



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: The German-American Alliance in Nebraska, 1910-1917

Full Citation: Frederick C Luebke, "The German-American Alliance in Nebraska, 1910-1917," *Nebraska History* 49 (1968): 165-185.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1968GermanAlliance.pdf>

Date: 12/17/2010

Article Summary: The German-American Alliance of Nebraska, organized in 1910, represented many lodges, singing societies, and other organizations. It sought to unify the German community and to represent its political interests. The Alliance supported German language instruction and vigorously opposed prohibition and woman suffrage, both considered threats to the German lifestyle. During World War I its members' emotional attachment to Germany came to be seen as disloyal to the United States and the German-American Alliance of Nebraska disappeared.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Hermann Gerhard, Christian A Sommer, Fred Volpp, John Mattes Jr, Carl Rohde, Valentin J Peter, Charles J Hexamer, George L Sheldon, Ashton C Shallenberger, William Jennings Bryan, James C Dahlman, John H Mockett Jr, Keith Neville, Woodrow Wilson

German-American Organizations /Events: *Kirchendeutsche*, *Vereinsdeutsche*, National German-American Alliance (*Nationalbund*), *Plattdeutscher Verein*, *Centralsverband*, *Saengerfest*, *Bier Brauer Unterstuetzungsverein*, Order of the Sons of Herman, German Day, Personal Liberty League

Keywords: German-American Alliance, *Omaha Tribuene*, Anti-Saloon League, Slocumb Act (1881), prohibition, county option, open primary, forestation, German language, State Traveling Library, State Library Commission, Mockett Law (1913), Nebraska City school board, Nebraska State Council of Defense, parochial schools, woman suffrage, initiative, referendum

Photographs / Images: State Senator John Mattes Jr, Otoe County, supporter of the German-American Alliance; a broadside used in the fight for prohibition

THE GERMAN - AMERICAN ALLIANCE IN NEBRASKA, 1910 - 1917

By FREDERICK C. LUEBKE

IT IS a curious fact that even though America is a nation of immigrants, the development and influence of non-English speaking immigrant groups and their institutions have been largely ignored in our national and state histories. Through the decades, the number of newcomers has been immense and their political and socio-cultural impact great. In Nebraska, for example, approximately forty percent of the total population in 1910 was of foreign stock.¹ Even though these people participated intelligently and extensively in the political and economic affairs of the state, their group goals, interests and institutions remain unassessed and frequently misunderstood.

Ever since the frontier of settlement swept across the Great Plains, the largest single ethnic group in Nebraska has been German. In 1910 approximately twenty percent of the state's inhabitants, or about one-half of all the foreign-born and their children, were of German origin. Although the largest proportion of them lived in rural areas, especially in

1. Nebraska State Planning Board, *Nebraska's Population: A Preliminary Report* (Nebraska State Planning Board, December 15, 1937), pp. 16-18.

Dr. Luebke is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Nebraska. He acknowledges the assistance of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the preparation of this paper.

the northeastern part of the state, significant numbers were also found in Omaha, Lincoln, and in smaller cities like Grand Island, Columbus, Norfolk, and Nebraska City.² In their adjustment to the new and unfamiliar American way of life, German immigrants, like other ethnic groups, were drawn together by their common language, heritage, and problems. Gradually they became aware of themselves as a cultural minority with a surprising measure of potential power in economic, political and socio-cultural matters.

Thus, the immigrants went about building a society of their own within American society. Its strength was drawn largely from the number and effectiveness of the institutions, both formal and informal, that they created. In the rural areas, the churches were easily the most important. In the cities, however, the Germans successfully established a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political organizations.³ One of the most important of these, one which effectively combined political and cultural goals, was the German-American Alliance of Nebraska, founded in 1910 as a branch of the National German-American Alliance. Representing as many as one hundred lodges, singing societies and other organizations, the Nebraska Alliance sought valiantly to unify the German community in the state and to be its spokesman, particularly in politics.

It was not an easy task. Despite the centripetal force of language and culture, the Germans were not at all as solid a block as native Americans perceived them to be. Roman Catholics in particular formed a sub-group with their own loyalties, organizations, and publications. Moreover, the Lutherans and other Protestant groups each formed their separate camps. Taken together, these three elements, which were strongest in rural areas, became known as *Kirchendeutsche*. They were commonly hostile, not only to

2. In Douglas County (Omaha), 57.4% of all males of voting age were of foreign stock in 1910; in Lancaster County (Lincoln), where native American influence was much more apparent, the figure dropped to 25.1%. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census . . . 1910*, III, 605-611.

3. Frederick C. Luebke, "The Political Behavior of an Immigrant Group: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1966), Chap. ii and iii.

each other, but to a fourth group, the so-called *Vereinsdeutsche*, whose associations were primarily with societies and clubs. Usually urban dwellers, the latter customarily drew heavily on German immigrants who were culturally rather than religiously oriented.⁴ “Possessed by an almost missionary eagerness to propagate and spread their particular *Weltanschauung*,” Heinz Kloss has observed,

[they] looked upon Americans as spiritually dormant worshippers of the golden calf. They looked upon themselves and others of German stock as the leaven that would bring about the spiritual awakening and maturing of the Yankee loaf.⁵

Each of the groups tended to be suspicious of the others and cooperation was rarely effected among them.

