

BOOK REVIEWS

Patriot Hearts: World War I Passion and Prejudice in a Minnesota County

Frederick L. Johnson

(Red Wing, MN: Goodhue County Historical Society, 2017, 202 p., Paper, \$21.95.)

When the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, the state legislature created the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS) and gave it unlimited power for the duration of the war. The commission included Governor Joseph Burnquist, the attorney general (Lyndon A. Smith, who died in office in March 1918, replaced by Clifford L. Hilton), and five men appointed by the governor, mostly conservative businessmen. John F. McGee, a corporate lawyer, emerged as the dominant figure, and he turned the MCPS into what some historians, including William Watts Folwell and Theodore Blegen, called a “dictatorship.” Very likely Minnesota repressed civil liberties more aggressively than any other state during World War I.

Frederick L. Johnson, an experienced historian (this is his twelfth book), wanted to know why, and he had the shrewd insight that his native Goodhue County “might well serve as a Minnesota microcosm of these turbulent Great War days.” Thanks to his intense research and unflinching willingness to confront disturbing facts, Johnson has produced with *Patriot Hearts* one of the most important contributions to our understanding of the Minnesota home front since Carl Chrislock’s groundbreaking 1991 book *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I*.

The war magnified existing social divisions in Goodhue County. The towns (including Red Wing, Kenyon, Cannon Falls, Zumbrota, and Pine Island) were run by conservative, old-stock American businessmen. They joined the local committee of the MCPS, the Home Guard (the MCPS’s militia), and the America First Association. They called themselves “100 percent Americans.” The farmers, in contrast, were mostly Norwegian, Swedish, and German immigrants and their offspring. Especially those with German roots were less than enthusiastic about the war. Johnson recognizes the importance of these ethnic differences but nevertheless demonstrates with overwhelming evidence that they were not the root cause of the tensions in Goodhue County.

Rather, the conflict involved the Nonpartisan League (NPL), an organization that sought a better deal for farmers by curbing the power of the big banks and grain millers. After the NPL had electoral success in North Dakota, it set up shop in St. Paul and began organizing Minnesota farmers. The NPL nominated Charles A. Lindbergh Sr. (father of the aviator) to run against Governor Burnquist in the Republican primary in 1918. The business community saw this as a dire threat. The MCPS aided Burnquist’s re-election by painting the NPL as pro-German traitors. NPL leaders insisted that they supported the war effort

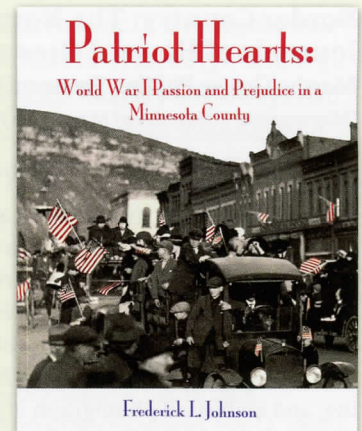
but added that if farmers could be drafted to fight in France, then the wealth of big business should also be conscripted.

In a well-constructed narrative, Johnson shows how this played out in Goodhue County. NPL organizers signed up many farmers, but they did so in the face of harassment, violence, and prosecution under Minnesota’s espionage and seditious

laws. In Kenyon for example, an NPL organizer was forced to kneel and kiss the flag before being run out of town. In an event that Johnson called “one of the most brazen and widely witnessed felonies in Red Wing history,” an NPL organizer was kidnapped from the St. James Hotel by a large crowd of locals. No one was charged because the judicial system fully supported the lawlessness. A week before the primary, the local MCPS chairman declared martial law in an attempt to block an NPL campaign motorcade from entering Red Wing. The Home Guard patrolled the streets with bayonets. Burnquist won the primary, but Lindbergh ran well in rural Goodhue County.

Johnson carefully surveyed the county newspapers, noting that most presumed the guilt of NPL organizers and condoned mob violence. One went so far as to call for the prompt execution of NPL organizers by firing squad. Johnson also paints a bleak picture of the Liberty Bond campaigns, supposedly a voluntary opportunity for citizens to pay for the war. In reality, the county MCPS monitored bond sales, and if a farmer hadn’t bought enough, the sheriff subpoenaed them to appear before the local MCPS.

Johnson’s conclusions are sound and supported by ample sources, although on two occasions his judgments seemed a bit off. He describes the NPL as a socialist organization roughly similar in theory to the Bolsheviks. However, as Michael Lansing has made clear in his recent book, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics*, NPL farmers did not challenge capitalism but merely sought equity in their dealings with railroads and grain millers. And although Johnson exposes the complicity of business leaders in suppressing civil rights, he lets them off the hook by suggesting that the problem was that they let their patriotism get out of hand (hence the book’s title). The story he tells, however, describes men more motivated by economic interest than love of country. In the end, his book is a brilliant study in how easy it can be to use patriotism as a cover for subverting democracy for private ends.



—Greg Gaut