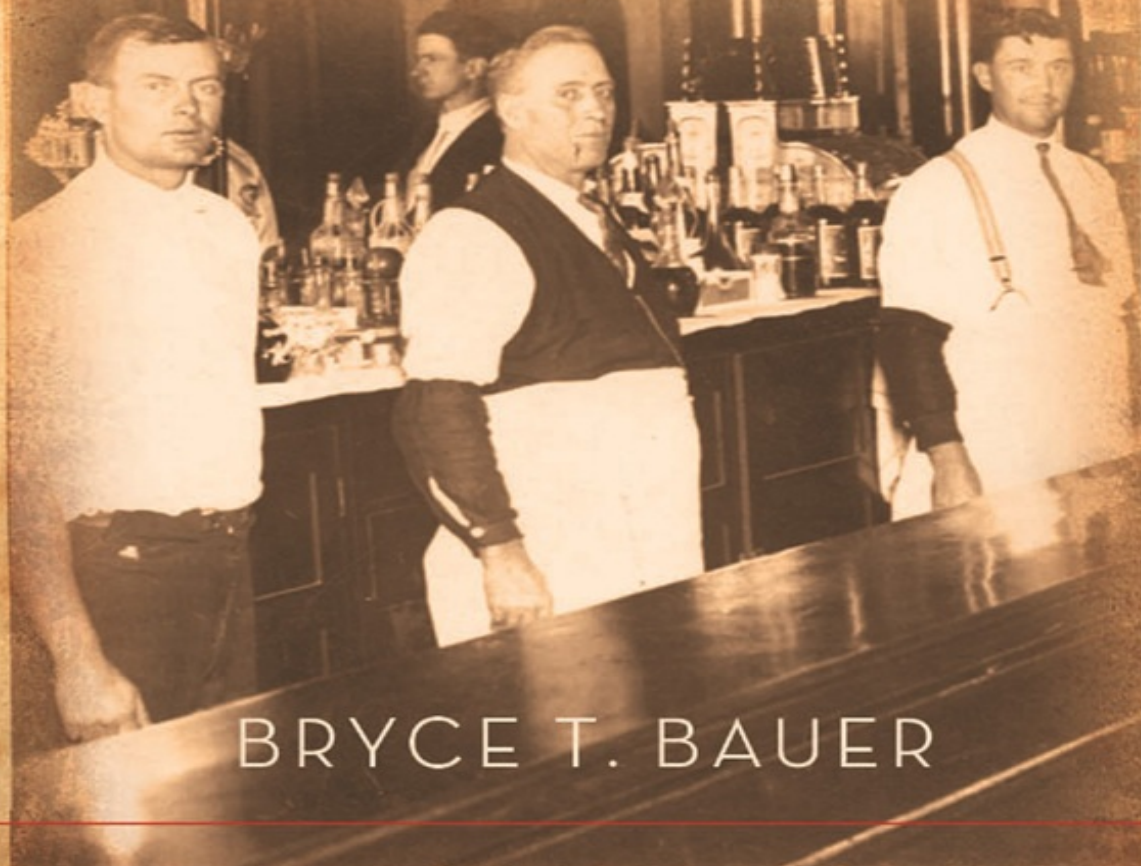


# GENTLEMEN BOOTLEGGERS

THE TRUE STORY  
OF TEMPLETON RYE,  
PROHIBITION,  
AND A SMALL TOWN  
IN CAHOOTS



BRYCE T. BAUER

During Prohibition, while Al Capone was rising to worldwide prominence as Public Enemy Number One, the townspeople of rural Templeton, Iowa—population just 428—were busy with a bootlegging empire of their own. Led by Joe Irlbeck, the whip-smart and gregarious son of a Bavarian immigrant, the outfit of farmers, small merchants, and even the church monsignor worked together to create a whiskey so excellent it was ordered by name: “Templeton rye.”

Just as Al Capone had Eliot Ness, Templeton’s bootleggers had as their own enemy a respected Prohibition agent from the adjacent county named Benjamin Franklin Wilson. Wilson was ardent in his fight against alcohol, and he chased Irlbeck for over a decade. But Irlbeck was not Capone, and Templeton would not be ruled by violence like Chicago.

*Gentlemen Bootleggers* tells a never-before-told tale of ingenuity, bootstrapping, and perseverance in one small town, showcasing a group of immigrants and first-generation Americans who embraced the ideals of self-reliance, dynamism, and democratic justice. It relies on previously classified Prohibition Bureau investigation files, federal court case files, extensive newspaper archive research, and a recently disclosed interview with kingpin Joe Irlbeck. Unlike other Prohibition-era tales of big-city gangsters, it provides an important reminder that bootlegging wasn’t only about glory and riches, but could be in the service of a higher goal: producing the best whiskey money could buy.

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TEMPLETON RYE, PROHIBITION,  
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BRYCE T. BAUER



TO THREE GREAT MEN:

Vic Bauer, Chuck Manatt, Louis Lauritsen

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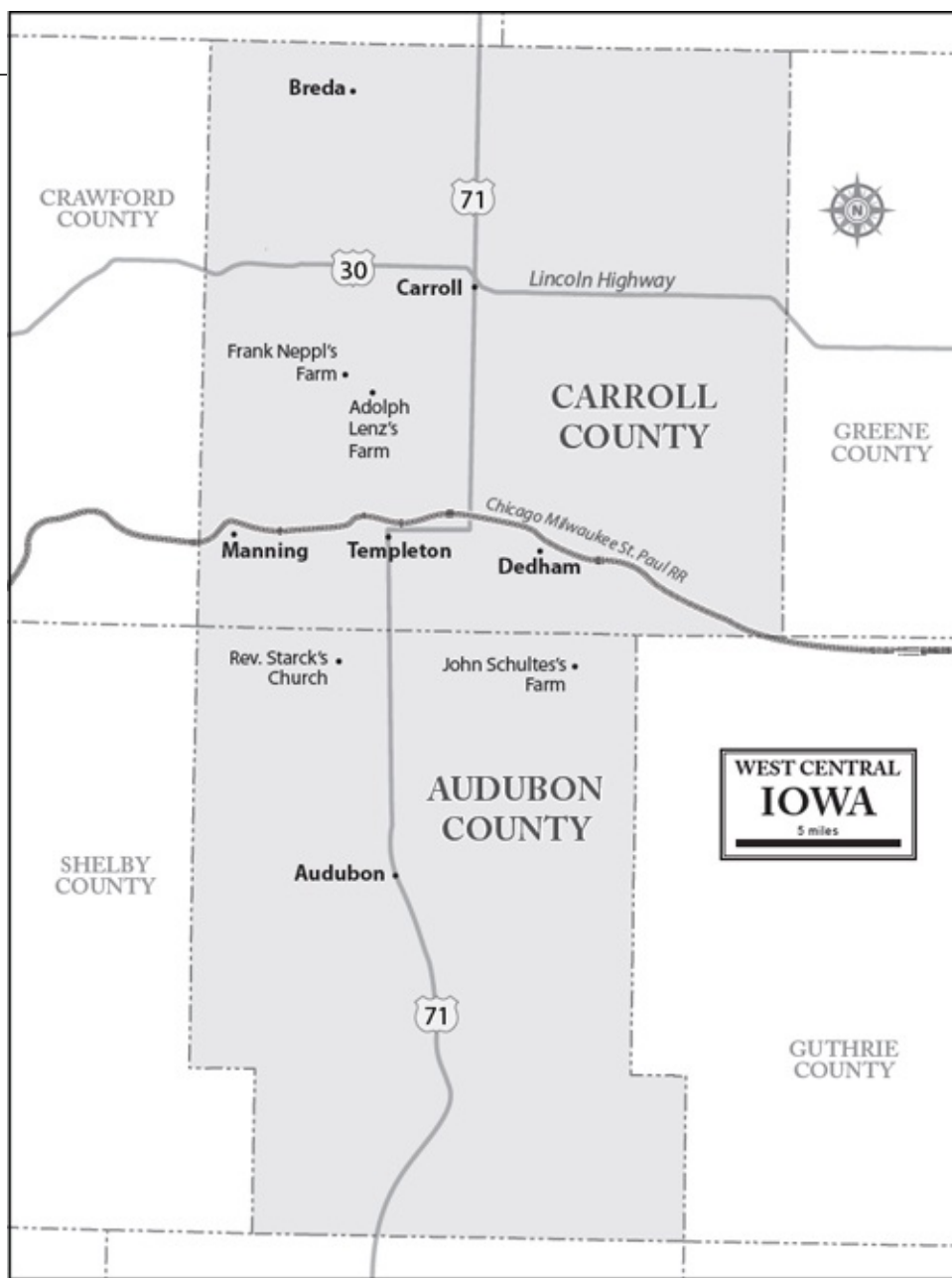
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## JUNE 16, 1931

On June 16, 1931, two bootleggers, both notorious violators of the decade-old National Prohibition Act which enforced the Eighteenth Amendment's ban on alcohol, fled two different federal courtrooms in a hurry. One hailed a taxi and slid into the backseat as a swarm of spectators thronged inches away; the other sped away in his Ford Model T, trailed by no one.

Their destinations—like their experiences, the shape of their fame, their individual fates—could hardly have been more different. Al Capone, the man in the cab, wended through the clogged, cacophonous streets of downtown Chicago on the way to his splendid floor of suites at the Lexington Hotel. There, the next day, he could pick up the morning newspapers and see his name splayed across the front page, column inches dripping away below, full of paeans to his imminent downfall.

Joe Irlbeck, meanwhile, bounced along the dusty, gully-cut roads of western Iowa. He was headed toward his home in the tiny town of Templeton, Iowa, in the county where he had lived his entire life, Carroll. There he was encircled by neighbors who knew him by name, by sight—as they knew everyone in the surrounding countryside. Some of them were grateful for what he'd done for their community, others perhaps a bit intimidated, a few maybe even disdainful, but still they all supported him. When his crimes hit the paper, the stories were met with amazement more than scorn.

Both bootleggers were about the same age, and though they didn't know each other, they were united. Their last several years had been—and the rest of their lives would be—defined by opposition to the Eighteenth Amendment, the only amendment to ever restrict the freedoms of every citizen.

Its supporters, the drys, were a motley but fierce band of traditional Americans: largely white Protestants, men and, significantly, women, whose ties to America went back generations and who were intensely loyal to the country's English heritage. Some were businessmen, others clergy, yet others professional activists. Politicians were among them, of course. But there were also those who'd never before worked in the public sphere. They weren't all residents of rural America, but it was the values associated with rural America that defined them, that they held dear, that they sought to protect from the sullyng effects of alcohol and alcohol's supporters, the wets.

The wets were an even more assorted group, defined, roughly, as everybody the drys were not—Catholic or Jewish, urban and immigrant. To them, Prohibition was nothing but a heavy-handed attempt to legislate morality and an un-American folly. The drys' claim that an era without alcohol would be one of newfound prosperity, in which men would behave as saints and women and children could live in peace, abundance, and godliness, seemed absurd. In the end, the wets would be vindicated—Prohibition would prove to be the most charlatan of laws, one that led the country into temptation and delivered it to evil. But it endured far longer than the wets had predicted. With a century of momentum behind it, repealing it would not be easy. And as long as it remained in effect, the government was obligated to enforce it, no matter how hopeless the fight against its violators appeared to be.

Of medium height and average build, with gray eyes and black hair, Joe Irlbeck nonetheless stood out. His oval face could cut a penetrating stare or a knowing, warm smile. He possessed the attitude of a bartender: companionable, but stern when necessary. He was ambitious and intelligent enough to fulfill

his aspirations.

Born in December 1899, he was just eleven months younger than Al Capone. He grew up on a farm near Dedham, seven miles east of Templeton, one of eleven children. His father, like so many early settlers in Carroll County, had been born in Germany, in Bavaria, and came to the newly opened land of western Iowa to find a comfort and safety that was all too elusive in his homeland. Though he found the prospect wouldn't last through the second generation. As luck would have it, however, Joe Irlbeck came of age just as a vast new market was opening up: that for illicit alcohol. (Enacting Prohibition, one astute politician rightly predicted, was tantamount to "legalizing the manufacture of intoxicating liquor without taxation.") He jumped right in.

At a time when asking the provenance of a particular shot of liquor was as absurd—an embarrassingly naive—as asking the origin of the pork in the sausage that rolled off the belts at Swift & Co.'s sprawling processing plant on Chicago's South Side, the whiskey Irlbeck came to make, Templeton rye, managed the remarkable: it established itself as a brand. Newspapers quoted its price independent of other bootleg liquor and discerning buyers ordered it by name.