The founders of the German-American Alliance of Nebraska were largely from the liberal, more secularly-minded segment of the German community. Prominent among them were Dr. Hermann Gerhard of Lincoln, a propagandist and founder of a German colony in Texas; Christian A. Sommer of Lincoln, advertising manager of the *Lincoln Freie Presse* and member of the Unitarian church; Fred Volpp of Scribner, a banker, Democratic state senator, and member of several lodges; John Mattes, Jr. of Nebraska City, a long-time Democratic member of the State Legislature who was associated with both brewing interests and the German-language press; and Carl Rohde of Columbus, a Republican, a Lutheran and a member of several lodges who was engaged in the liquor business.⁶ But the organizing genius and guiding spirit of the Nebraska Alliance was its first and only president, Valentin J. Peter of Omaha.

4. Heinz Kloss, *Um die Einigung des Deutschamerikanertums* (Berlin: Volk Und Reich Verlag, 1937), pp. 31-35.

5. Heinz Kloss, “German-American Language Maintenance Efforts,” in Joshua Fishman (ed.), *Language Loyalty in the United States* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966), p. 227.

6. *Omaha Tribune*, August 24, 1911; *Lincoln Star*, October 9, 1954; W.H. Buss and Thomas Osterman, *History of Dodge and Washington Counties, and Their People* (Chicago: The American Historical Society, 1921), II, 490; *The Nebraska Blue Book and Historical Register, 1918* (Lincoln, 1918), p. 267; G. W. Phillips (ed.), *Past and Present of Platte County, Nebraska* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1915), II, 208.

Born in Bavaria in 1875, Val Peter came to America at fourteen years of age. Very early in life he became associated with the German-American newspaper business in Peoria and Rock Island, Illinois. In 1907 he moved to Nebraska, became the publisher and editor of the *Omaha Tribune*, consolidated it with several other German-language newspapers of the state, and converted it into a widely circulated and influential daily. A member of the Elks and a variety of German social and benevolent organizations, Peter was also a devoted member of the Roman Catholic church.⁷ The German-American Alliance of Nebraska, largely a product of his determined efforts, naturally was given extensive publicity in his newspaper.

The bond between the Nebraska organization and its parent, the National German-American Alliance, was close. Founded in 1901 in Philadelphia by Dr. Charles J. Hexamer, the *Nationalbund*, as it was often called, was originally established to further cultural objectives. It was part of a surge in organizational strength and expansion which characterized the German ethnic community in America during the two or three decades preceding World War I. Very quickly, however, the national organization acquired a reputation as being interested in little else than opposition to the prohibition movement. It was transformed into an ethnically based counter-organization to the Anti-Saloon League. When prohibition threatened a certain state or locality, the National Alliance would take steps to organize state and local branches which, in turn, became politically active, attempting to form and lead public opinion, approving candidates for public offices and marshalling "the German vote" in behalf of the anti-prohibition cause.⁸

7. Ruth August, "Val J. Peter, Publisher," *American-German Review*, XXVIII (October-November, 1960), 16-18; Arthur C. Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917), II, 860f.

8. Clifton J. Child, *The German-Americans in Politics, 1914-1917* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1939), pp. 2-14; Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts," p. 231.

So it was also in Nebraska, where prohibition had a venerable history as a political issue. Throughout the 1880's and climaxing in the election of 1890 when a prohibition amendment to the state constitution appeared on the ballot, prohibition had been a divisive force, chiefly on an ethno-religious basis.⁹ The basic regulatory law was still the Slocumb Act, passed in 1881, which combined local option with high license fees. Although the enemies of prohibition had fought the Slocumb law bitterly when it was enacted, they were now its champions, even though more than half the state had voted itself dry by 1909.¹⁰ Having lain dormant as a major political issue since its defeat in 1890, prohibition was reintroduced in 1907 during the progressive administration of Republican Governor George L. Sheldon, who unsuccessfully pushed for a county option law to replace the local option provision of the Slocumb Act. By shifting the option from incorporated cities and villages to the county, prohibition was presumably made easier since rural voters could participate in making the decision. Sheldon's support for county option unquestionably contributed to his defeat in 1908 by the Democratic candidate, Ashton C. Shallenberger, who enjoyed widespread support among German and Bohemian voters.¹¹

During Shallenberger's administration, two developments served to complicate the situation for the Democrats. First, Governor Shallenberger chose to sign a bill which forbade the sale of alcoholic beverages after eight o'clock in the evening. Having thereby alienated his German support, he subsequently declared himself to be in favor of a county option bill.¹² The second major development was that prohibition gained an influential adherent in the person of William Jennings Bryan, who had just failed for the third time to win the Presidency of the United States. For two

9. Luebke, "Political Behavior of an Immigrant Group," pp. 226-267.

10. Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska, The Land and the People* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), I, 843.

11. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 253; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 844.

12. *Omaha Tribuene*, July 28, 1910.

decades Bryan had benefited from German support even though he had always been personally dry. Now, however, he suddenly became "the arch enemy of *das Deutschtum*."¹³ In the past there had never been much question about where the Democratic party in Nebraska stood on the question of prohibition. But with the defection of Shallenberger and Bryan, the historic identification of the Democracy with "personal liberty" and as the friend of the immigrant was placed in jeopardy. By May, 1910, it was obvious to the leaders of the German community that immediate and drastic steps had to be taken if their group interests were to be preserved. The result was a remarkable feat of organization, achieved in time for the primary election in August and the general election in November, 1910. During those months, the Nebraska branch of the National German-American Alliance was conceived, born, and put to work.

