

# **PATRIOTS on the RAMPAGE**

by Anna Zellick

**We are done with the days of a divided allegiance in this broad land of liberty. With our sacred honor and our liberties at stake, there can be but two classes of American citizens, patriots and traitors! Choose you the banner beneath which you will stand in this hour of trial.<sup>1</sup>**

Thus spoke the Honorable Tom Stout at the huge, first Patriotic Day and Loyalty Parade in Lewistown, Montana, on April 22, 1917. All through the following year, amidst the tensions, emotions, and anger engendered by America's entry into World War I, Lewistown's citizens were quickly classified as either patriots or traitors. There seemed to be no middle ground, no place for calmness and common sense. Passive and silent loyalty was not acceptable. Irrationality and emotionalism increased in 1917-1918, resulting in a mass hysteria that culminated in a public book-burning, and possibly, the incendiary destruction of Fergus County High School. Lewistown was a community with a large and noticeable population of recent immigrants, concerned with the education and the Americanization of its young people. When war came, visible attachment to one's native country was suspicious to many American-born residents. Teaching young people the German language or anything about Germany came to be seen as support of "the kaiser." Employers pressed by Industrial Workers of the World organizing efforts, and town people watching desperate farmers' interest in the Nonpartisan League, feared these groups were working against the war effort. Their watchfulness hardened into acute suspicion. Finally, a spontaneous demonstration erupted, where hundreds of Lewistown residents burned German books and then almost lynched a suspected traitor. They shocked themselves into a return to subdued, legal means for handling sedition, but the mob action may have caused the loss of the school they were proud of—a still-unsolved mystery.

**EVERY LOYAL AMERICAN  
SHOULD USE THE  
AMERICAN LANGUAGE  
IT IS THE LANGUAGE  
OF YOUR COUNTRY**

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**IF YOU DON'T KNOW IT=  
LET US HELP YOU LEARN IT**

MAN COMMITTEE,  
DEFENSE



Frank L. Cummings

Fergus County High School Annual



Robinson Museum, Pierre, South Dakota



Lewistown, circa 1910

All photos from Montana Historical Society unless otherwise indicated

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## Fergus County Free High School

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Lewistown, at the geographic center of Montana, was the seat of Fergus County and had grown steadily in the last two decades of the 19th century. With the coming of the Montana Railway in 1903, Lewistown acquired permanent standing as the economic hub of the county. Its businessmen fostered a booster spirit backed by their investment in substantial buildings. They encouraged homesteaders as well as city residents; immigrants along with native-born citizens flocked to the area. By 1920, a quarter of the county's population was foreign-born. From wherever they came, the new residents were seeking better lives for themselves and for their children. Along with hard work, the newcomers believed in education that would guarantee a better life for their children.

That they were genuinely interested in their children's high school education is amply demonstrated by their prompt response when a new Montana law allowed voters to establish free county high schools. Rural students had been attending Lewistown's high school, but were required to pay tuition. Under the provisions of legislation enacted in April 1899, Fergus County electors petitioned for, and on the first Saturday in August approved, a proposition that created a free county high school course. It would be administered and taught by a county board and faculty separate from the Lewistown Board of Education.<sup>2</sup>

Classes were scheduled promptly, and held in locations around town, including the W. H. Culver photography studio. The \$20,000 high school already under construction by the city of Lewistown was not utilized, and in fact would serve only grades one through eight. Three years later, in 1902, the high school board decided to

purchase a whole city block in Lewistown for \$1,200. The following year, it awarded a \$28,070 building contract to T. J. Tubb, the town's leading contractor, for a permanent county high school.<sup>3</sup>

From a single imposing stone structure standing like a "beautiful palace high on the hill," the Fergus County Free High School had grown by 1916 into a good-sized complex serving 360 students. Adjoining and separate units comprised the administration office, classrooms, library, laboratories, manual and industrial arts, home economics, and a swimming pool-equipped gymnasium that also served as an assembly room.<sup>4</sup>

The years 1916-1917 were to be eventful ones in the development of the high school, for it was then that the colorful and unforgettable Frank L. Cummings was hired as principal. Brilliant, dynamic, fearless, forthright, and a very strict disciplinarian, Cummings came to Lewistown from Kalispell. In three years there, as the principal of the Flathead County High School, he had built the school "not only in membership, but also into a real community center."<sup>5</sup>

At the time the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, the high school board and Cummings were deeply involved in the forthcoming \$100,000 school bond election.<sup>6</sup> Within three years, it was anticipated that there would be 5,000 more pupils of high school age in Fergus County, and that the county would definitely keep on growing. They needed additional space to accommodate an anticipated 800 to 900 extra students.<sup>7</sup>

Extremely concerned about those towns in the outlying parts of the county that were already showing an interest in local or district high schools of their own, B. C. White, an eleven-year board member, publicly supported the bond issue. A legislator and a rancher from Buffalo, White expressed himself in plain, down-to-earth English when he wrote:

Ninety percent of a man is above his ears. We are going to proceed to have the finest school in the Northwest. It will add dollars to every acre of land in Fergus County . . . Now my farmer friends . . . use your horse sense for

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1. *Democrat-News* (Lewistown, Montana), April 23, 1917.

2. *Laws, Resolutions and Memorials of the State of Montana passed at the Sixth Regular Session of the Legislative Assembly* (Helena: Independent Printing Co., 1899), pp. 59-64; *Fergus County Argus* (Lewistown, Montana), August 9, 1899.

3. Fergus County High School, Minutes of the School Board, Meetings of September 12, 1902, June 20, 1903.

4. *Fergus County Argus*, December 15, 1916.