By 1931, Irlbeck's operation had grown into a sprawling organization capable of producing hundreds of gallons of booze, worth thousands of dollars, a day. To achieve that required the involvement of nearly every one of Templeton's residents, from the town grocer to the church parson. As a result of their volume, the quality of their product, and their total commitment to bootlegging, Templeton, population just 428, became known as the "far-famed oasis of the middlewest."

But that same success drew the attention of the federal Prohibition agents charged with cracking down on violators. Leading them was a former blacksmith and sheriff named Benjamin Franklin Wilson, the most respected Prohibition agent in the state. Born in Audubon County, just south of Carroll County, he was familiar with the area.



Aerial view of Templeton looking southwest in 1910. The town's late-Prohibition-era population of 428 would be its highest. *Courtesy Elaine Schwaller*

The still for which Wilson arrested Irlbeck a few months before his June court date was one of the largest producing Templeton rye. It was located on the land of one of Irlbeck's many partners, a struggling farmer named Frank Neppel. The rent Neppel earned, fifty cents for every gallon of Templeton rye produced, was supposed to buy not just a safe place to run the still but also the promise that if the farm was ever raided Neppel would take the blame and not implicate Irlbeck. For years that policy had frustrated Wilson's many attempts to bust Templeton's bootleggers. But this time, he'd caught a break:

he'd found Irlbeck at the still site. The case seemed unbeatable.

The June 16 hearing was just a grand jury investigation to determine whether there was enough evidence for an indictment. As a result, Irlbeck was not allowed to attend. Instead he eavesdropped from outside the federal courthouse, listening from inside his car as the prosecutor's voice drifted down from the second-story courtroom through a window someone had opened to ease the sweltering heat. What he overheard was the government's case falling apart. Neppel kept his word to take the fall and swore Irlbeck had nothing to do with the still. The town banker, subpoenaed to talk about Irlbeck's finances, swore his client was not a bootlegger. And when Irlbeck heard the prosecutor, enraged that his case was not going as he planned, vow to summon every business owner in Templeton and call them to testify that he really was a bootlegger, Irlbeck sped off, confident that if he alerted them to the officer's impending arrival, they'd all stay out of their shops.

Four hundred miles east, in Chicago, things proceeded much differently. There the courtroom was jammed with newspapermen, lawyers, and anyone with enough clout to make their way past the guarded sixth-floor blockade set up to keep all of Chicago from pushing in. They were in "furores," wrote one observer, over the anticipation of seeing Al Capone—the former "cheap Brooklyn roustabout" who, through murder, extortion, bribery, and, above all, bootlegging—had earned the title of America's Public Enemy Number One, finally face serious charges and real punishment for almost a decade's worth of flagrant crime.

The complaint against Capone was stunning. As it should've been: it was the work of a two-year-long investigation by a small team of extremely dedicated federal agents, led by George E. Q. Johnson, the unassuming federal prosecutor who'd been born just a few miles from the Iowa courthouse Irlbeck was sitting outside of that day.

For those in attendance who were cheering Capone's downfall, the day appeared a victory.

As soon as the judge entered and everyone sat back down, Johnson's assistant stepped forward to address Capone. He read the first indictment, then asked Capone how he pleaded.

"I plead guilty," Scarface Al replied, his voice scarcely audible to the gallery focused intensely on his every word.

In response to the two other charges, Capone shaved his reply to just "guilty," but his voice remained, by all accounts, meek. Once he did, the judge curtly announced he'd be sentenced two weeks later. Then it was over.

In less than three minutes, the capo of Chicago crime admitted what the entire nation already knew: he was a criminal. The government never even had to present its case, but everyone knew that it was built on evidence from Capone associates who were willing to sell out their boss to save themselves.

As Scarface Al left, he was flanked by his lawyers and a contingent of police officers. Behind him, thousands of Chicagoans eagerly jostled for a glimpse of their most famous resident, now at his most downtrodden. They were looking at, a reporter for the Associated Press wrote, "a monarch stripped of his realm."

He would return to his lavish headquarters, increasingly aware that his fellow Chicagoans were tired of the violence he brought to their city, and embarrassed of the corruption his millions had wrought. His heyday, he knew, was over.

His would be a startlingly different fate from that of Irlbeck. For the Iowa bootlegger, the day demonstrated once again just how strongly the citizens of Templeton supported his bootlegging operation, the bootlegging operation that had kept many of their businesses solvent and saved the

farms from foreclosure.

~~But neither man's fate was sealed. Capone would change his mind: he would make the government show its hand and reveal its witnesses. Meanwhile, Wilson would not accept his defeat. Like Irlbeck, he was headed back to Templeton, certain he could gather enough evidence for a new case.~~

The only question was whether he'd find it before the law changed and Prohibition was repealed.

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## EDEN'S OASIS

That the founding of Templeton, Iowa, and the passage of an absolute prohibition amendment to Iowa constitution both occurred within a few months of each other in the year 1882 was not a complete coincidence.

Templeton came first. It was announced in a newspaper ad on May 24 that had been taken out by the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroad. Like its competitors, the Milwaukee Road, as the railroad was known, was busy stretching train tracks out across the country. For the thirty-six-year-old state of Iowa, those lines functioned like blood vessels, pulsing life into the little towns that sprouted up along the way.

Less than four months later, state prohibition arrived. On June 27 voters approved an amendment banning the manufacture, storage, and sale of liquor, wine, and beer by a margin of 10 percent, foreshadowing the very move the nation would make some four decades later. It was the most ambitious of a long string of liquor control laws (and attempts at their circumvention) that stretched back to Iowa's founding.

From its very beginning, Iowa was at the forefront, along with Kansas and Maine, of temperance activity in the nation. Several times before the state's prohibition amendment, the legislature had enacted laws similarly banning alcohol. And several times those laws were either weakened or repealed as soon as the temperance activists let up in their crusade; even when they were in effect they did little, as they proved nearly impossible to enforce in the places where drinking was already ingrained in the culture. The goal with the amendment was to make the law considerably more difficult to repeal and to elevate its stature and perceived seriousness.

Both Templeton and state prohibition were products of the same specific energies of that place and that time—thrown off by the grand, frenetic engine known as progress, which was then powered by the belief that the frontier was there to be conquered and which was running, in the last decades of the nineteenth century in Iowa, at a rate faster than it had ever run before. Templeton was a stake in the conquest of the place, a new perch of civilization on the prairie. Prohibition was a stake in the attendant idea that such bold new places need not be burdened by the deep-rooted habits of their predecessors but could instead be fertile substrate to try bold ideas anew.