Correspondence between Val Peter and Dr. Hexamer of the *Nationalbund* ensued. At Peter's request, Hexamer invited the Omaha *Plattdeutscher Verein* to assume leadership in the organization of a state branch.¹⁴ The first step was to create an alliance of the German societies of Omaha and its vicinity. This was accomplished on May 29, 1910, when Peter was chosen president of the new *Centralsverband* of Omaha. This organization, in turn, passed a resolution calling for the founding of a state-wide alliance during the great German music festival that was scheduled for the latter part of July.¹⁵ Thus, at each step the base for the state alliance was broadened. As thousands of German citizens of Nebraska converged upon Omaha for the *Saengerfest*, they would be exposed to the goals and

13. *Ibid.*, May 19, 1910. Wildly anti-Bryan articles became standard fare for the German readers of the *Tribune* during May, June and July, 1910.

14. William H. Werkmeister, "*Der deutsche Staatsverband*" (unpublished typewritten MS, Werkmeister Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society), p. 2; *Omaha Tribune*, May 19, 1910. Werkmeister's account is based upon a publication by the executive committee in 1914. It includes a "*Kurze Geschichte seiner Gruendung und Entwicklung*" as well as the reports of committees, resolutions, officers and financial reports for the first four conventions of the organization. It was supplemented by a similar publication in December, 1915. Both pamphlets are in the Werkmeister Collection.

15. *Omaha Tribune* May 26, 1910; June 2, 1910.

objectives of the German-American Alliance. More than that, the plan permitted distinctly political goals to be cloaked in German culture.¹⁶

While the music festival dominated the scene in Omaha and won effusive praise in the English-language press,¹⁷ the German-American Alliance of Nebraska was quietly organized on July 20, 1910. One hundred and fourteen delegates representing fifty-four organizations were present. Val Peter was duly elected president, though there was some sentiment in favor of Dr. Hermann Gerhard of Lincoln, who then became first vice president. John Mattes was chosen corresponding secretary, and Senator Fred Volpp became treasurer.¹⁸ With the exception of Gerhard, each held his office throughout the life of the Nebraska Alliance.

As an active churchman, Peter was interested in bringing the *Kirchendeutsche* also into the fold. Despite repeated invitations, however, the churches tended to keep their distance. No more than two or three church organizations participated. On the other hand, the presence of the *Bier Brauer Unterstuetzungsverein*¹⁹ was perhaps more significant. Generally the membership of the Nebraska Alliance came from culturally oriented societies, singing groups and farmer organizations. Approximately one-third of the membership came from German lodges affiliated with the Order of the Sons of Herman. The close bond between the two is revealed by the fact that several of the new officers of the Nebraska Alliance were also leaders in the state organization of the Sons of Herman.²⁰

After adopting several resolutions, including one which severely condemned county option and prohibition generally, the Alliance swung into action.²¹ A mere three weeks

16. There is no doubt that, in its inception, political objectives of the Alliance were paramount. Though there was much talk about cultural goals, the testimony of Peter and others is explicit. See *Omaha Tribuene*, May 26, 1910; August 11, 1910; *Lincoln Star*, October 7, 1910.

17. *Morning World-Herald*, July 24, 1910; *Omaha Bee*, July 20 and 24, 1910.

18. *Omaha Tribuene*, July 28, 1910; *World-Herald*, July 22, 1910.

19. Brewers' Benefit Association.

20. *Omaha Tribuene*, July 28, 1910; May 19 and 26, 1910. Mattes, Volpp and Rohde were all officers of the Sons of Herman.

21. *Omaha Tribuene*, July 28, 1910.

separated the organizational meeting from the primary election slated for August 16, 1910. Every effort had to be made to prevent Governor Shallenberger's renomination and to secure the election of Mayor James C. Dahlman of Omaha as the Democratic candidate for governor. Dahlman was as wet a candidate as the Democrats had ever had, and, as the son of German immigrants, he was especially attractive to the Alliance.²² United States Representative Gilbert Hitchcock, the publisher of the *Omaha World-Herald*, also received enthusiastic endorsement. As a candidate for the United States Senate, Hitchcock was much preferred over Bryan's candidate, Richard Metcalfe. Both Dahlman and Hitchcock wooed the German vote. While Dahlman declared himself to be "heart and soul against fanaticism and nativism (Fremdenhasz)," Hitchcock made much of his two years in Germany as a student and insisted that he had always opposed prohibition and county option.²³ Meanwhile, the Nebraska Alliance screened and approved other candidates for lesser offices on the basis of their stand on county option.

The open primary, which Nebraska had adopted in 1909, was another avenue for political action by the Alliance. Since the law permitted a voter to cast his ballot for any candidate of any party, the executive board explained to German voters in a widely distributed statement how it was possible for "liberal" Republicans to fight the fanatics in their own party by voting for Dahlman and Hitchcock.²⁴ A great migration of wet Republicans occurred on election day, especially in Omaha, with the result that Mayor Dahlman successfully, although narrowly, defeated Governor Shallenberger for the Democratic nomination.²⁵

During the next three months, the Nebraska Alliance employed a variety of tactics to achieve its political goals. It exploited German Day festivities in Lincoln, set for October 6 and 7, 1910, by scheduling its first annual convention to

22. *Ibid.*, September 29, 1910.

23. *Ibid.*, August 4 and 11, 1910.

24. *Ibid.*, August 11, 1910. See also July 28, 1910; *Lincoln Star*, October 7, 1910.

25. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 848.

meet at the same time and place. It supplied visitors at the festival with "foaming liquid refreshments" as well as badges picturing Abraham Lincoln and James C. Dahlman side by side. The resolutions passed by the convention were endlessly reprinted in the German-language press. The necessity of German unity and cooperation was repeatedly emphasized in order to advance the German spirit and German liberty and to frustrate xenophobic intolerance and puritanical fanaticism. A headquarters for political action was set up in Omaha. Several prominent members of the organization, including John Mattes and Otto Leptin, the second vice president, worked full time as campaigners, agitators and organizers of local alliances in the smaller cities of the state. German Day festivals were organized in other communities, including Falls City and Hastings. Circulars in both the German and English languages were printed and distributed which explained the position of the Alliance and which endorsed candidates of either party who were acceptable to the Alliance. Efforts were also made to enlist the support of other ethnic groups, notably the Bohemians, by organizing separate branches for them in the Personal Liberty League. Participation by the German churches and pastors in the Alliance's activities was repeatedly encouraged. Val Peter even proposed the creation of German citizens clubs in every German settlement, especially where the local churches refused to give official support to Alliance policies.²⁶

The results of the election of 1910 provided a temporary respite for the German-American Alliance in Nebraska. A majority of Democrats and/or opponents of county-option were elected to the State Legislature. Gilbert Hitchcock won the preferential vote for United States Senator. But "Mayor Jim" Dahlman went down in defeat, a victim, perhaps, of his opponents' efforts to identify him as the tool of the liquor interests.

26. *Omaha Tribuene*, September 8 and 15, October 6, 13, 20 and 27, 1910; *Lincoln Star*, October 6 and 7, 1910; *World-Herald*, October 8, 1910. Meanwhile the state convention of the Baptist church, meeting in Omaha at the same time, passed a resolution condemning "Dahlmanism," which, the Baptists asserted, "opposes the most sacred interests of morality and public order. Its unconcealed friendliness for the elements of vice and crime renders Dahlmanism a menace to public morals." *Omaha Bee*, October 8, 1910.

To say that "the German vote floated on an ocean of beer," as some have observed, or to describe the Democratic campaign of 1910 as "an assault upon the very life of our state [by] a great debauching and o'erweening brewery trust," as the new Republican governor, Chester H. Aldrich, declared in his inaugural address, is to misunderstand the immigrant mind in politics.²⁷ Prohibition was more than an issue to most German voters. It was the political symbol of a general clash of cultures which confronted many immigrants as they adjusted to American society. Prohibition was cut from the same cloth as sabbatarian legislation, governmental control of German parochial schools, objections to German-language instruction in public schools, woman suffrage, initiative, referendum or any other device which promised to smooth the path for xenophobic legislation under the aegis of reform.²⁸ The native American had little understanding of the importance which the mother tongue and mother culture had for immigrant psychology. Thus Governor Aldrich could dismiss "personal liberty" as a "specious and deceptive" ploy of the beer barons. But it mattered little to a German Lutheran pastor, who was possibly an abstainer himself, how much of Dahlman's campaign fund came from the breweries. The important thing for him was that prohibition was a type of legislation which threatened the German life-style and value system. His parish school, he had ample reason to suspect, could be next on the nativistic reformer's list.

It was. Shortly after the new Legislature convened in January, 1911, a bill was introduced by Representative O. H. Moody of Ansley, a Republican, which specified that every child of school age be required to attend a public school at least three months of every year unless he attended a private or parochial school in which instruction was in English. At the same time, the bill required parochial and private schools to keep records of attendance and to supply monthly reports

27. Carl Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America* (University of Kentucky Press, 1957), p. 164; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 852.

28. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, August 12, 1911; *Omaha Tribune*, August 17, 1911.

to the county superintendents of schools. Represented by John Mattes, the German-American Alliance lobbied effectively against the bill. Moreover, officials of the Lutheran and Catholic churches testified against it at an open hearing. In the end, the Legislative committee to which the bill had been assigned voted almost unanimously to table it.²⁹ For the moment the threat had passed; but it reminded Germans of the unsuccessful attack on their schools in 1890, and it presaged the bitter fight of the post-World War I era when defenders of parochial school education went the full route to the United States Supreme Court to protect their rights.³⁰

In 1912 the political activity of the German-American Alliance in Nebraska was relaxed compared to the contest of two years earlier. It gave full support to the gubernatorial candidacy of Democrat John Morehead, partially because his opponent, the Republican incumbent Chester H. Aldrich, was a leader of the "fanatical faction" of his party, as Val Peter described it. The initiative and referendum had been endorsed by both parties and therefore was sure to become law. The Germans were highly suspicious of these measures because they fully expected the prohibitionists to convert them into powerful weapons of intolerance.³¹ According to Val Peter, the only recourse was a systematic program of

29. *House Roll No. 116, Legislature of Nebraska, Thirty-Second Session, 1911* (Nebraska State Historical Society); *Omaha Tribune*, February 2, 1911; August 17, 1911; *Grand Island Daily Independent*, August 12, 1911; *Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Session of the Nebraska House of Representatives, 1911* (House Journal), pp. 83, 90 and 200.

30. For the fight in 1890, see Luebke, "Political Behavior of an Immigrant Group," pp. 256-265; for the later struggle, see Jack W. Rodgers, "The Foreign Language Issue in Nebraska, 1918-1923," *Nebraska History*, XXXIX (March, 1958), 1-22.