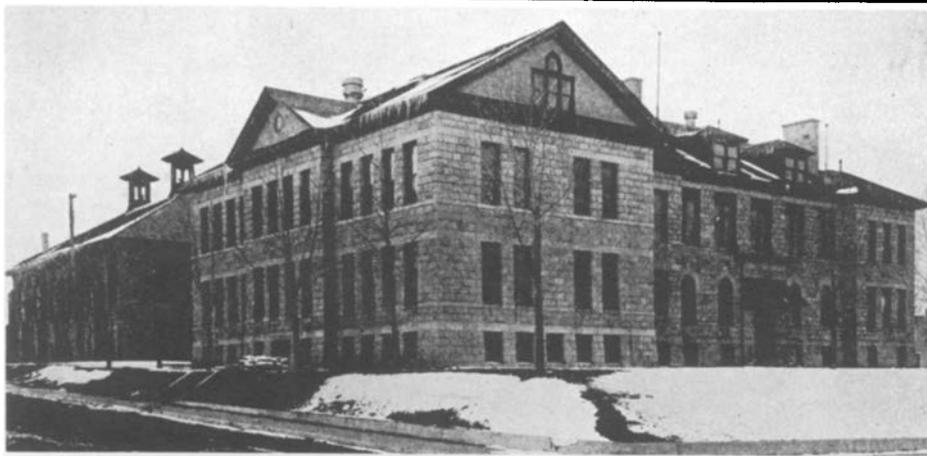
5. Senior Class of Fergus County High School, *The Fergus: Annual Commencement 1921* (Lewistown: Fergus County Democrat, 1921), unpagged.

6. Fergus County High School, Minutes of the School Board, Meetings of January 18, April 30, May 14, 1917.

7. *Democrat-News*, April 18, 1917.

8. *Democrat-News*, April 22, 1917. On bond issue, see *Fergus County Argus*, May 4, 1917.

9. *Democrat-News*, April 23, 1917.



Fergus County High School Annual

Fergus County Free High School, as it looked until April 1918

yourself and your children and vote for the bond issue.

At the polls, voters agreed with White, and the bond issue passed.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the school was among the public and private institutions cooperating with the newly-created Fergus County Council of Defense. Council members, appointed by Governor Samuel V. Stewart, were Tom Stout, chairman; W. D. Symmes, manager of the Power Mercantile Company, and Bank of Fergus County cashier James E. Woodard.<sup>9</sup> An extension of the National and Montana Councils of Defense, the Fergus body was to promote the war effort with particular emphasis on increasing agricultural production. Local people must have been very aware of the school's involvement in Council and community war-support as children participated in the Junior Red Cross, organization of war savings societies, thrift stamp sales, book-collection drives for soldiers, promotion of gardening and agricultural production.

At the Patriotic Day and Loyalty Parade in April 1917, where Tom Stout defined the "two classes of American citizens," the *Democrat News* reported a marching contingent of "hundreds upon hundreds of children, from little tots to higher classes," each one carrying a flag.<sup>10</sup>

Another speaker that day was the Reverend H. P. "Daddy" Crego, the well-liked history instructor who spoke on many similar occasions. He delivered a spirited extemporaneous talk, in

which he argued the necessity of marshaling every force in the nation to bring the war to a speedy and a victorious close. "In our life and death struggle with autocracy," he declaimed, "we have to throw our weight on the side of democracy." Other faculty members besides Mr. Crego took part in patriotic meetings held in various towns throughout the county.<sup>11</sup>

Judge W. H. Smith publicly congratulated high school students "for their demonstration, the spirit which activated them and the example which they were setting for the other cities in the Nation" during a "mammoth" war savings society parade on March 14, 1918.<sup>12</sup>

By this time, also, three Fergus County High School faculty members and forty-eight students and graduates had left for military duty.<sup>13</sup> All in all, the school had demonstrated the patriotic fervor demanded by the place and the times. Why then, within two short weeks, did the school and its administration become targets of the town's irate citizens in "the greatest demonstration that was ever staged in local history"?<sup>14</sup>

The answer to this question is not easy because the issue was not only complex, but also filled with paradoxes. To begin with, one must consider the large foreign-born population, particularly the non-English speaking Europeans who were recent immigrants. Their very presence, in time of war, induced uneasiness and suspicion among the local "Americans."

10. *Democrat-News*, April 23, 1917.

11. *Fergus County Argus*, December 7, 1917.

12. *Democrat-News*, March 15, 1918. *Fergus Commencement Number*, 1918, unpagged.

13. *Fergus Commencement Number*, 1918.

14. *Democrat-News*, March 28, 1918.

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## A Country of Immigrants

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Central Montana's agricultural lands had appealed to European immigrants from the early days of settlement, as they had to the native born. Henry P. Brooks, who came in 1879, one year ahead of Granville Stuart, was born in Germany. James Fergus, an 1880 arrival after whom the county was named, was born in Scotland; so was Angus McMillan, who also came that year. Frank Anton Yaeger came from Alsace-Lorraine. From Switzerland came Zacharias Tresch, and the following year (1881), Mr. and Mrs. Josef "Chris" King and sons. John Glancy and Ed McDonnell arrived from Ireland and Pete Anderson from Norway. From Austria-Hungary (present day Croatia in Yugoslavia), approximately 100 stone craftsmen came, who helped to build the city of Lewistown. Many of them also homesteaded, becoming permanent settlers. In 1903-1904, Bohemians Joe and Jim Vanek and Vaclav Hruska came to Lewistown with their families.<sup>15</sup>

With the advent of the railroads, 1903-1914, more and more Europeans joined the native-born who were pouring in to file on the abundantly available free grazing land. In 1916, according to the U.S. Land Office in Lewistown, there was a total of 4,301 homestead transactions. Passage of the Ferris Bill, the 640 Acre Grazing Act, the next year, brought in even more homesteaders. "Free Land Vanishes Under the New Law," pronounced the *Fergus County Argus*.<sup>16</sup> In a short time over one million acres of public lands in the Judith Land District, of which Fergus County was a part, had been claimed.

