second case the editor had nothing good to say about William Ludemann of Frankfort, brother to St. Michael's esteemed physician, Dr. Alfred Ludemann. Ludemann was convicted for telling four men working for the Red Cross "that the Red Cross is graft [corruption], and that this government had no business in the war". While Claessen plead guilty, Ludemann insisted on a trial, one that took two days. But considering the political atmosphere in the county at the time, Ludemann didn't have a chance. Both men had a choice of either paying a \$250 fine or six months in jail. Additionally, both were required to report to the sheriff once a month and "must not repeat any seditious act or remarks during the period of the war". According to the paper, Ludemann was educated as a lawyer, which may be why he appealed his case to the Minnesota Supreme Court. Ludemann eventually won his appeal as the court ruled that the law was aimed at those who tried to convince others not to participate in the war. Having personal, anti-war beliefs, according to the Minnesota Supreme Court, was not illegal. This was not the view of others, especially of the editor of the *Buffalo Journal* who stated, "Mr. Ludeman [sic] likes to fight better than



he likes to share the war troubles with Uncle Sam, providing the fighting is not in the trenches."

There were plenty of men from St. Michael and Frankfort, however, who were willing to fight in the trenches. Whether it was a genuine feeling of duty or a wish to prove loyalty, thirty-nine young men volunteered for military service. The list below is from a hand-written chart that once hung in the vestibule of St. Michael's Catholic Church. The chart provides us with the most complete list of WWI enlistees who considered themselves members of the St. Michael community. In some cases their military assignment is also noted.

This cartoon was provided by the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety and appeared in the July 25, 1918 edition of the *Buffalo Journal*

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|--------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Andrew Schumm | Co. 93, 7 Reg. USMC | Fritz Holzmann | |
| Leonard Aydt | Co. C, 1st Bat. 163 Depot Brig. | William Holzmann | |
| John Otten | Co. 2, 313 Engineers | John Huring | Co. F, 311 Ammunition Train |
| Andrew Sieg | Co. G, 136 Infantry | Frank Sieg | Co. D, 338 Machine Gun Bat. |
| Hubert Georges | | Jerome Duerr | |
| Joseph Hagemeyer | Co. 4, 152 Depot Brigade | George Englert | |
| William Kessler | Co. F, 82 Division, 327 Inf. | Thomas Zachmann | |
| Philip Steffens | Co. F, 130 Infantry | Alphons Zachmann | |
| William Robeck | Co. F, 129 Infantry | William Eull | |
| Arnold Neiss | 312 Trench Mortar Co | Jim Elliot | |
| Clem Vetsch | Co. K, 132 Infantry | Ignatz Georges | |
| Arthur Dick | 109 Ammunition Train | Albert Holzmann | |
| Nick Schumacher | | Robert Zahler | |
| William Gutzwiller | Co. D, 343 Infantry | Louis Krieger | |
| Andrew Neiss | 78 Div. 309 Infantry | Simon Sieg | Co. D, 388 Infantry |
| Walter Eull | | Joseph Barbeln | |
| Anton Diederich | | John Englert | |
| Rudolph Senart | | Math Lindenfelser | |
| Math Otten | Co. A, 3 Pioneer Infantry | Frank Niesen | Camp Forrest, Georgia |
| Frank Eicher | | | |

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We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.saintmichaelhistory.org

Like us on **Facebook!**

Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.

Chief Editor: Bob Zahler
Editors: Sheldon Barthel
Stephen S. Barthel
Stephen D. Barthel
Sara Casalino

World War I continued

Three of the above enlistees are known to have died during the war: Arthur Dick and Frank Niesen died of complications due to the 1918 influenza epidemic and Andrew Neiss died in an accident on the way home from the war. There are many obvious holes in the above list. A complete public list of enlistees from St. Michael is not available, and so we must assemble this information from other sources. Can you help us? Do you have additional information regarding the military service of any of the men listed above or do you have the name of a WWI enlistee who considered himself a member of the St. Michael community who is not listed? Please contact curator, Bob Zahler, with any information or military photos at zahlerb66@gmail.com or 763-843-3176.

Ken Zylla Print Now Available

Our tenth anniversary print by Ken Zylla entitled "St. Michael USA" is now available for sale to the general public. Prints can be purchased at any of our monthly meetings by check or cash, or through our "Store" tab on our website at www.saintmichaelhistory.org using a PayPal account with credit card. Keep in mind that there is no charge for shipping and handling of framed prints if delivery is within ten miles of St. Michael. If delivery is eleven to fifty miles, there is a twenty-five dollar charge for framed prints. Unframed prints will be sent in a mailing tube with a charge of thirty dollars per print for shipping and handling unless purchaser chooses to make his/her own pickup. If you wish to view samples of all of the framing options that we are making available at cost from a professional framing service, please contact Sheldon Barthel at 763-497-4205 or email him at: srbarthel@charter.net

Upcoming Events

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|------------------------------------|---|
| August 15, Saturday, 10 AM-3:30 PM | St. Michael Daze and Knights celebration. We will have a booth at the Business Expo at which we will be selling Ken Zylla prints, historical society note cards, and <i>Faith, Family, and Farming</i> history books. Mat and framing samples will also be available for viewing. |
| September 13, Sunday, 11 AM-4 PM | St. Michael Parish Festival. We will have a booth with items similar to those available at the Daze and Knights celebration. |
| September 14, Monday, 7:00 PM | Regular monthly meeting followed by a presentation on the history of Dehmer's Meat Market by former owner Joe Dehmer. |
| October 12, Monday, 7:00 PM | Regular monthly meeting. |
| November 9, Monday, 7:00 PM | Regular monthly meeting. |

All meetings are open to the public and held in the Gries & Lenhardt Conference Room adjacent to the Great River Regional Library in the St. Michael City Hall complex, 11800 Town Center Drive.