31. Since woman suffrage, initiative and referendum were ordinarily categorized as progressive measures and because German voters normally opposed them, the latter have frequently been identified as conservatives. This is at best a half-truth, for the Germans generally gave enthusiastic support to progressive legislation in social and economic matters that did not impinge upon cultural and religious concerns. This concept is analyzed from a somewhat different point of view by Gerd Korman, "Political Loyalties, Immigrant Traditions, and Reform: The Wisconsin German-American Press and Progressivism, 1909-1912," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XL (Spring, 1957), 161-168. See also John D. Bunker, "Edward F. Dunne: The Urban New Stock Democrat as Progressive," *Mid-America*, L (January, 1968), 3-21.

political education. If local *Vereine* would conduct seminars for the discussion of issues and voting, he asserted, the threat posed by the initiative and referendum could be met.³² When the ballots were counted in 1912, John Morehead was victorious. Moreover, friends of "personal liberty," mostly Democrats, were in control of both houses of the Legislature.³³

Although politics dominated the first years of the Nebraska Alliance, its founders had a much broader conception of what its activities ought to have been. They were aggressively conscious of their cultural heritage, and they wished to preserve it and promulgate it in dynamic ways. At the same time, they were totally loyal to America and its political institutions. They wished to assist and to lead their fellow German-Americans to higher levels of citizenship and civic responsibility.³⁴ Convinced that their maintenance of German language and culture was not incompatible with being thoroughly American in outlook, they epitomized their sentiments in the expression, "Germania our Mother, Columbia our Bride."³⁵ It was not necessary, they believed, for a man to forsake his mother in order to be loyal to his bride.

The Alliance pursued a variety of projects which were not directly related to politics. Among these was a sustained effort in behalf of forestation in the Sandhills of Nebraska. Originally motivated by a desire to attract German immigrants to settle on unsold school lands, the project was sparked by Carl Rohde of Columbus. Rohde and his committee persuaded the Legislature to pass a resolution authorizing the governor to appoint a commission to investigate the feasibility of forestation and to submit a comprehensive plan of action to the Legislature.³⁶ Rohde was subsequently appointed chairman of the commission. Hampered by the Legislature's failure to appropriate funds,

32. *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, August 29, 1912.

33. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 878-880.

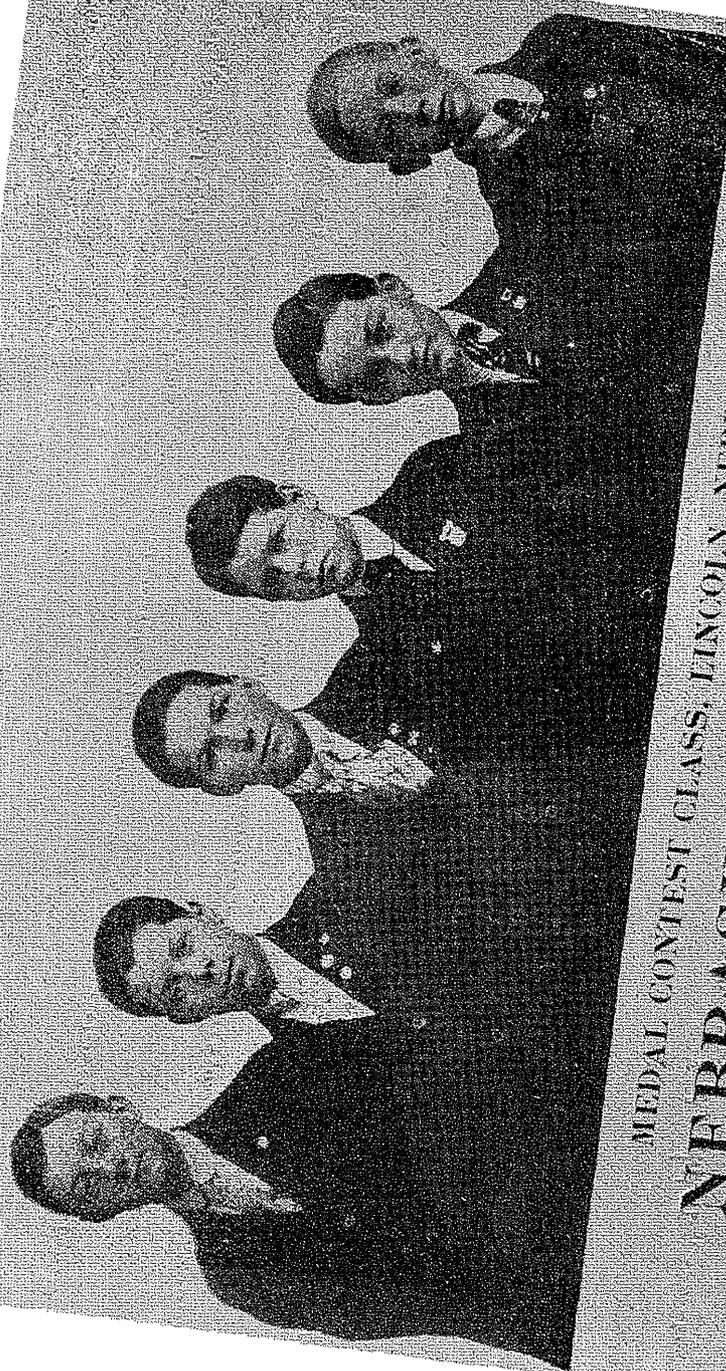
34. Cf. Val Peter's annual report in 1913. *Lincoln Star*, October 16, 1913.

35. *Omaha Bee*, October 2, 1913; Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts," p. 229.

36. *Laws of Nebraska, 1913*, p. 138f.