The precise number of foreigners living in Fergus County when the United States entered World War I is difficult to determine. The U.S. Census figures for 1910 and 1920 miss those foreign-born who had come during the decade but had left during either World War I or the devastating drought in 1919. Neither do these census figures reflect the hundreds of foreigners who worked on the Great Northern-New Rock-

ford Cut-Off, east of Lewistown, 1913-1918, nor those who had worked on the other railroad projects completed by 1920. For instance, in 1916 alone, there were an estimated 5,000 railroad workers in Fergus County among a total estimated population of the county of 40,066.<sup>17</sup>

In 1920, after its population had declined from the homestead boom years, Fergus County counted 3,535 foreign-born residents in its total population of 28,344. The larger of those non-English speaking nationality groups were: Germans, 360; Norwegians, 359; Austrians, 299; Swedes, 225; Czechs, 217; Yugoslavs, 147; Danes, 106; Swiss, 106.<sup>18</sup>

These figures do not include the children who were born in Fergus County or in the United States. Many foreigners who settled in Central Montana came as young married people with only one or two children, bearing the remainder of their children after arrival. Also, immigrant bachelors often returned to their homelands for brides, or single girls emigrated to Lewistown to marry.

Adding the 4,226 children and native-born adults of foreign parentage to the total number of foreign-born in Fergus County yields 7,761 "foreigners" in the county, nearly 27 per cent of the total population.

Their inability to speak English placed many of these European newcomers in an uncomfortable position. Even in peacetime, apprehensive American-born settlers had been known to remind the foreigners of their "duty" to learn and to speak in English. If the immigrants appreciated the freedom and economic privileges of their adopted country, they could at least learn its language.

Feeling the social stigma, most foreigners did try to speak English, but only a few were able to master it. Miss Mari Lovsletten, a native of Norway who arrived in 1883 to marry her countryman Pete Anderson, exercised rigid discipline, determination and practice. In due time, she could speak English fluently and without an accent. But she was the exception rather than the rule.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike today, there were no special adult

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15. Tom Stout, *Montana: Its Story and Biography* (Chicago: The American Society, 1920), Vol. III, p. 1293; *Lewistown News Argus*, July 16, 1980; Anna Zellick, "The Men from Bribir," *Montana. The Magazine of Western History*, 28, (Winter 1978); and information from Nettie Brooks Snyder, Angus McMillan, Dustin Machler Rolfsness, Mrs. Joe C. King III, Ruth Kamp Sproul, Roy Boettger, Alice Glancy Ayers, Mrs. Marie V. Vanek, Albert Hruska.

16. *Fergus County Argus*, December 15, 1916, January 26, February 2, 1917.

17. *Fergus County Argus*, December 22, 1916.

18. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), Vol. III, pp. 580, 586.

19. Information from Hazel Anderson Boettger and Ruth Kamp Sproul.

education classes in the high schools, including Fergus County High. Surely aware of the adult needs, community-oriented Frank Cummings had to be primarily concerned with the education of the young students. Short and/or winter courses had to be scheduled for the farm boys who could not spend the entire term of nine months in school. Girl teacher-apprentices had to be assigned to and supervised in the many one-room elementary rural schools that were being built all over the county. Furthermore, a dormitory had to be built and managed in Lewistown as an accommodation to the out-of-town high school students. The adult foreigners were left to their own resources.

Not surprisingly, religious services were held in foreign languages. Sunday morning services and sermons, for example, were delivered in German at St. Paul's Lutheran Church and in Norwegian at Zion Lutheran Church. In both churches, however, they used English in the evening services and in the Sunday School classes.<sup>20</sup>

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## War Efforts and Fears

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Then in April 1917, America went to war against the Central Powers—including Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Now, more than ever, some citizens regarded with deep suspicion speaking in a foreign language (especially German), and in some instances it was *prima facie* evidence of disloyalty. Speaking to the Chamber of Commerce only a few days before United States entry into the war, Judge E. K. Cheadle stated that, while he did not blame foreigners for having a sentimental regard for their homeland, “they should remember that this is their home now and their loyalty to this country should be of such a quality that no sentiment can detract from it.”<sup>21</sup>

To assure safety and order, Sheriff John H. Stephens issued a proclamation addressed to the foreign-born, stating that those who went about their business and conducted themselves in a law-abiding manner, should not fear any invasion of their personal or property rights. The gravity of the local situation was clearly revealed by his statement:

20. *Democrat-News*, April 1, 1917.

21. *Fergus County Argus*, March 23, 1917.