Templeton was founded in a township known as Eden, in southern Carroll County, which was named after Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence. In their own ways both names, Eden and Carroll, were apt, providential.

Templeton was perched atop one of the highest points in the state, right along the Missouri-Mississippi divide, which separated the streams that flowed toward the Missouri River bounding Iowa to the west from those flowing to the Mississippi River, which defined its eastern edge. The slope and the gently rolling hills that surrounded it formed an area of exquisite cropland unbroken by soggy ditches and further enriched by the band of glacial till and loess soils—among the richest found on earth—then met in the county's center. The debate for decades to come would be whether Templeton was comprised of the best cropland in Iowa, and therefore the world, or merely *some* of the best.

Prior to Templeton's founding, Eden Township was home to 172 of what must have been the hardest pioneers. By the town's third birthday, that number had surged to nearly 900—a quarter

whom lived within Templeton city limits. At the turn of the century there would be a total of 32 Templetonians.

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The town was bonded together not just by the shared experience of building a new community in a foreign place but also by a shared heritage that went much deeper and back much further.

As the first timbers of the new town were being lashed together and everyone was still adjusting to the whistle of the trains passing through daily, the citizens of Templeton quickly set about building the community's most important building: a Catholic church. Even as pioneers, isolated on scattered farms set amid still virgin prairie, they had been religious. Pastors from nearby congregations would venture out and hold services in open fields, under the shadow of a quickly erected cross and temporary altar. But with a permanent settlement a permanent place for worship was needed.

By the summer of 1883, they'd completed work on a small temporary chapel. But it didn't take long for them to set about building a church more befitting the spiritual and social importance of one religion: Catholicism, in their lives. The result was Sacred Heart Church, a gothic edifice complete with an imported marble statue of St. Michael, a 150-foot spire—visible across the countryside—and seating for seven hundred. At a time when a pound of butter cost about a quarter, a buggy sold for about \$55, and a minister (a relatively high-paying profession) earned about \$730 a year, the entire project cost \$33,000, including \$5,000 spent on the altar alone.

In the beginning the Catholics weren't the only denomination in town; there were also Methodists, Protestants and perennial drys. But their middling numbers had fallen so low by 1903 that their own Templeton church was sold at auction. The buyer: the wife of a leading saloon-keeper.

Templeton wasn't united just by its religion. It attracted a specific kind of Catholic: immigrants from Germany, especially the western and southern provinces of Bavaria and Westphalia, who sought the opportunity of cheap land. Only a few places in the country could claim a higher percentage of residents of German heritage than could Carroll County and, specifically, Templeton.

"Does all of Germany wish to come to America?" asked the regionally influential German-language newspaper out of Carroll, *Der Carroll Demokrat*, in a May 1882 article. "The morning express train led no fewer than sixty-eight families at the local train station who made the trip across the blue waves of the Atlantic Ocean in order to seek a new and happy home here in the distant West in Carroll County. Everyone who has traveled across to Old Germany in the early spring is in agreement that America is the only country where one can have a free and independent life."

So delighted, the paper continued in its report, was one Carroll County man to welcome a new member of his family on that recently arrived train, that he intended to go out and purchase "a small keg, no, a truly large keg of beer."

As the paper indicated, what attracted immigrants to Templeton was the same thing that attracted them to communities throughout the country: that American idea of universal prosperity from universal equality that proved so appealing to the oppressed poor of Europe.

And as the paper also indicated, the German settlers brought with them their traditions, such as a fondness for beer in celebrating family and community. It was just one of many customs associated with people who attached with a hyphen their old identity to their new American one. The German-Americans were hardly alone in their fondness for booze. They'd arrived in a country that already had, by the late-nineteenth century, a well-developed and, at times, fraught relationship to alcohol.

Unless he'd shaven recently, Orlando H. Manning sported what could only be described as a frontier mustache—one so ample that it was not just as wide as his face but half as wide again. Without it, he

angular features could have evoked a young Abraham Lincoln. As it were, he gave the appearance of having pasted a squirrel tail under his nose and let it go bristly.

One of the leading opponents of alcohol in Iowa, he rose to prominence in an unlikely place. Manning was born the first son of a Methodist minister just six months after the state's founding in 1846, and though he wasn't born in Iowa, he grew up with the state. At the age of twenty-one he went into legal practice, locating in Carroll County, which was even then becoming a bastion of anti-drink sentiment. Six years later he opened a bank there and two years after that was elected a state representative, joining the Republican Party, which, though dominant throughout most of the state, had little support from Carroll County's German-American voters, who were more often Democrats. His rise was rapid, and within a few more years he was elected lieutenant governor, the second-highest position in state government. Meanwhile, Carroll County earned a distinction of its own: its voters were one of the few rural counties to vote against the state's prohibition amendment. In the end, they would win—the amendment was quickly challenged by a brewer and a tavern owner and declared unconstitutional on procedural grounds. The law, which for many had represented the pinnacle of decades of effort, was fatally stricken, but the dries vowed not to give up.

At the 1883 Republican State Convention, which was electric with efforts to find a way to keep alcohol out of Iowa, Manning rose to give a speech. It was short, repetitive, and filled with much that had already been said about alcohol many times that day, but to his party's worn denunciations of drink, he added a flourish.

The Republican Party, he declared, “stood for protected homes and firesides; a schoolhouse on every hill, and no saloon in the valley.” Immediately he received an “uproarious, long-continued and renewed applause” from the delegates. From the Iowa chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, one of the nation's most powerful dry organizations, he received an even more florid award: a miniature replica of a schoolhouse covered in tulips and daises from under its window frames up to its little chimney house. Inside was a statue of the Virgin Mary surrounded by four magnolia blossoms, evoking angels.

For years after, Manning's quote would appear in dry literature across the country. It became so ubiquitous that when Manning died, after he'd left Iowa and made a fortune as a Chicago lawyer, after he took up residence on Madison Avenue in New York and studied the soils of the Nile Delta and Rhine Valley, it would be the almost singular focus of his obituaries, appearing three times in its entirety in one write-up.

Two years before that speech Manning had received another honor, one more permanent than his seemingly immutable utterance: the founders of a new community eight miles west of Templeton in Carroll County decided to name the place after him. Despite the propensities of its namesake, the residents of Manning would go on to boast that their town had “the longest bar west of the Mississippi.”