State Senator John Mattes, Jr. of Otoe County, a strong supporter
of the German-American Alliance



MEDAL CONTEST CLASS, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

NEBRASKA'S BEST ASSET

The Saloon Ruins One Boy out of Every Fifth Family. **WHICH LEAD SHALL IT BE?**
VOICE NEBRASKA DRY NOV. 7, 1916

Order from Life-Savers Dept., 415 Fraternity Bldg., Lincoln

Photo by *Harold*

A typical broadside in the fight for prohibition.

the commission relied on the financial assistance of the Alliance. Finally, when the commission submitted its plan in 1917, the Legislature was no longer interested. The exigencies of war caused the project to fade and die.³⁷

Perhaps the most active arm of the Nebraska Alliance was its school committee, headed by Christian A. Sommer of Lincoln. During the years preceding American entry into World War I, Sommer worked ceaselessly for German language maintenance. He succeeded in having high quality German literature placed in public libraries. He pressured the finance committee of the Legislature to recommend a one thousand dollar increase in the appropriation for the State Traveling Library so that additional German and other foreign language books could be circulated. Sommer also propagandized the Alliance members to build their home libraries of German literature and got himself appointed as a member of the State Library Commission by Governor John Morehead. Other activities of the school committee included efforts to initiate and improve German-language instruction in the public schools of the state. The introduction of new textbooks was encouraged, and stipends were offered for teachers attending a seminar in Milwaukee sponsored by the National German-American Alliance.³⁸

But Sommer's most impressive accomplishment came with the passage of the Mockett law in 1913. This legislation, a mild reflection of similar laws enacted years earlier in Indiana, Kansas, and other states,³⁹ required authorities to inaugurate foreign language instruction on an elective basis in urban schools if the parents or guardians of fifty pupils above the fourth grade requested it. Not more than five hours each week and not less than one period per day was to be devoted to the language instruction.⁴⁰

37. Werkmeister, "Der deutsche Staatsverband," pp.9-11; *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, October 14, 1915; September 14, 1916; *Fremont Tri-Weekly Tribune*, August 27, 1912; *Columbus Telegram*, August 28, 1914.

38. Werkmeister, *Der deutsche Staatsverband*, pp. 14-16; *Omaha Tribuene*, August 24, 1911; *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, August 29, 1912; August 27, 1914; October 7, 1915; May 20, 1916; September 21, 1916; *Omaha Bee*, October 7, 1915.

39. Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts," p. 235f.

40. *Laws of Nebraska, 1913*, p. 107.

Sommer had planned his strategy with Teutonic thoroughness. First, he courted the support of J. E. Delzell, the state superintendent of public instruction, as well as several city and county superintendents of schools. Next, he persuaded the foreign language department of the University of Nebraska, along with a conference of German teachers, to lend their aid. After legal counsel had been secured to draft a law in proper form, a brochure entitled "*Der deutsche Unterricht in den oeffentliche Schulen Nebraskas*"⁴¹ was prepared and distributed. Similar materials in English outlined arguments in favor of the proposed legislation. Both were sent to pastors, teachers and editors. Sommer then proceeded to line up the support of other ethnic groups, notably the Bohemians, Swedes and Danes. Anticipating nativist opposition in the Legislature, he got one of the most distinguished Anglo-American members of the House of Representatives, John H. Mockett, Jr. of Lincoln, to introduce his bill. These tactics, combined with discreet lobbying, led to an easy victory in both houses. The law went into effect on July 17, 1913.⁴²

Although many communities instituted German-language instruction in conformance with the Mockett law, opposition was not unexpected. The Nebraska City school board, in particular, found technicalities to justify its failure to comply with parental requests. With the aid of the Alliance, the case eventually reached the Supreme Court of Nebraska, where in 1916 the Mockett law was upheld.⁴³

The German-American Alliance continued vigorously to pursue its political goals in 1914. As in previous elections, attention centered on the races for the governorship and the legislative seats. This was because the success or failure of attempts to enact prohibition, woman suffrage, or

41. "German Instruction in the Public Schools of Nebraska."

42. *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, August 29, 1913; October 23, 1913. The vote in the House of Representatives was seventy-eight to seventeen; the Senate was unanimously in favor of the bill. Mockett had been Speaker of the House in 1903. A Mason and a Presbyterian, he had been a leader in the fight for county option. See *The Nebraska-Blue Book and Historical Register*, 1915, p. 432.

43. *State, ex. rel. Charles Thayer v. School District of City of Nebraska City, Reports of Cases in the Nebraska Supreme Court*, XCIX (1916), 338-348.

compulsory school legislation depended largely on the attitudes of the men who held these offices.

German fears regarding the new initiative law were validated in 1914 when it was used to place woman suffrage on the ballot. Inevitably the Alliance worked against it. Strongly worded resolutions condemning it were adopted in the annual convention. Woman suffrage was a degrading thing, the Germans thought, and not at all a progressive measure. To them it was a menace to the home; it threatened to take wife and mother from her proper place and make her a contestant in the political arena⁴⁴. On election day in 1914, woman suffrage was defeated by a relatively narrow margin of ten thousand votes and John Morehead was returned to the governor's mansion for another term.

From its very beginning, the tragedy of World War I cast a pall over the Nebraska Alliance. All parades and festivities were cancelled at the annual meeting in 1914, held in Columbus shortly after hostilities had begun. A deep sympathy for *das Vaterland* was apparent as speakers frequently made references to pledges of loyalty and financial assistance to Germany. Always sensitive to public opinion, the delegates resolved to do all in their power to correct the false impression they believed the English-language press was giving the public regarding Germany and its part in the war. Meanwhile, contributions for the German Red Cross began to flow into the Alliance treasury. Eventually they totaled more than twenty thousand dollars. Fearing an Allied monopoly of the war news, the executive committee transmitted a letter to President Woodrow Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan protesting the closing of a German telegraph station in the United States.⁴⁵

As publisher of the *Omaha Tribuene*, Val Peter fed his readers a steady diet of passionate partisanship for Germany. In this he was no different from the editors of hundreds of

44. *Columbus Telegram*, August 28, 1914; *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, August 27, 1914. See also the *Lincoln Star*, October 15, 1913.

