

## **German Iowa and the Global Midwest Old Capitol Museum Exhibit, 18 August 2016 – 8 January 2017**

### **Banner Texts, World War I**

#### **1. German Iowa in Crisis: The Years of Neutrality**

The eruption of the Great War in August 1914 threw German Iowa into crisis. While the United States remained neutral until April 1917, German-American communities divided. Some supported Imperial Germany and condemned Great Britain, while others sided with Anglophiles such as President Woodrow Wilson. Yet as the war progressed, German Americans were often lumped together and characterized as “hyphenated citizens” with suspect loyalties. They also faced many opportunists in Iowa and the rest of the country who used anti-German propaganda of the day to undermine their German-American competitors in business and politics.

This crisis was part of a global movement. Millions of Germans had settled abroad during the nineteenth century. The majority came to the United States. Yet German communities could be found in Great Britain and many of the British Commonwealth states. There were also large numbers in Brazil and other Latin American countries. All of them felt the weight of the naval blockades, the cutting of undersea telegraph cables, and the black listing of German businesses. Violence against German residents and citizens as well as their property erupted in many of these locations.

News coverage of the war varied greatly across Iowa. Some local papers wrote avidly about the war. Others noted the opening salvos but remained focused largely on local concerns. That was true for both German and English language papers. Even major, controversial events such as German submarine warfare and the sinking of the Lusitania failed to produce a consensus. Yet political debate about war and neutrality continued, particularly in towns and cities, and it had a major impact on local elections. Most German Iowans supported politicians who favored neutrality. By the time of the 1916 presidential election, however, neutral positions were increasingly difficult to maintain.

Prior to World War I, German-speaking Iowans were a very diverse group. They often identified most closely with their class, profession, place of origin, religion, generation of arrival, and even rural versus urban settings. World War I turned them into a unitary group. As neutrality was hotly debated in the national sphere, Germans as a group were increasingly associated with the German military: the “Huns” ostensibly threatening European civilization and the world. That was true for German Iowans as well. Regardless of their personal associations, attitudes, patriotism, or their positions on the war, they found that being German in Iowa had taken on completely new meanings.

## **2. German Iowa in Crisis: The War Years**

Conditions worsened for German Iowans when the United States entered the war. Nationally, the newly formed Committee on Public Information produced endless anti-German propaganda, and the American Protective League supported spying on German Americans in every setting.

German Iowans suffered mightily under these conditions. Their neighbors listened to their phone calls, watched their mail, scrutinized their participation in liberty drives, and reported any “suspicious activities.” Iowans who failed to show proper support for the war were often denounced as “slackers,” and many found their homes and businesses painted yellow. Others were forced to contribute to liberty drives, and still others were publically assaulted and humiliated, often while state authorities turned a blind eye.

Conditions deteriorated further after Governor William L. Harding issued the Babel Proclamation on May 14, 1918. In it, he declared that only English was “legal in public or private schools, in public conversations, on trains, over the telephone, at all meetings, and in all religious services.” German Iowans were denounced for public and private conversations, for singing songs in German, even for worshiping in German. Other Iowans used this as an opportunity to undercut German cultural organizations. Preachers turned on neighboring congregations. Schools in Davenport, Spirit Lake, and other towns publicly burned German books.

In an effort to demonstrate their loyalty and defend themselves, many German-Iowan communities changed their names: Berlin, Iowa (Tama County) became Lincoln, Germania (Kossuth County) became Lakota; towns across the state eliminated German street names. German banks, other business, even fraternal organizations and leisure associations changed their names. So too did families fearing harassment.

Not everyone followed suit. The towns of Schleswig (Crawford County) and Holstein (Iowa County), named after two North German territories, voted against changing their names. In response, local officials replaced the towns' names with numbered stops on the wartime train schedule. German choral societies wrote to the Governor from Lee and Muscatine Counties asking if they might continue their meetings. Pastors wrote asking how they could preach to congregations filled with people who had never learned English, although they were demonstrably loyal to the United States and had been building Iowa and paying taxes for decades. A number of clergymen asked sarcastically if Latin was still allowed.

Cities and larger towns saw the greatest transformations. Rural parts of the state often weathered the storm by relying on strong communities that resisted the denunciations, ostracism, and eager policing of German Iowans. The numbers of German-language newspapers, schools, and associations declined statewide, and German waned as a public language in many locations. Yet the language and customs persisted on farms and smaller towns across the state. There, new waves of German immigrants continued to encounter German cultures, language, and traditions well into the twentieth century.