To evoke the saloon as the evil of drink manifest was no sleight of style but a deliberate denunciation of what the dries saw as alcohol's most terrible envoy.

Though they may have been forerunners to the bars that would emerge after Prohibition, saloons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were places far more primitive and debauched. Often they were foul dens, the domain of men and harlots only. Typically their floors were covered in sawdust, to absorb spilled drink and other less pleasant effluents; spittoons dotted their length, but not in every place did decorum demand their use. In some cities officials tried to restrict public drinking to hotels, but the saloon owners just built dingy rooms atop their establishments instead, providing patrons with the convenience of indulging in alcohol and sex under the same roof.

Indicative of the temperance activists' wrathful view of the saloon was a propaganda poster released around the turn of the century. It purported to be an "honest" saloon-keeper's introduction to the community he is about to serve. In it he announces that soon he shall "deal in familiar spirits which will excite men to deeds of riot, robbery, and blood" and "undertake, at short notice, for a small sum, with great expedition, to prepare victims for the asylums, the poorhouses, the prisons, and the gallows." In the illustration a dapper man with a trailing beard and a top hat leans casually against the bar, as a young child, wrapped tightly in an ankle coat, stands in a dark corner, staring, one suspects forlornly, toward the exit.

The image reinforced the dries' key argument: to dawdle at the saloon was to neglect the family home. The choice was between the life of a degenerate drunk and that of an upstanding family man. And the dichotomy was absolute. Though at the time of Manning's speech, Templeton's founding, and Iowa's attempts at constitutionally mandated sobriety, Americans were drinking only one-third as much alcohol as they had been at their most bibulous—the forty years from 1790 to 1830, when booze was especially cheap—the saloon, to the horror of the dries, was a growth industry.

In 1880 there were an estimated 150,000 saloons across America, a 50 percent increase from the decade prior, and half as many as there would be just twenty years later.

In Chicago around that time, researchers counted 3,500—one for every 203 residents, women and children included. In San Francisco the 3,000 licensed saloons needed hold only 96 people each to sequester the entire city—and that would leave the estimated 2,000 illegal saloons empty. In Des Moines at a time when such establishments were prohibited by a state law, a local doctor and dry leader reported there were 175, one for each 185 residents. He admitted, though, that the number could be higher—he didn't know exactly. Most of the saloons, after all, were hidden in basements or tucked away in the back of drugstores, and the cops cared little about finding them. They couldn't even manage to shut down saloon-keeper Jim Himes's place, located right across the street from the downtown police station, perhaps because it had the reputation of being the toughest bar in the west.

Des Moines wasn't the only place in Iowa plagued by illegal saloons. With every attempt by lawmakers to restrict alcohol (and they attempted often, even after Iowa's prohibition amendment was overturned in 1883), drinkers would quickly find a way to flout the law. Just a few months after one of the first laws prohibiting alcohol in Iowa went into effect, a newspaper covering the eastern river city of Muscatine complained that "liquor is brought into this city in jugs, flasks, and men's stomachs" and was known to all.

The citizens of Carroll County proved, as they would under national Prohibition as well, to be especially enthusiastic offenders. Their taverns were built atop skids, so they could be moved by a team of horses as soon as some judge tried to place a lien against the property to cover liquor fines. Bootleggers roamed the streets, pints of liquor hidden in their coats, or—employing the trick from which the profession took its name—tucked in the leg of their boots, offering wares only to trusted customers. An entire side street, running through the city's main business district, sprouted "blind-tigers"—liquor stores, essentially, where the buyer would pass a bit of money and his order through a tiny slat in the door and back out would come the booze, without the seller ever revealing his face. Altogether they helped maintain Carroll County's civic pride as a hospitable stop for travelers parched after a long trail trip across dry Iowa.

As wicked as the saloons could seem to the dries, they were, for other Americans, especially working-class immigrants, an important resource that provided a slew of services to make their transition to America a little easier.



Camaraderie and a place to wallow in the mellowing effects of alcohol were the most obvious, ~~course, but turn-of-the-century saloons also served as employment agencies and check-cashing offices,~~ message drops and temporary residences. In the winter they were warm, and year-round far more comfortable than the dark, dirty, collapsing apartments that qualified as housing in many city slums. For weddings they were banquet halls; for political parties, headquarters. They even provided the era's version of a free lunch (they in fact coined the term, imbuing it from the start with its knowing misdirection) when they offered a full complimentary meal on purchase, of course, of a drink or two.

The trebling of the saloons in the last decades of the nineteenth century could easily be explained by the attendant influx of immigrants, including those from Germany. Between 1880 and 1900, just under half a million immigrants arrived in America every year.

As a result, the saloon, in the decades leading up to Prohibition, became firmly associated in American minds with the poor, immigrant class—men drawn to the city to perform the horrible tasks demanded by the sprawling factories and processing plants of newly industrial America.

To some the saloon was as revolting for serving alcohol as it was for serving immigrants.

Reverend Billy Sunday, one of the nation's foremost foes of that substance known to him as "double-distilled liquid damnation," opened his most famous speech (officially titled "Get on the Water Wagon" but known to nearly everyone simply as the "Famous Booze Sermon") by declaring that he was the "sworn, eternal, uncompromising enemy of the liquor traffic." In fact he was so committed to the fight against booze, he said that when he found himself on his deathbed, he planned to call to his wife with specific instructions upon his death. "Send for the butcher and skin me," he planned to say. "Have my hide tanned and made into drum heads, and hire men to go up and down the land and beat the drums and say, 'My husband, Billy Sunday, still lives and gives the whiskey gang a run for its money.'"

But that was only to be if Sunday didn't destroy the whiskey gang first.

Born William Ashley Sunday on November 19, 1862, out on the wilds of frontier Story County, Iowa, he was remarkable for his frenetic energy, untamable passion, and down-home locution even before he was known to everyone as Billy—first as Billy the wickedly fast outfielder for the Chicago White Stockings, who could have been a legend if only he could have learned to hit, then, later, as Billy the reverend. His early life, however, didn't suggest that either occupation was likely.

Sunday's childhood was less than elysian. His father died of disease as a soldier fighting for the Union Army before Billy had a chance to meet him. His stepfather was an alcoholic who abandoned the family before Sunday observed his tenth birthday, and his mother was constantly wracked by poverty. Shortly after his stepfather's desertion he was sent to a branch of the Iowa State Orphans' Asylum. The orphanage provided him with the education and stability he missed at home, but it would also hone his independence to a sharp point—so much so that by the time he turned fourteen, he'd had enough. He fled back home to his grandfather's farm, where his mother was then living. But he couldn't stand there either, so he set out on his own.