45. *Omaha Bee*, August 27, 1914; *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, August 27, 1914; *World-Herald*, October 7, 1915.

other German-language publications in America. Motivated by deeply felt bonds of culture and kinship and by what they conceived to be elements of justice and fair play, they sought to balance the prejudices which to their minds characterized the English-language press.⁴⁶ "Both here and abroad," Peter assured the Alliance delegates in 1915,

the enemy is the same! perfidious Albion! Over there England has pressed the sword into the hands of almost all the peoples of Europe against Germany. In this country it has a servile press at its command, which uses every foul means to slander everything German and to poison the public mind.⁴⁷

By 1915 it was apparent that an easy German victory was not in the offing and that the European conflict had become a war of attrition. The German-Americans accordingly focused their ethnic intensities upon the hated war loans and the shipments of arms and munitions to the Allied powers. As they drifted away from the American consensus, the members of the Nebraska Alliance fervently expressed their emotions in a pack of resolutions, all the while asserting their loyalty to America, a sentiment which, indeed, was genuine. One of these resolutions is quoted at length:

As loyal American citizens, loving our adopted country and anxious for its future, we deprecate the enormous proportions attained by our trade in arms and ammunition. We believe that this hideous and wicked traffic should be stopped by law, and we commend both Nebraska senators, and those of our representatives in Congress who supported measures to that end in the last session. The trade in arms and ammunition is directly abhorrent to all believers in the Christian code of ethics, and to all human beings born with heavenly compassion in their hearts. It is building up in this peaceful country a military industry greater and more dangerous than any that has heretofore existed in any country of Europe. That industry, rich and powerful and greedy for continued profits, will prove a dangerous influence for fastening militarism upon us here in the United States. Because the arms and munitions which we export are used to kill the brothers, cousins, and other kin of millions of American citizens, the trade is creating bitter division along racial lines among our own people and threatening the homogeneity of citizenship which is essential to our nation's future greatness. Because it will be used to wipe out lives and property and to ruin the prosperity of our best customers, this commerce threatens our own future prosperity. Our profits lie in Europe's peace. Our security is linked with Europe's security. We feel it

46. Wittke, *German-Language Press*, pp. 238-242.

47. *Woehentliche Omaha Tribune* October 7, 1915.

is our duty to God and to a Christian civilization to do nothing to prolong this frightful war and everything in our power to shorten it. In the presence of the awful tragedy in which the lands of our forefathers are plunged—a tragedy which can only mitigate—we brand as base and abhorrent the arguments that are urged to justify our active aid in prolonging and making more murderous and more destructive this appalling war.⁴⁸

The position of the Nebraska Alliance on the European war remained largely unchanged during 1916. The partisanship of the *Omaha Tribune* for the German cause continued unabated or, perhaps, more shrill than before. Val Peter regularly published chauvinistic editorials ground out by the erstwhile first vice president of the Alliance, Dr. Hermann Gerhard, who mercilessly castigated President Wilson for his allegedly pro-Allied policies. Insisting that American behavior was anything but neutral, the Alliance cleverly identified its position with that of the founding fathers of the Republic, who shunned all entangling alliances and presumably pursued a policy of strict neutrality. Demands were made for a policy which defended American lives and American interests with equal firmness and justice for both sides. Better protection was needed, the Alliance asserted, for American mail, for American commerce in non-contraband commodities, and for American merchants discriminated against by blacklists.⁴⁹

As anti-German sentiment built up during 1916, the Alliance seemed to broaden its range of interest. Among the resolutions passed at the annual convention were several that were in no way related to traditional German-American interests. Motions favoring the construction of an adequate highway system, the erection of a new state capitol, improvement in the salaries of public school teachers, and the establishment of local lending libraries were all supported by

48. *Omaha Bee*, October 7, 1915. The *Bee's* transcription omitted a few sentences from the original resolution. These have been supplied and translated by the present writer from German sources. *Woehentliche Omaha Tribune*, October 14, 1915; Werkmeister, "Der deutsche Staatsverband," p. 18ff.

49. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, September 14, 1916. This issue contains English translations of all the resolutions passed at the seventh and last convention of the Alliance, held in Grand Island, September 13 and 14, 1916. See also *Omaha Bee*, September 15, 1916.

the delegates.⁵⁰ Perhaps these resolutions were intended to screen the Alliance's unpopular stands on neutrality, war loans, munitions, and prohibition.

Perhaps the most significant development for the Alliance in 1916 was the new level of cooperation and participation which the *Kirchendeutsche* gave its activities and endeavors.⁵¹ The impending crisis of war with the fatherland, together with portents of defeat in domestic political matters, served to unite the Nebraska Germans as never before. Val Peter had never relaxed his efforts to bring the church Germans into the Alliance. In 1916 he sent personal representatives to the conventions of the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Iowa Synod Lutherans. Both groups responded by sending official delegations to the 1916 convention of the Alliance. Other pastors also accepted special invitations to attend. All of them, ministers and priests, were made honorary members of the Alliance and were granted full rights of speaking and voting in the convention.⁵²

The last great political effort of the Nebraska Alliance was made in 1916, when prohibition once more dominated state politics. Under Bryan's leadership, the dry faction within the Democratic party experienced continued growth. Keith Neville, a young, wealthy cattleman new to politics, was advanced as an acceptably wet candidate to head off the gubernatorial ambitions of Charles W. Bryan, the younger brother of the Great Commoner. Along with Senator Hitchcock and Edgar Howard, the candidate for lieutenant governor, Neville received strong backing from the German-American Alliance. Even though the Democrats won the governor's chair and swept both houses of the Legislature in the November election, German hopes were dashed as the

50. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, September 14, 1916; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 15, 1916; *Omaha Bee*, September 15, 1916; Werkmeister, "Der deutsche Staatsverband," pp. 21, 25.