I urgently request that all our people refrain from public discussion of questions involved in the present crisis and maintain a calm and considerate attitude toward all without regard to their nationality. Let it be understood that every citizen owes undivided allegiance to the American flag, that he is expected to loyally fulfill all obligations which citizenship and residence impose on him. And that any act, however slight, tending to give aid and comfort to the enemy is treason, for which severe penalties are provided, in addition to that punishment which public opinion inflicts upon the memory of all traitors in all lands.<sup>22</sup>

Patriotism soon became an obsession. Whether one was “loyal” or “disloyal” became as important an issue as the progress of the war itself. The extreme emotionalism that was developing shows in a letter to Tom Stout's newspaper by Dr. T. H. Pleasants:

In our little city of Lewistown, disloyalty and treachery are stalking hand in hand, seeking whom and by whom and by what means, they may devour. I only refer to the disloyal citizens irrespective of nationality.<sup>23</sup>

Rudolf von Tobel, the first lawyer to establish himself in Lewistown, having come on horseback from Helena in 1885, experienced the harassment that resulted from the new prejudices. Then secretary of the Fergus County High School Board, on which he had served many years, von Tobel was now accused of being German because of his name. But, in actuality, he had been born in America of Swiss parentage.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Central Montanans were also fearful of potential saboteurs of war production efforts. First there were the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), those “anarchists” who, in 1917, were active in the mining towns and lumber camps in the western part of the state. “Before the harvest season,” warned the *Democrat* in July, “we may expect them here [in Lewistown] to cause all the trouble they are capable of

22. *Fergus County Argus*, May 31, 1917.

23. *Democrat-News*, July 4, 1917.

24. Interview with Anna von Tobel, August 9, 1978; Rudolf von Tobel, “Reminiscences,” unpublished ms. dated January 17, 1925.



**Managing editor Dave Trepp (left) and editor/publisher Tom Stout at the Fergus County Democrat office, about 1906.**

by preaching exorbitant wages to the laborers and by more violent means.”<sup>25</sup>

The I.W.W. comprised “traitors to this country [who] were going to be a real menace to Fergus County farmers and businessmen before Fall,” John H. McIntosh stated during a visit to Lewistown later in July.<sup>26</sup> He was state secretary of the Employers’ Association, a state-wide committee whose goal was to thwart the I.W.W.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly thereafter, an I.W.W. organizer signing his name as “Zitler” was detected, caught, and “run to his hole” by Chief of Police E. W. Ray. According to Ray, about fifteen new members whom Zitler had recruited, all “being the scum of the earth,” were subjected to “the police mill.”<sup>28</sup> Two weeks later George E. Martin, the local Milwaukee Railroad agent, was laid up from injuries sustained in an encounter with a reported “hobo I.W.W. who attempted to take charge of his office, cursed the lady cashier, and otherwise acted in a ruffianly manner.”<sup>29</sup>

Then came the news that in Judith Gap, fifty-five miles south, twelve different fires had been set in the Great Northern Railroad yards,

causing a damage around \$75,000. Only a year previously, according to the *Fergus County Argus*, “this town was the scene of a pitched battle when the I.W.W. took possession of the train, with the result that two were killed and several wounded.”<sup>30</sup>

“This state,” declared the *Democrat*, “is swarming with men who claim to be the members of the I.W.W. So long as the I.W.W. were operating on their own account and were actuated solely by their peculiar branch of anarchy to which they, as an organization subscribe, their activities could be tolerated as one of the excrescences of a democratic form of government.” But now “that it was apparent that they have become paid agents of a country at war with the United States the period of tolerance should end and measures based somewhat upon the example set by the vigilantes of our early history might not be out of place.”<sup>31</sup> Because the anarchist I.W.W. members were supposedly the “tools of Germany,” they were doubly dangerous and such drastic action was thought justified.

Feelings against the I.W.W. mounted. The executive committee of the Lewistown Chamber of Commerce resolved that Governor Stewart

25. *Democrat-News*, July 3, 1917.

26. *Democrat-News*, July 16, 1917.

27. Mark Mackin, “The Council for Defense: Autocracy in Montana, 1917-1918,” (Senior thesis, Carroll College, Helena, Montana, 1976), p. 63.

28. *Democrat-News*, July 20, 1917. The organizer’s name was also given as “Joe Zettle.” *Democrat-News*, July 19, 1917.

29. *Democrat-News*, August 3, 1917.

30. *Fergus County Argus*, August 24, 1917.

31. *Fergus County Argus*, August 24, 1917.

32. *Fergus County Argus*, September 14, 1917.

33. *Fergus County Argus*, August 31, 1917, Mackin, *Council for Defense*, p. 20.

should bring about a "complete extermination of this copperhead organization within the state, no matter how drastic the step necessary to accomplish this end."<sup>32</sup> There was even talk that a special session of the legislature was necessary, because the Montana Council of Defense concentrated on agricultural and food production and still had no legal authority.<sup>33</sup>

Fergus County residents who feared the I.W.W. would soon hear of another organization, reputed to be a partner of the I.W.W., that would increase their fears. By the end of November 1917, Nonpartisan League (NPL) membership meetings were being held in the eastern part of the county, and the following spring, new members in towns all across Fergus County would be petitioning for a state-wide convention.<sup>34</sup> Because of terrible weather conditions, farmers sought easy credit, cash, and seed grain, and were willing to pay \$16 dues to the two-year-old organization that advocated radical solutions to problems they faced.

An extreme drought practically crushed area farmers as they were trying to increase food production for the war effort. In his annual report for 1917, Fergus County Extension Agent Carl H. Peterson wrote that "due to an unprecedented drouth, there was a complete crop failure in certain districts of the county. The crop over the entire county was reduced by one-third." And in the following year, he stated that, without financial aid, "175 farmers would practically have to abandon their farms."<sup>35</sup> The Nonpartisan League attracted the hard-hit farmers, and offered badly-needed help.

Not being sympathetic, the Fergus County general public was critical and suspicious of the NPL. In addition to concern over the Nonpartisan League's socialistic principles, people felt it was "directed by men who were selfish, insincere, and dishonest, the greatest and the most serious objection to it was that some of its leaders were preachers of disloyalty and were encouraging opposition to the government in war operations."<sup>36</sup>

34. *Fergus County Argus*, November 30, 1917, June 28, 1918.