He found early success running in the races held across the state by local fire brigades ever eager, apparently, to prove their vigor. Eventually he was spotted by a star ballplayer from the major leagues who, impressed by his raw speed, invited him to try out in Chicago, even though Sunday had played little baseball. He made the cut. From there he went to Pittsburgh, playing as a starter, and later, with a reputation as someone who could steal bases and catch nearly anything flying toward him, he moved on to Philadelphia.

Alcohol during Sunday's youth and the beginning of his baseball career never seemed to give him

much concern—he had that alcoholic stepfather, but he also counted as his teammates and friends ~~whose exploits behind home plate were rivaled by their escapades out in the “whiskey-soaked, harle-~~ ridden world” Sunday would come to rail against. Ballplayer Billy even, as the Reverend Billy would not drink moderately himself.

His conversion came on a warm summer evening in 1886 in Chicago. While taking a pause from barhopping with his teammates, he overheard the enchanting sound of hymns from parishioners singing out into the street from the nearby Pacific Garden Mission. Tears welled in his eyes and he was so drawn to the carolers that he left his friends to their cavorting, went into the church, and pledged himself to God.

Sunday didn't immediately put down his glove. He continued to play professionally for a couple more years, but his focus was increasingly centered on the church. Eventually religion proved to be magnetic. In 1891 he officially decided to give up his lucrative baseball career and enter the much more hardscrabble life of the ministry. As his first assignment, he took a job with the YMCA converting drunks and bums and whores. Sunday believed it was what God wanted him to do.

There was also something else Sunday believed about what God wanted: the Almighty, he claimed, desired the righteous to be rich. And rich Sunday was to become. When he left baseball he turned down an offer of at least \$5,000 a year for a salary one-fifth that. No one could have predicted that the money would prove to be as good for his pocketbook as it was for his soul.

Billy Sunday's oratorical skill had always been as awe-inspiring as his speed. In school he could draw a crowd to a debate as reliably as he would later draw one to the ballfield or the tabernacle. But when he set out on his own as a traveling preacher, going from town to town across America holding rallies which brought Christians of all faiths—and thousands of converts—to his rousing revivals, his appeal took on a dimension unseen before in Christian evangelism.

A writer for the *American Magazine* who traveled from New York to the prohibition town of Fairfield in eastern Iowa in 1907 to watch Sunday in action wrote that “he began by slapping every church tradition in the face,” while “his gestures, more vehement even than his words, caused the drop of sweat to fly from his brow and ears as he beat the pulpit and tossed his head until he was hoarse.”

Sunday was a biblical literalist, keen on acting out scenes from scripture, onstage, seeming spontaneously, which captivated his audiences. He did not hesitate to point to attendees and call out their sins, nor did he refrain from describing in stark terms the hell that awaited the unconverted. Over the course of his career, he was estimated to have preached to a stunning one hundred million people. The number he brought into the Christian fold was reliably a source of amazement, as was the 1,118 he converted in Fairfield. Many of those, in that already religious town, were thought by the local clergy to be eternal heathens. Sunday's revivals were free. At the end of each stay, he would merely ask the community to contribute to him what they thought his services were worth. When he died, he left an estate as rich as his legacy.



To the Reverend Billy Sunday (left), alcohol was nothing other than “double distilled liquid damnation.” Despite his troubled Iowa childhood, he became one of its leading foes as America’s most famous evangelist of the era. In his sermons before packed tabernacles, he thrilled his audiences with energetic onstage antics. Here he demonstrates at a visit to the White House. *Courtesy of Library of Congress*

Whether those who signed his pledge cards and returned them with a couple of dollars tucked inside remained permanently in the flock was always an issue of debate. But no one could deny that he reached into the heart of the communities he spoke to, urging them to cease at once their sinfulness—and often the sinfulness Sunday was most focused on eradicating was drinking.

When Sunday proclaimed, in one breath, that the saloon was the “sum of all villainies,” that it was “worse than war, worse than pestilence, worse than famine,” and “the crime of crimes,” “the mother of all sins,” and “the appalling source of misery, pauperism, and crime,” he was hoping to scare his listeners into sober. And he did. Rum sellers noticed a phenomenon that occurred after Sunday arrived in a town: their orders fell.

After his booze speech in Fairfield, the writer sent by the *American Magazine* reported that three barrels of beer that arrived the next day were ordered returned by their purchasers, the shipping agent giving as the reason “Influence of sermons of Rev. W. Sunday.”

But for many Americans, the turn away from booze—or at least the turn toward favoring a ban on booze—came not from the century-old arguments about alcohol’s pernicious health and societal effects but from a modern-day renewal of one history’s most powerful rallying cries: jingoism.

It was a cry even Sunday would carry—and be tarnished by.

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## PATRIOTIC MURDER

At 8:35 PM on the evening of April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson, four years in office, stood in front of a tense joint session of the United States Congress. The last claps of the most fulsome applause he'd ever received had just ended. The Capitol steps outside were more peaceful than they had been any day, the mass of "belligerent pacifists" who thronged over them earlier that afternoon quelled by the police.

"The world must be made safe for democracy," he said. To accomplish this, he added, Congress must declare war on the imperial German government. Wilson's insight was that the unremitting submarine attacks against what were supposed to be neutral American merchant and passenger vessels meant that the United States was, in all but name only, in a state of war. Now it was time to make it official.

Over the course of his thirty-six-minute speech, Wilson emphasized that the feud was only with the government of Germany—the political power holders—not its population, and certainly not its diaspora. "We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feelings toward them but one of sympathy and friendship," he said. "We happily shall have an opportunity to prove that friendship in our daily attitude and actions toward the millions of men and women of German birth and native sympathy who live among us and share our life, and we shall be proud to prove it toward all who are in fact loyal to their neighbors and to the government in the hour of test."

It was hopeful thinking. A pronouncement of ideals. Reality, Wilson knew, would be much different.

About an hour after midnight on the morning before the speech, Wilson had summoned Frank Cobb, editor of the *World*, to the White House. He fretted about the impending war, the consequences for the country, its people, its hard-won society—its sacred Constitution. "Once lead this people into war and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance," he told Cobb. "To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street."

He might have added his own executive branch to the list as well.

Not long after receiving Congressional authorization to enter the First World War, Wilson appointed a man named George Creel to lead a newly formed propaganda bureau, the Committee on Public Information.

