

Lydon, Sandy

World War I fired patriotism, but men didn't want to fight

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THE COMMENT about the Kaiser's head seemed harmless enough. All the man said on that lovely spring afternoon up at Davenport was that it seemed a bit barbaric to have a baseball toss with prizes for hitting a papier-mache likeness of the Kaiser's cranium. War or no war, throwing baseballs at a human head seemed a bit much. But before the afternoon was over, the unfortunate man was braced between Sheriff Howard Trafton and a deputy, getting grilled about his motives for making the remark: Was he some kind of spy? Didn't he know there was a war on? Was he sympathetic to the Axis cause?

Eventually the man (his name was never given in the reports) was released, but we know from records made public after World War I that Trafton kept him under close surveillance for more than a year after the incident.

Patriotic righteousness was loose upon the land.

John F. Graham had a junkyard on the southern end of Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz, and he was convinced the United States should not have declared war in April, 1917. One afternoon he got into an argument with a Coast Counties Gas and Electric lineman about the war, and during that discussion Graham said that he would not fight for the United States. He concluded by insulting the flag. Within an hour, he was surrounded by a small group of Coast Counties employees who dragged him into the street and demanded that he apologize and publicly kiss the flag. After he knelt and kissed the flag several times, the group made him wave the flag over his head for a time before letting him go.

Similar flag-kissing ceremonies were held all across the United States in the early months of World War I, as the American people tightened their indulgence for dissent to zero tolerance.

The anger toward the Kaiser quickly spread to include all of German culture: People of German ancestry were harassed, and the German language disappeared from school curriculum (it was against the official policy of the state department of education to teach German in California schools).

Perhaps the most infamous victim was the hamburger — it was transformed into the "liberty sandwich."

This paroxysm of anti-German hysteria reached Santa Cruz when the local German Association, Turn Verein, quietly disbanded. Eventually, the German flag was removed from the Boardwalk merry-go-round collection of world symbols.

America's entry into World War I in April 1917 crystalized a sense of unfocused righteousness which had been festering for years. Hostility and impatience about the large numbers of unemployed people roaming the county roads and a growing temperance movement in 1914 and 1915 were eclipsed and simplified by the war. Ah, *there's* the cause of it all ... it's the Germans!

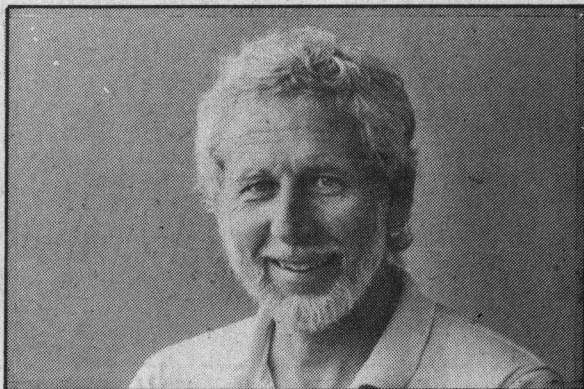
There was no room for neutrality. You either supported the war, flew the flag, purchased Liberty Bonds and praised the president, or you were a traitor. The United States Congress helped by passing several laws which made speaking out against the war a crime. Many communities set up local organizations to investigate suspected traitors. Justice was swift. Watsonville resident William McDonald said, "To hell with the flag," was arrested, found guilty and sentenced to 60 days in jail, all in the same day. The local newspaper characterized him as "the scum of the earth."

In November, 1917, Sheriff Trafton set up a branch of the American Protective League (A.P.L.) in Santa Cruz County. He sent letters to hundreds of local residents asking them to report to him any activity or remarks deemed "detrimental to the interests and welfare of this government." In the words of one of its members, the local A.P.L. was a "volunteer secret service force of nearly three hundred patriotic Americans." More than a thousand incidents were reported to Trafton during the war and his files included 287 instances in which he actually investigated the complaints. Neighbors reported each other in droves.

It didn't take much to get the A.P.L.'s attention. In 1918, for example, a young man of German ancestry was overheard to say that President Wilson was a "little man." The comment brought a visit from Trafton who told him that if he made any further remarks he would "commence a long period of residence in the county jail, after serving an apprenticeship in the hospital."

But there was trouble in River City. It seems that some of the young men expected to go across the sea and get into those European trenches were hesitant. A Santa Cruz naval militia unit formed several years

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon



The Kaiser took it on the head.

before war was declared was quickly mobilized and sent to Mare Island in San Francisco Bay in April 1917. When the Navy insisted the sailors sign three-year enlistment papers, 35 of them refused, declaring that they were in for the "duration of the war," not a moment longer. The mass refusal was a great embarrassment to Santa Cruz, and the mayor and members of the Chamber of Commerce went up to convince the sailors to sign up. Eventually most of them signed, but the city leaders were puzzled. Why would these young men not want to go?

Within weeks of its war declaration in April, Congress passed a Selective Service law. On June 5, 1917, all young men between the ages 21 and 31, citizen or alien, had to register for the draft. Those who did not were termed "slackers" and local residents were urged (with confidentiality assured) to report suspected slackers to Sheriff Trafton. A Draft Exemption board was set up with W.V. Lucas, Samuel Leask and W.R. Radcliff empowered to review requests for deferment and exemption. The board was not prepared for what was to come.

More than 70 percent of the local draftees who passed their physicals asked to be excused from military service. The majority claimed that they had dependent family members needing their support. (The national exemption request rate approached 80 per cent.) Local civic leaders were astounded. There had been no public demonstrations against the war or the draft, and few slackers had been arrested. But when the young men of Santa Cruz County were finally asked if they wished to go to a far-off land and face death, they quietly said, "No thank you."

The Exemption Board (all of whom were older than 31 years of age) tossed out most of the requested exemptions. For the duration of the war and the years that followed, however, the community puzzled over the contradiction between the tightly choreographed public statements of commitment to the far-away war and the reluctance of the young men asked to go and fight it.

Sandy Lydon is a writer and lecturer on matters historical. He can be seen regularly on KCBA-TV 35's evening news discussing history and the weather.