

## Omaha, a City in Ferment: Summer of 1919

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Article Summary: Tensions ran high in Omaha during the summer of 1919 as inflation raised the cost of living, unions staged strikes, and ethnic and racial distrust grew. Controversy over prohibition, woman suffrage, and corrupt city government further aroused Omaha residents. Street violence at the time of a lynching in September led to a riot that threatened the life of Mayor Edward Smith and did serious damage downtown.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Edward Smith, Dean Ringer, Abel V Shotwell, Theodore Roosevelt Jr, Woodrow Wilson, Will Brown  
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Photographs / Images: editorial cartoon by Guy Spencer about the high cost of living, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, August 30, 1919; Omaha's Petticoat Lane from 16<sup>th</sup> and Howard Streets, about 1910; editorial cartoon depicting a celebration at Krug Park honoring returning World War I veterans, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, August 27, 1919; Red Cross women in their quarters following Omaha riot of September 1919; interior of Douglas County clerk's office, Omaha courthouse, after the riot

## OMAHA, A CITY IN FERMENT: SUMMER OF 1919

*By Michael L. Lawson*

The summer of 1919 was a time of restless transition. Tensions and frustrations which accompanied this period of adjustment from war to peace were as evident in Omaha as elsewhere. Lacking external controls the nation's economy ran away with itself. Americans began searching behind every dollar sign for a solution or at least a scapegoat for inflation. With the rise of prices and the lifting of a strike ban imposed during the war, labor organizations became restless and again took collective action to make their demands known, although they now received little government sanction. The farmer and the soldier home from the war found little federal support and faced a difficult period of adjustment. Above all, the mythical American melting pot still showed signs of having residue clinging to its sides. Ethnic hatreds generated by the hysteria of war continued to manifest themselves in ugly if sometimes subtle ways. Racial tensions which had accumulated from an even earlier period increased, and racial violence erupted in Omaha shortly after the summer ended. Nervous activity generated by prohibition and woman suffrage movements, corrupt city government, and other issues contributed to the general anxiety of the early post-war years.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout 1919 there were numerous conflicts between capital and labor and in the course of the year over four million workers participated in strikes in America. As the summer began in Omaha, local boilermakers, bricklayers, tailors, telegraphers, teamsters, and truck drivers had already walked off their jobs. On June 21 the Central Labor Union (CLU) threatened to call a general sympathy strike of the thirty thousand union employees in the city if an agreement was not reached in the teamsters' strike. The teamsters were demanding wage increases and the right to

wear union buttons on the job. While several employers had granted these rights, the union decided to strike "fair employers" to show sympathy for a strike against those "unfair employers" who had not yet met the union demands. In reference to the recent labor riots in Canada, the CLU threatened to make "a second Winnipeg" out of Omaha.<sup>2</sup>

Following alleged teamster violence in an attempt to stop vehicles driven by non-union drivers, Omaha police prohibited the gathering of picket groups in the streets and deputized 150 new men to protect the strikebreakers. Meanwhile, between forty and fifty additional strikebreakers arrived in the city, including eight Negroes from Kansas City. After a brief but hostile confrontation with the strikers, these men were persuaded to return to their homes.<sup>3</sup>

At this point the city government tried to mediate the situation. Mayor Edward Smith, recently elected in a reform campaign, called for a conference between teamster employers and union members. His efforts, however, were not appreciated by the CLU, which began circulating petitions calling for the recall of the mayor and five city commissioners. Mayor Smith did not help the situation in an address to an American Legion convention on June 25:

If these troubles arise, I am going to ask the American Legion, the men who went overseas to fight this same thing and defend it again and fight if necessary. I'm going to ask them to drive the ice wagons and milk wagons that carry the ice and milk to the sick and to the babies of Omaha in spite of opposition.<sup>4</sup>

Hundreds of ex-soldiers promised the mayor that they would help keep order in case of a general strike and the convention subsequently passed a formal resolution which was anti-union in outlook. It stated that "anything savoring of anarchy in Douglas County should be put down by the Legion."<sup>5</sup>

The *World-Herald* praised Smith for his stand and called him a "true American mayor" while referring to labor as the "voice of anarchy."<sup>6</sup> As a result of the convention resolution, however, the Legion received such vigorous criticism that a month later it announced a hands-off policy in any labor troubles in Omaha or Nebraska. In the meantime the CLU passed a resolution denouncing Mayor Smith and his speech.<sup>7</sup>