Creel was a natural pick. He'd once elaborated on his philosophy by adding to the popular phrase that people "do not live by bread alone" the assertion that "they live mostly by slogans." But for German Americans his appointment proved devastating—for Creel also believed that "fear is a rather important element to be bred into the civilian population." And it was an element the government was banking on.

Unwilling to raise taxes or borrow money on the open market to fund the full cost of the war, Wilson's administration turned to selling billions of dollars of Liberty Bonds at low interest rates to American citizens eager to subsidize the war effort. What motivated them was not just a sense of patriotism but also a fear and hatred of the Germans—a fear and hatred promoted by federal agencies like Creel's.

One man most adept at exploiting this "spirit of self-sacrifice," as he called it, was native Iowan and

future president Herbert Clark Hoover, who was tapped to run the wartime Food Administration.

Hoover was born in 1874 to Quaker parents in the thoroughly Quaker village of West Branch, Iowa, on the other side of the state from Templeton. By age ten both his parents had died and he was living as an orphan—first in Iowa, then with relatives in Oregon, where he remained until moving to Stanford to study engineering. From there his success was as immense and wide ranging as the feats of engineering, social as well as mechanical, that brought it about.

By his forties he was already inspiring awe for his quintessentially American, by-the-bootstraps ascent. The orphan boy from provincial Iowa was now a millionaire, a mining tycoon who'd worked in China, Australia, and Africa and had earned a reputation as a master of efficiency for his ability to extract wealth from even the most financially challenging enterprise. He would soon impress the country again when he adeptly supervised the evacuation of 120,000 Americans in Europe and organized the delivery of food aid to the Belgians early in the war's course.

It was no surprise then that when America itself entered the war, it was Hoover whom President Wilson tasked with ensuring that a steady supply of food from the country's fertile heartland reached the dough boys and their allies fighting the Central Powers across the Atlantic.

Working under the slogan "Food will win the war," Hoover decided that rather than forcing farmers to grow more crops while simultaneously forcing citizens to cut back on their consumption of the important staples of wheat, meat, and sugar, he would harness their patriotic fervor to get them to agree out of a sense of duty. He sent out a force of a half-million people to go door-to-door urging families to pledge to "wheatless" and "meatless" days to support the war effort. He also encouraged farmers throughout the countryside to streamline their operations and improve their productivity in part by ensuring high prices for their commodities. High prices, patriotism, and a shortage of manual labor due to all the young men who'd been called up for war, encouraged farmers, including those in Iowa, to vastly increase their investment in equipment—and during the war they ordered so many new tractors that manufacturers could not keep up with demand. But crop prices wouldn't stay high, and the inevitable tumble would ravage the state.

On the eve of the war, America was, in some ways, almost as much a German country as it was an English one: a full 25 percent of the country's population was of German descent, a number surpassed only by those from Anglophone countries, who made up a mere 2 percent more.

It was during those early years, when the conflict seemed to be little more than an isolated European skirmish, that a prominent British editorialist felt content simply portraying Germany in the "ludicrous" manner of a "fat old bandmaster with a string of sausages hanging out of his pocket." But as the war escalated, and the Allied press began carrying accounts of atrocities carried out by German soldiers, the portrayal shifted. Soon one man became the emblem of warring Germany: Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor, from whom all the nation's destructive power seemed to emanate and whose name and likeness, with his upturned beard and prominent nose, as well as the term "Hun" that he'd previously evoked to describe his country's might, became shorthand for all that was evil or feared of the Germans.

In America, posters from Hoover's Food Department evoked the marauding Huns in order to convince citizens to conserve food. One implored them to EAT LESS WHEAT TO DEFEAT THE KAISER AND HIS U-BOATS, and featured a background image of a smoldering ship sinking in the ocean, as the sun cast its last long reddish rays and the Kaiser, steely-eyed and clad in the requisite spiked helmet, looked on. Think of the consequences, it seemed to be saying, of waking up to a bounty of bread steaming on the hearth. To conserve staples, families were encouraged to plant Victory Gardens and eat more of the

perishable produce that could not be shipped overseas; they were to, as another poster urged, *CAVEAT: NO VEGETABLES, FRUIT, AND THE KAISER TOO.*

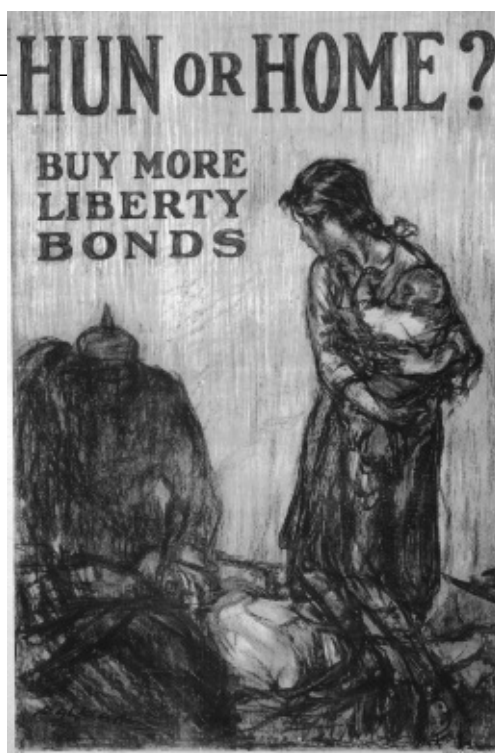
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Other departments also turned to propaganda posters evoking anti-German sentiment to coax patriotic acts. One read *GERMAN SLAVERY OR LIBERTY BONDS* in gold type set against black; unpunctuated the dichotomy was not a possibility but an absolute. In all the propaganda, the message was clear: Americans failed to support the war, the country would soon be overrun by the German army and made an occupied state, subject to the same horrors as the Belgians.

But, as ambiguous in name as it was nebulous in form and insidious in outcome, unbridled patriotism, called 100 percent Americanism by some, was often best identified not by what it was but by what it was against: disloyalty. With war, disloyalty became a watchword. Opaque and weighty, it could be used to describe genuine acts against the United States and the country's mission in war, but could just as easily be used as an excuse to settle political scores, to intimidate minority groups and those with beliefs outside the mainstream.