35. "Annual Report of County Agent Carl H. Peterson, Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Montana State College, for December 1, 1916, to December 1, 1917," and "Annual Report . . . December 1, 1917, to December 1, 1918," Fergus County Agricultural Extension Service, Federal Building, Lewistown, Montana.

36. *Democrat-News*, February 10, 1918.

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## The Patriots' Response

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Lewistown's newspapers reflected the suspicion of the NPL and the I.W.W., as well as the underlying anti-German fear. The *Democrat-News*, for example, editorialized in December 1917: "German propaganda was never so active in this country as at the present . . . lies . . . being manufactured by pro-Germans calculated to exert an insidious influence against speeding up our war work and to aid the cause of auto-cracy."<sup>37</sup> Besides recording and encouraging local attitudes, Lewistown's newspapers kept their readers well-informed of the war's progress. The daily *Democrat-News* and the weekly *Fergus County Argus* ran front-page news from the front, chronicled stateside support efforts, and frequently offered newsy letters that "Fergus boys" had sent to their families. Each of these papers was under the direction of an able journalist and publisher, Tom Stout at the *Democrat-News*, and J. A. Gilluly at the *Argus*.

Tom Stout, who had been elected to his second and final term as U.S. Representative at-large in 1914, and Lewistown businessman John B. Ritch accompanied an unofficial Congressional party to the battlefields in Belgium and France, where they spent nearly two months making firsthand observations. Upon his return late in December 1917, Stout told of his experiences in weekly articles entitled "The War As Tom Stout Saw It On the Battlefields." Through editorials, as well as numerous speeches delivered all over the state, he continually and firmly reiterated his views on the internal work of the German propagandist. "I entertain no illusions," he wrote, "as to the methods which will be employed by Germans to hamper America's war efforts. These methods will take every insidious and violent form. Failing in one direction, they will start out upon another. Honest people will be deceived by German sophistries and the work of disillusionment must be constant and vigorous."<sup>38</sup>

*Argus* publisher J. A. Gilluly became one of the vice presidents of the influential Montana Loyalty League that was organized in 1918.<sup>39</sup> It has been characterized as one of the most power-

37. *Democrat-News*, December 3, 1917.

38. *Democrat-News*, January 14, 1918.

39. Nancy Rice Fritz, "The Montana Council of Defense," (M.A. Thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, 1966), p. 77.

ful state-wide organizations that were “to investigate and root out sedition, disloyalty, and pro-Germanism.”<sup>40</sup> It was also to assist with fund-raising campaigns that, through advertising and pressure, were aimed at convincing people to buy war bonds. C. V. Peck of Danvers, Fergus County, also a member of the Montana Council of Defense, was its president.

Then there was the American Defense Society, a national organization whose aim was to expose German atrocities, to put down sedition, and to suppress German-inspired propaganda.<sup>41</sup> Because the problem of German propaganda varied in different localities across the country, in the Society’s viewpoint, it could best be handled on the local level through locally appointed loyalty committees. Accordingly, the Society contacted the mayors of towns and cities across the nation.

Responding to their request, and with the “full concurrence” of the Fergus County Council of Defense, Lewistown’s Mayor L. C. Clark appointed such a committee early in December 1917. Lewistown Loyalty Committee members were Sheriff John H. Stephens, Fire Chief John C. Bebb, Police Chief E. W. Ray, and H. L. Fitton as secretary. Mayor Clark served as its chairman. It started its work at once, allowing the Fergus Council of Defense to concentrate on agricultural production and leave the sedition threat to the Loyalty Committee.<sup>42</sup>

The committee’s task was to classify all foreign-born residents of the city as loyal or disloyal, always reporting their findings to the appropriate local officials. Any native-born “supporters of the kaiser” were to be included as well. Being familiar with the town’s people and “having information not possessed by any private citizen,” the committee was presumed to be able to make out a reliable list. The appointment of this extra-legal committee was looked upon with favor by the *Democrat*: “It created the machinery by which real offenders may be swiftly brought to book and in preventing injustices as may result from over-officiousness on the part of well meaning but injudicious individuals.” In every com-

munity, there was a “tendency on the part of some wholly unauthorized persons to occasionally assume a lot of authority that does not belong to them.”<sup>43</sup> The Lewistown Loyalty Committee, apparently, would prevent this from happening.

Mayor Clark contacted the local Chamber of Commerce for its support in the task of identifying disloyal statements. Responding strongly, the Chamber endorsed the committee and instructed the Mayor to publish the names of those who were against the war, and “to keep after them until they are completely ostracised by their fellowmen, and make it impossible to earn a living in this community.”<sup>44</sup>

In “rounding up” pro-Germans and disloyalists, the committee also asked those working on committees supporting the Red Cross, War-Savings Stamps Societies, and the Liberty Bond Drive to report “any persons who failed to support these movements without good reason in order that these cases might be investigated.” Five days later it published its first report, where three citizens “were called on the carpet” to account for their statements.<sup>45</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the legislation necessary to support the committee’s pursuit of the disloyal was provided by an extraordinary session of the state legislature. Meeting from February 14 to 25, 1918, it sanctioned and funded the Montana and the County Councils of Defense and it also passed a stringent Sedition Bill. From now on, seditious comments could bring a fine from \$200 to \$20,000 or imprisonment from one to twenty years.<sup>46</sup>

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## Book-Burning and Loyalty Tests

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Late in March, the tension, fears, and vigilance in Lewistown boiled over like the “bursting forth of a volcano [*sic*] which had long been gathering its pent up forces.”<sup>47</sup> A charge of sedition, filed under provisions of the new law, led to a three-hour demonstration by hundreds of townspeople, which included book-burning and, almost, lynching.