While mediation continued between City Commissioner Harry B. Zinnam and the teamsters, the Omaha electricians and planing

mill workers voted to join the strike; the plumbers and barbers voted against it; and the carpenters could not make up their minds. Finally the teamsters killed plans for a sympathy strike by returning to work for "fair employers," although they continued their strike against companies they regarded as unfair and urged that they be boycotted.<sup>8</sup>

By June 27 both horse-drawn and motor transportation returned to near normal. The strike effort had been crippled because some men returned to work for unfair as well as fair employers; disgruntled pickets went unpaid; and the sympathy strike by other local unions had not received support from national organizations. The teamsters, truck drivers, tailors, and boilermakers won their demands with some companies, but in other cases their jobs were taken by non-union men. While thirty-five bricklayers returned to work for a 12 1/2 cent per hour increase on June 27, others remained idle, as did the majority of the telegraphers.<sup>9</sup>

Another important and even more successful strike effort involved street railway workers. In June employees of the Omaha-Council Bluffs Street Railway Company began agitating for an 8 cent per hour wage increase, a closed shop, final approval of time schedules, overtime pay after ten hours, and seniority rights lost during a 1909 strike. While the union voted not to walk out on June 24, in July it threatened the city with a strike and increased wage demands from the prevailing 41 cents-45 cents per hour to 65 cents-75 cents per hour. Mayor Smith said a fare hike on streetcars would be required, since the company would not be able to meet the demand and break even on the current 5 cent fare.<sup>10</sup>

Once again the city government stepped in to mediate and settlement was reached on August 8. A 7 cent carfare was put into effect, and the union agreed to a 10 cent wage increase, which brought the average wage to 55 cents an hour.<sup>11</sup> In the face of rising prices, however, citizens were not happy with the fare increase, and in a letter to the *World-Herald* "Public Pulse" one of them demanded to know: "Why is it that a corporation declaring enormous dividends each year can't afford to raise their employees' pay without making the general public pay for same?"<sup>12</sup>

On July 17 over two hundred livestock handlers at Union Stockyards in South Omaha went on strike and were joined the next day

by stockyard carpenters. Management personnel, called upon to fill in for strikers, objected to unloading and yarding livestock and threatened to quit if new men were not soon hired. Meanwhile, strikers, who had left their jobs before being fully paid, met at the Workman's Temple and marched to the yards to demand their checks. Management officials met the workers at the east end of the O Street viaduct and with the aid of police dispersed the strikers and prevented their entry into the stockyards. Soon 75 per cent of the men who had walked out were replaced by non-union workers.<sup>13</sup>

Livestock receipts dropped as much as 50 per cent for a time, but by July 20 the yards were back to near-normal operation. Next, members of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen threatened to walk off their jobs in the packing plants because strikebreakers in stockyard chutes were paid \$5.00 a day plus room and board. On July 23 after weighing alternatives, the meat cutters decided not to risk their jobs and voted against a strike.<sup>14</sup>

During the first week of August, the *Bee* reported that as many as five hundred Negro workers, mostly from Chicago and East St. Louis, where violent race riots had recently occurred, arrived in Omaha to seek employment in the packing houses.<sup>15</sup> Employment of blacks as strikebreakers during the teamster and stockyard strikes was viewed with considerable contempt by workers who had been displaced and by unemployed veterans in the city. Sensational coverage of this aspect by the *Bee* and the *Daily News* heightened the level of racial tensions and contributed to the general anxiety.

Two hundred shop workers from the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad went on strike in August. Although Union Pacific and Burlington shopmen did not join the walkout, the strike affected grain receipts in the city. A strike by stationary engineers and firemen at steam plants brought the threat of a power shutoff and fear of possible spoilage of stored foodstuffs. On August 15 in a petition to Police Commissioner Dean Ringer, policemen and firemen demanded a 35 percent pay increase over the \$125 a month they averaged. While none of these disputes would be settled before the end of the summer, half of the city's boiler-makers, who had been on strike since May 14, went back to work for a 15 cent per hour increase. Also in August, the local Newspaper Reporters and Newswriters Union urged pressure be

*Assaults on HCL [high cost of living] as seen by cartoonist Guy Spencer (Omaha Morning World-Herald, August 30, 1919).*



brought to bear against the Woodmen of the World Life Insurance Company after its personnel manager dismissed twenty members of the Clerks and Stenographers Union, saying that “he didn’t care about any union.”<sup>16</sup>