At the start of the war many German immigrants still spoke German, and the language was taught in schools throughout the country. Davenport, Iowa, where more than 80 percent of students learned German, broke the school day in half: one part for English instruction, the other for German. But with the war, the German language was added to the heap of things disloyal. In many places German instruction abruptly ceased, and German faculty across the country suddenly found themselves without work—which was fine for one Iowa politician, who considered 90 percent of them “traitors” anyway (meaning that perhaps the other 10 percent had just been bad at their jobs?). In some places, students preempted the school boards in eradicating German from the curriculum, as a cohort did in Denison, Iowa, thirty miles from Templeton, when they broke into the school at night, stole all the German books, and burned them in a great bonfire in protest of a decision by the district to continue dual-language education through the end of term.

Eventually, German was silenced not just in Iowa schools but in all public places. In May 1918 Iowa's wartime governor, Republican William Lloyd Harding, a political chameleon, fleshy faced with matted hair, and one of the most adept extemporaneous speakers of the era, issued a decree banning the speaking of any language other than English in all schools, public or private, on the telephone, in all public places, and in all public speeches—even church services. Regarding the last restriction, he suggested those who could not understand English could pray at home. As for what they were to do if they needed to make an urgent phone call or ask a train conductor a question, he offered no advice. Though Harding's Babel Proclamation, as it came to be called, was widely considered unconstitutional, it held throughout the war and was used as the basis to punish several German-Americans.



“Fear,” said the country’s chief propagandist, George Creel, “is a rather important element to be bred into the civilian population.” To do so Creel and his counterparts at other government agencies produced copious literature casting the Germans as inhuman and bloodthirsty and hellbent on not just defeating the Allies in Europe but crossing the Atlantic and pillaging America as well. “Hun,” as used in this poster, was one of their prized watchwords. *Courtesy of Library of Congress*

Meanwhile, across the nation, patriots were working hard to purge as many references to German from the English language as possible. Supervisors in Keokuk County, in southeastern Iowa, changed the name of a township from “German” to “Plank,” in honor of a local boy killed while fighting in France. The German Savings Bank of Carroll, once slathered in yellow paint for its treasonous name, became the American Savings Bank. Sauerkraut became liberty cabbage. German measles, liberty measles. If measles—measles!—were too pure to be despoiled by association with the Huns, what hope did the German-Americans themselves have?

Anti-German feeling would become more than just popular sentiment—it would thoroughly infect the country, passing beyond intimidation and denigration into actual acts of violence against German-Americans. In Missouri, when officials prosecuted a group of men for lynching a German-American in 1918, the jury deliberated for just twenty-five minutes before returning an acquittal. They agreed, apparently, with the defense team that the murder was “patriotic.” What was remarkable about the case was not just the jury’s judgment but the fact that the case made it to trial at all. Similar attacks on German-Americans occurred all over the country, often without a modicum of retribution against the perpetrators.

In Davenport, Iowa, anonymous accusations of disloyalty frequently forced German-Americans to go before sham quasi-courts to defend their patriotism and receive punishment for their alleged slights, and when spiteful citizens felt the punishment wasn’t severe enough, suspected traitors were forced to kneel and kiss the American flag. In towns elsewhere in the state, German-Americans were forced to parade through the streets, saluting the flag. Once they were finished, they were forced to donate to the war effort.

But one of the most violent incidents happened right next door to the German stronghold of Carroll County.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, December 26, 1917, members of the Audubon County Council of

Defense gathered in the offices of what was known as the Commercial Club. The space was chosen because, though the proceedings there that day resembled a court case, their legal basis was slightly hardly official enough to merit a spot in the courthouse, or even the police station.

The council had been called to investigate “murmurings” against several citizens “known to have German sympathies,” as one specifics-shy reporter summed up the situation. The presiding judge—for lack of a better term—was Robert C. Spencer, editor of the *Audubon Advocate*, former mayor of the town, an active Democrat and devout Presbyterian, and the grandson of a Civil War veteran. Except perhaps, for his politics, he epitomized the stalwart American.

In contrast, the loyalty to America of the two men against whom he was asked to lead the inquiry would have been questioned even if they had walked around every day wrapped in Old Glory herself. Reverend Ernest J. W. Starck was the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, a German parish located in the Lincoln Township community of Gray, just across the county line from Carroll. He was born in West Prussia in 1862 before immigrating with his parents at the age of two. He graduated from seminary in Springfield, Illinois, a couple of years after he wed another German native, Elizabeth, whose two sisters were still residents in the land of what was now America’s staunchest enemy. Starck was “on trial” alongside a farmer named Fred Tennigkeit. A wealthy bachelor, Tennigkeit was born in Germany but found success in America as a farmer, buying 160 acres of land just a few miles east of Audubon.

The crowd of spectators that afternoon was large and near connoption. The stirring memory of sixty-five young men leaving to go fight just a few days before was still all too present in their minds. If they didn’t enter that extralegal tribunal aware they wanted blood, then they certainly did with thirst for a very warped form of justice.

One by one, members of the community, presumably respectable, presumably with bios like Spencer’s, recounted alleged instances of disloyalty by the two defendants. Starck, already seen as a traitor by many for simply preaching in German, something he had done prior to the war without raising any objection, was further accused of “inciting insurrection and sedition” for selling German thrift stamps. Throughout the whole proceeding Starck adamantly denied every charge, defending himself eloquently while “looking into the faces of the determined men before him, refusing to do their bidding.”

Tennigkeit was accused of the crime known as “slackerism”—the failure to fully join in the common sacrifice war required. He had never been married and had no children and he was just thirty years old. The Council of Defense estimated his net worth at somewhere between \$40,000 and \$50,000, yet could find no record of him contributing more than a measly three dollars to the war effort: one dollar to the YMCA and two to the Red Cross. He apparently had yet to purchase a single Liberty Bond. He was further accused of making what were universally termed “pro-German utterances”—either a unspecified critique of a recent Red Cross fundraising drive or a statement to the effect that the United States was fighting on the wrong side, or possibly both. No one seemed quite sure.

After hearing the charges, the members of the council went into a private session to deliberate over what punishment to give Starck and Tennigkeit. It had to be severe, they knew that much. They’d seen the state of the crowd that had come out to see the trial and felt the oppressive tension during the meeting. Theirs wasn’t an enviable job. They knew that whatever they meted out would seem soft to the county’s most red-blooded patriots who, they worried, might take action of their own.

When they left their private session, their fears were proven founded. They announced that Starck would be forced to leave Audubon County within three days and could never return. Tennigkeit meanwhile, was threatened with arrest unless he immediately purchased, depending on the account



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