Two women reported to Police Chief Ray that they had overheard well-known real estate

40. Mackin, “The Council for Defense,” p. 62.

41. *Democrat-News*, February 8, 1918.

42. *Democrat-News*, December 3, 1917; January 17, 1918.

43. *Democrat-News*, December 3, 1917.

44. *Democrat-News*, January 25, 1918.

45. *Democrat-News*, February 11, 1918.

46. *Laws of The State of Montana, Passed By The Extraordinary Session of the Fifteenth Legislative Assembly, February 14-25, 1918* (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1918).

47. *Fergus County Argus*, March 29, 1918.



This pool hall group includes Rudolf Von Tobel (left) and Tom Stout (fifth from left).

broker Edward A. Foster say, as the *Argus* reported, "Because I don't carry their G—d d—d flag and buy the G—d d—d Liberty bonds they class me as a pro-German."<sup>48</sup> No formal action had been taken yet when, on March 27, Assistant Fire Chief Art Baker met Foster on the street and asked him to come to the Empire pool hall. There an unofficial "committee of loyal citizens" judged Foster guilty of sedition.<sup>49</sup>

They demanded that Foster carry the American flag three blocks down the street and back again, and accompanied him to see that "the sentence was carried out to the letter." Their small crowd drew a larger one of about 500 people, who witnessed Baker's administering an oath of allegiance to Foster. Only then did Chief Ray serve the official arrest warrant.

Someone in the excited crowd then "proposed cleaning the High school building of German text books. A word was enough." The school board had already ignored public sentiment and allowed Miss Agnes Trost to continue teaching first- and second-year German language classes, so that students could obtain their credits.<sup>50</sup>

The weekend before this Wednesday afternoon demonstration, the German texts had mysteriously been stolen and also replaced, according to newspaper accounts. But the people feared that

"much of the material printed in German and introduced for use in our schools and colleges was very largely the most skillful sort of propaganda which exalted, without stint, the German system of government and deified the German kaiser." Another sentiment in this community of recent immigrants was that teaching German constituted an "insuperable hindrance to the complete Americanization of tens of thousands of German born children in this country. . . ." and should not be tolerated.<sup>51</sup> The time had arrived for the citizens to take the matter into their own hands; the high school belonged to them and not the trustees or the faculty.

It was shortly after 3:00 p.m. when the students in one classroom were aware of much noise and commotion outside the building. Jumping to their feet, students George and Carl Ruckman could see a big crowd right in front of their classroom window, with many people still coming up Sixth Avenue from Main Street. "Could you lend me a helping hand?" asked one of the men, explaining that the front door was locked. The Ruckmans lifted the window without realizing what was going on.<sup>52</sup>

From that moment on, the mob took over. Martin Traywick, spokesman for a small group, presented an ultimatum to the principal: "We want the books!" Undoubtedly aware of the gravity of the situation and that he might be in

48. *Fergus County Argus*, March 29, 1918.

49. Information on the activities of March 27 can be found in the *Democrat-News*, March 28, 1918, and *Fergus County Argus*, March 29, 1918.

50. Interview with Dora Dykins, May 18, 23, 1978.

51. *Democrat-News*, May 14, 1918.

52. Interview with George Ruckman, July 11, 1978.



Horace Phillips' drug store, from which he brought German-language books to feed the "immense bonfire" of March 27, 1918.

danger himself, Cummings replied, "I will personally see that they are delivered at the City Hall by 6:00 p.m." Not sure, Mr. Traywick asked the crowd, "Do you want the books delivered at the police station at 6:00 p.m. or do you want them now?" "Now! Now! We want the books now!" shouted the citizens. Some five hundred of them then circled the high school building, making sure that no one got away while a small group went inside to gather the books.

This deed accomplished, the crowd then shouted, "We want Cummings!" "He's a pro-German!" "Make him kiss that flag!" Rita Simonfy Weingart, a student at that time, remembers this as a moving episode. Taking the tip of the flag to his lips, Cummings, she recalls, said in a tearful but audible voice, "I love this flag as much as anyone standing here with me today."<sup>53</sup>

George Ruckman later recalled that the students "knew Mr. Cummings was a good loyal American and we also knew that he was in real deep trouble. No one knew for a while what was going to take place next. It was that serious."<sup>54</sup>

The undaunted principal made an impassioned speech outlining the patriotic history of the Cummings family, whose members had fought in both the American Revolutionary and the Civil Wars. "Never," he said, "was there a charge of disloyalty against my family as there is at this moment." Vehemently denying that he was pro-German, he informed his audience that he resented this visit as an "intrusion on him and his faculty." If anyone doubted his loyalty, he continued, he was welcome to come forward and "face to face, fist to fist," Cummings would show

him! No one accepted the challenge.

Cummings was then interrogated about the attitudes of some of the teachers who were "under him," as well as his own actions following the mysterious disappearance of the books. "In permitting the teaching of German," Cummings replied, "I am carrying out the mandate of the board over which I have no control." Cummings had been heard. He was spared from carrying the flag up and down Main Street and taking the Oath of Allegiance as nine other suspected "Disloyalists" in the community would have to do that day.

The German textbooks were burned as the crowd sang "America" and the "Star Spangled Banner." The "immense bonfire" was further "fed" by druggist Horace Phillips, who contributed an armload of German books he had been carrying in stock. "He wanted to show that he didn't want anything of a German flavor about him," the *Argus* approvingly concluded. The "matinee" continued with the crowd locating nine more alleged "pro-Germans" and subjecting them to the "loyalty bath."