51. This action paralleled similar efforts by the National German-American Alliance. See Child, *German-Americans in Politics*, pp. 122-128.

52. *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, September 14 and 16, 1916.

prohibition amendment won a surprisingly large majority of votes.⁵³

The Nebraska Alliance endorsed no presidential candidate in 1916, disillusioned as it was with President Wilson's foreign policy. Dr. Hexamer of the national organization, however, came out for the Republican candidate, Charles Evans Hughes, as did Val Peter in the *Omaha Tribuene*. Not unexpectedly, the heavily German counties of northeastern Nebraska, traditionally Democratic strongholds, followed through with majorities for Hughes.⁵⁴

The election of 1916 ushered in a series of events that was nothing less than traumatic for the German-American Alliance. All the things it had fought for since 1910 were lost during the months that followed. Prohibition had been first. That it became law without the aid of woman suffrage was no comfort. Next came the declaration of war against *das Vaterland* on April 6, 1917. Its impact upon the spirit of the German community was incalculable. Yet within the month, the Nebraska Legislature enacted the law to implement the prohibition amendment.⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter it created the Nebraska State Council of Defense.⁵⁶ Fortunately, the Germans could not know at that time the indignities that awaited them under that agency's authority.⁵⁷ Even the German books that Christian Sommer and his committee had placed in the State Traveling Library became the subject of an investigation by the Legislature. Indeed, Sommer was forced to resign his post on the State Library Commission.⁵⁸

53. Among the victors was the secretary of the Nebraska Alliance, John Mattes of Nebraska City, who was reelected to his seat in the Senate. Despite his unpopular views on prohibition, woman suffrage, the war and the Mockett Act, his peers returned him to the office of president *pro tem* to which he had been first elected in 1915. The vote in favor of the prohibition amendment was 146,574 to 117,532. Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 913.

54. *Woehentliche Omaha Tribuene*, September 14 and 21, October 19 and 26, November 2, 1916; Sheldon, *Nebraska*, I, 910ff.

55. *Laws of Nebraska, 1917*, pp. 425-451.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 489-492.

57. Robert N. Manley, "The Nebraska State Council of Defense: Loyalty Programs and Politics during World War I" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska, 1959); Frederick C. Luebke (ed.), "Superpatriotism in World War I: The Experience of a Lutheran Pastor," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XLI (February, 1968), 3-11.

58. Werkmeister, "Der deutsche Staatsverband," p. 16.

And while an attack on the Mockett law was repulsed by the Legislature of 1917,⁵⁹ Governor Neville requested its repeal in a special session called for March 26, 1918. In his message to the Legislature, Neville branded it "vicious, undemocratic, and un-American."⁶⁰ The Senate, presided over by the Alliance's John Mattes, dutifully acquiesced in a unanimous vote, as the House also concurred, eighty-two to eleven.⁶¹ All this, ironically enough, was at the hands of a governor whose election the German-American Alliance had supported and a legislature that was decidedly Democratic in composition.

In the wave of intolerance for all things German which swept across the land in the wake of war, it was inevitable that the German-American Alliance of Nebraska died quietly and unlamented. The loyalty of German citizens throughout the state naturally was questioned. It could not have been otherwise, considering the incessant defense of Germany by editors, clergymen and other leaders of the ethnic community. Native Americans, government officials or members of the State Council of Defense could not be expected to have had a genuine understanding of the role of immigrant language and culture in our society. Yet, for the majority of the members of the German-American Alliance, German ethnicity was of a traditional, non-ideological character. It was a part of the countless, mindless acts of everyday life. It was emotional, not rational. Germany was a symbol of spiritual and cultural values, not of specific nationalist or ideological goals of the German Imperial Government.⁶² Indeed, many of the Germans had emigrated to America in order to escape them. Thus, American ethnic minority groups, Germans in particular, had historically been received with tolerance and good humor. Frictions and misunderstandings were both expected and overlooked. The

59. *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Session of the Senate of the State of Nebraska, 1917* (Senate Journal), p. 852.

60. *Senate and House Journals of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, Thirty-Sixth (Special) Session, 1918*, p. 38.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 59f. and 136f.

62. Cf. Joshua Fishman, "The Historical and Social Contexts of an Inquiry into Language Maintenance Efforts" in Fishman (ed.), *Language Loyalty in the United States*, p. 27.

German-American Alliance could be founded in Nebraska and be allowed to participate freely and effectively in the political affairs of the state. Many native Nebraskans did not like it, but there were few who were prepared to deny the Germans the right to so participate.

But with the outbreak of war in 1914, the circumstances began to change. Native Americans began to perceive an ideological character in the activities of the Alliance, the editors of the German-language press, or the Lutherans with their parish schools. The fact that this perception was largely in error made no difference. Emotional attachment for Germany increasingly seemed incompatible with loyalty to the United States of America. Inevitably the Alliance, essentially an institution for political action, met its demise. Whatever value it had had as an agency to mitigate the process whereby German immigrants could be absorbed into American society had disappeared, like water in sand.