One other suspect was Carl Philipp, a post office employee, "said to have given offense in connection with the Thrift Stamp Sale." He had to kiss the flag and wave it, before he took his oath. Because of his supposedly sensitive job, a petition was being drawn to request his removal. In the opinion of the radical patriots, it was a "dangerous matter to have a pro-German working in a position where such great opportunities are afforded for acquiring information for the Kaiser."

For a moment, the hysteria became almost unmanageable when the crowd captured the

53. Interview with Rita Simonfy Weingart, August 3, 1978.

“disloyal” George Anderson, Sr., and his son, and prepared to lynch the elder man. Refusing to buy Liberty Bonds or War Savings Thrift Stamps on religious and conscientious grounds, but willing that the Loyalty Committee “take every dollar he had and devote it to those purposes [war] if it wished,” Anderson denied that he was pro-German.

The memory of this frightening moment still lingers with Norma Hanson Gilmore, who was a high school student at that time:

They nearly hung a man, and he was going to be thrown into the Spring Creek. When my sister and I came to the scene, they were calling for the ropes. I can still remember how I felt in my bosom. I was just a kid then, but I felt this was so wrong because this was our United States which was supposed to be free, and we could do as we wished as far as buying bonds were concerned.<sup>55</sup>

Art Baker, who was administering the Oaths of Allegiance that day, convinced the crowd to spare Anderson’s life. Baker told them that Anderson’s refusal “was not a matter of calling for violence, but such men as the Andersons who would not help to defend the flag were unworthy to so much as touch it.” The crowd acquiesced. Anderson and his son were set free.

Hundreds of citizens, singing patriotic songs, had turned out to observe the activities of the “impromptu court.” A raid on the Sons of Herman Lodge, a fraternal order for ethnic Germans, was averted by Emil Saxl, a member, when he willingly submitted its books and records to County Attorney Stewart McConochie. “Fully 2,000 people,” stated the *Democrat*, “joined the evening parade, which served as a finale to the mass demonstration.” Speeches were delivered in front of the Elks Club and the Busy Corner newsstand while the “crowd cheered lustily.” The day’s events were proudly labeled by the *Argus* as a “Big Day in America and the City of Lewistown.”

But the public apparently had some second thoughts about their illegal actions. On the following day, many answered an informal call to attend a meeting at city hall, for the purpose of

preventing a repetition. Mayor L. C. Clark presided as a plan was outlined for creating a “strong, representative committee that would . . . look after any pro-German cases.” Their duty would be to report them to legal authorities and “to see that any action by unauthorized committees along the line of further demonstrations were promptly checked.”<sup>56</sup>

W. D. Symmes, member of the Fergus County High School Board, urged caution. He wanted a “committee that stood for law and order and for no other purpose.” Judge H. L. Dekalb stressed that the United States government was one of law and justice. “No court,” he urged, “could place the stamp of approval upon the act of people taking the law into their own hands.”

Dr. W. A. Stevenson, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, believed otherwise. He supported a committee, with the feeling that there was a point where law ceased to be effective. “As to propaganda, a shrug of the shoulders, a smile, a nod, a wink was sometimes more than a speech in that direction.” A committee could serve “to cover the breach between the outwardly disloyal and the secretly disloyal.”

The meeting’s decision was to organize a county-wide committee with an executive committee of one hundred members. Its function would be “to investigate all reports of disloyalty and sedition, whether direct or indirect, by word or act or intimation on the part of any citizen or alien within the jurisdiction of this committee.” It also was to assist the local officials “by every possible means in the prosecution of any person charged with disloyalty or the disobedience of any regulations promulgated to meet the emergencies of the war.”

The *Democrat-News* sounded the same note of caution about extralegal activities late the following month. Fergus County’s district court had rendered its first sentence for a sedition charge on April 19. The paper editorialized about the seriousness of the crime, but it added: “All excuse for any action of an overt nature, except through the agency of the law, has disappeared in the state of Montana.”<sup>57</sup>

56. Information on the meeting discussion and decision can be found in *Democrat-News*, March 29, March 31, 1918, and *Fergus County Argus*, March 29, 1918.

57. *Democrat-News*, April 20, 1918. John Harrington, a man of “small intelligence,” had pleaded guilty to seditious talk and was sentenced to an “adequate” two to four years in the state penitentiary. *Fergus County Democrat*, April 25, 1918.

54. Interview with George Ruckman, July 11, 1978.

55. Interviews with Norma Hanson Gilmore, May 30, June 5, 1978.

Throughout April 1918, patriotic efforts in Lewistown were directed towards the third Liberty Bond Drive. Buying bonds was to be considered a privilege as well as a duty. The war had to be won "if it took every dollar and every drop of blood running in American veins."<sup>58</sup> Immigrant groups were especially praised for supporting the bond drive, as when the *Democrat-News* singled out a thrift club of Bulgarian Milwaukee Railroad employees. Its thirty-five members subscribed to their thrift stamps and purchased \$2,000 worth of Liberty Bonds.<sup>59</sup>

When the drive closed on April 23, Fergus County had surpassed its \$241,000 quota by more than one hundred per cent, and enthusiasm was at an all-time high.<sup>60</sup>

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## The High School Fire

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Exactly one week passed. April 30 was a balmy spring evening, and people were still up and around when the Fergus County Free High School exploded into flames. The populace was stunned by what seemed a carefully planned act of arson, one they immediately suspected to be of a seditious nature.

"There was a Reign of Terror," declared the *Fergus County Argus*. "Counter fires were set out in advance to distract efforts of the [Fire] Department."<sup>61</sup> The first alarm went off around 10:20 p.m., when Hal B. Gibson's barn was set on fire. The second fire occurred only a few minutes later at the "old Blackford place" at the opposite end of town. At 10:37, seventeen minutes later, the third alarm went off at the high school.<sup>62</sup>

Gasoline had been used in all three fires. Three gasoline cans were found at strategic places in the school; the stairway had been sprinkled and the roof saturated.<sup>63</sup> Students and residents came out and watched in horror all that night as the school burned to the ground. There was fear

that the fires were only a beginning of greater trouble, and a patrol of citizen riflemen was called out to keep watch over Lewistown.

Speculation about who set the fires began at once. "One of the most popular" theories, according to Tom Stout's weekly *Fergus County Democrat*, was that pro-Germans were the arsonists, in retaliation for the book-burning, but, "It seems to be generally accepted that this was an I.W.W. job."<sup>64</sup> There was also speculation that the cause was a recent strike of "very small proportions," which had resulted from a wage disagreement between the Employers Association and the Trades and Labor Council.

Whatever the cause, the *Democrat-News* lamented that Lewistown could harbor "men with souls so perverted."

The dastardly crime of Tuesday night . . . is difficult to explain. . . . That the whole business was the result of a carefully laid plot, daringly carried out, is beyond a shadow of doubt, and it is disturbing to think that in such a community as ours there can be men with souls so perverted that they would descend to such an act.<sup>65</sup>

A couple weeks later, in mid-May, two former Lewistown residents were arrested in Seattle. They were suspects because they had left town just after the fire. H. H. Snyder, an electrician, and W. W. Weyman, a tinner, were questioned and then released after satisfying Seattle Police that the time of their departure from Lewistown for Puget Sound's booming shipyards was mere coincidence.<sup>66</sup>

Montana Governor Samuel V. Stewart offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonist, but it

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58. *Democrat-News*, April 13, 1918.

59. *Democrat-News*, April 17, 1918.

60. *Democrat-News*, April 23, 1918.

61. *Fergus County Argus*, May 3, 1918. A fire had broken out the week before, on April 24, on the high school roof, but had been attributed to defective wiring.

62. *Democrat-News*, May 1, 1918.

63. *Democrat-News*, May 2, 1918.

64. *Fergus County Democrat*, May 2, 1918.

65. *Democrat-News*, May 2, 1918.

66. *Fergus County Democrat*, May 23, 1918.

67. *Democrat-News*, May 2, 1918.

68. *Fergus County Democrat*, October 10, 1918.

69. Senior Class of Fergus County High School, *The Fergus: Commencement Number 1919* (Lewistown: Fergus County Democrat, 1919), unpaginated.

70. *Fergus County Democrat*, July 25, 1918.

71. *Fergus County Democrat*, October 24, September 19, October 3, 1918.

72. *Fergus County Democrat*, April 28, 1918.

73. *Democrat-News*, June 26, 1918.

74. *Democrat-News*, May 15, 1918.

75. *Democrat-News*, June 16, 1918; *Fergus County Argus*, June 21, 1918.



The fire-gutted Fergus County Free High School

expired in six months with no claimants.<sup>67</sup> The identity and the motives of the culprit are still unknown.

For the town, the hysteria was past. There were no more public demonstrations until Saturday night, October 5, when word was received of the German request for an armistice.<sup>68</sup> The Fergus County High School students completed their 1917-1918 term meeting in churches around town and in the gymnasium, which had survived the fire. When school opened in the fall of 1918, it was in a substantial but temporary structure the students nicknamed "the tar paper palace."<sup>69</sup>

In July, a jury needed twenty-four hours to convict Edward Foster of sedition. Defense witnesses testified that he had been misunderstood, not using profanity and actually saying that because he did not buy bonds he had been asked whether he was pro-German. He received a \$500 fine and no jail sentence.<sup>70</sup>

Other sedition cases were tried, as when twenty-two-year-old rancher Charles Weingart said he would not go for "two of the best farms in Fergus County" because the German guns were superior to the "air guns" American soldiers had. Franklin Gaver, an itinerant painter, was charged when he said he saw no reason for sugar rationing that benefited the "pimps" who were "drinking and gambling in army camps," and Lehigh coal miner Joseph Stimson was also charged for public complaints about sugar rationing.<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, the stiffest penalties went to

the two men whose cases came soonest after the high school fire. Fred Vogel had been charged, just before the fire, with saying that he "prayed to God that Germany would win the war and would make a good government out of the United States."<sup>72</sup> In June, he was given a penitentiary sentence of one to twelve years, by Judge Roy Ayers.<sup>73</sup>

Sheep rancher Anton Schaefer was arrested May 4, accused of sedition by two tenants he had been trying to evict. According to his tenants, Schaefer said that the Liberty Bond monies were locked up in Washington and not used for the war effort, and that the United States would be better off if ruled by the Germans.<sup>74</sup> The jury that found him guilty in June recommended a fine rather than a jail sentence. Judge Ayers set the fine at \$12,000, "said to be the largest fine ever imposed by a court in the state of Montana," the *Argus* reported.<sup>75</sup>

However serious the penalties and however mild some of the comments, the summer's sedition cases were handled through the courts. Lewistown residents did not turn again to taking the law into their own hands. They channeled patriotic concern into Red Cross drives and Liberty Bond sales, to collecting books and tobacco money to send to the troops. They had vented their earlier war hysteria on the symbolic German textbooks and, possibly, the high school. But they had shocked themselves into withdrawing in time, and supported the war effort in its remaining months through legal means. ❧

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