In September the Omaha Cooks Association and Local 143 of the Hotel Restaurant Employees Union merged efforts and gained CLU support for a strike which involved virtually all cooks, waiters, and waitresses in Omaha. Resourceful strikers picketed eighteen restaurants and on September 9 opened their own restaurant—the Orpheum Gardens on Harney Street. Subsequently it became a popular eating place, since it featured a waiter for each table and prices were about half that of any other restaurant in Omaha.<sup>17</sup>

Despite tension caused by labor demands and examples of violence elsewhere, Omahans were involved in few violent or criminal activities during the various strikes of 1919. Occasionally non-union workers were beaten by strikers and property damage was reported by employers who were being picketed. The idea of organizing for collective action, however, caught on in other elements of society. Household workers, nurses, and lifeguards at municipal pools were organizing and making their demands known. Despite prohibition, the still-functioning Bartender’s Union continued to fight for fair employment conditions in fruit juice and soft drink “bars.” The Ice Kids’ Union, self-styled the

“strongest organization in the city” (it consisted of thirty-five teenagers who sold over 600 cakes of ice per day), became so big that it organized a second local.<sup>18</sup>

With the transition from a wartime to peace-time economy, prices in Omaha soared to an all-time high. Prices rose nearly twice as fast as income, and for the average-income group, the cost of living increased 71 per cent within a four-year period. Farmers and meat and dairy producers enjoyed a record year, yet food prices remained high in 1919. The farmer and the small businessman complained of an increased proportion of profit reaped by the middleman.<sup>19</sup>

On August 1 the *World-Herald* reported food prices during July had gone up 18 per cent over the wartime prices of 1918. Three weeks earlier the United States Labor Bureau had reported that food prices had advanced more in Omaha than in any other major city in America.<sup>20</sup> While charges of “profiteering” became a convenient scapegoat, there was no consensus as to the cause of what was known as “Mister HCL” (high cost of living). The consumer blamed the retailer, the retailer blamed the supplier and jobber who blamed the farmer, who in turn blamed the government. The brunt of the blame seemed to fall on the middleman, but the alibis were brought around full circle when the farmer and the merchant began blaming the consumer.

In a letter published in the *World-Herald*, inflation was blamed on the general public: “If the consumer will stop buying everything but what is necessary,” it stated, “high prices would be reduced.”<sup>21</sup> John S. Brady, a vice president of the McCord-Brady Company retail firm, blamed the consumer’s craze for high-priced goods. He pointed out that ordinary farmers as well as the most wealthy men were buying goods handled by Omaha’s most exclusive stores. “If people would stop buying luxuries,” he said, “the problem of the high cost of living would take care of itself.”<sup>22</sup> Some blamed inflated currency and “imported gold” for the price rise, but the *World-Herald*, a thorn in the side of organized labor, said one of the greatest reasons for the high cost of living was the fact that the working man was not doing his share and was slacking on the job.<sup>23</sup>

On September 2, “HCL” was even blamed for a crime when Joseph Prohaska shot his neighbor Blas Zager, who was also his landlord. Prohaska had raised a flock of geese to reduce his meat bill and let them roam loose. When Zager put the geese into a pen,

Mrs. Prohaska tried to let them go. During the ensuing argument, Prohaska shot three times but did Zager no bodily harm, "merely shooting off the buttons on the left side of his overalls as clear as if they had been cut off by a knife."<sup>24</sup>

Mrs. H. J. Holmes attributed the high cost of living to the unpopular new daylight savings time:

Supper is now being served earlier, by bedtime the family is again hungry and they go into the kitchen and eat the food which would be served for lunch the next day or more food than the average person eats for his regular lunch, thereby increasing the grocery bill 10 to 15 per cent.<sup>25</sup>

Mrs. Holmes became chairman of the National Mothers' Organization to Repeal the Daylight Law and persuaded 15,000 readers to sign a repeal petition printed in the *Bee*.<sup>26</sup> Newspapers were filled with letters from other irate citizens who charged that the daylight law deprived them of time in their gardens, caused them to suffer more from hot weather, and made "night hawks of the children." One claimed that the law "only benefits the light and coal companies, the golf players, and the joy riders."<sup>27</sup> Farmers who objected to the time change claimed that livestock and hired men refused to adjust themselves to the unusual hours: "The rooster still crows regardless of Daylight Savings Time."<sup>28</sup>

The new time scheme was only one of the minor problems faced by Nebraska farmers in 1919. Besides fighting the government, inflation, and the ubiquitous "profiteers," Douglas County farmers also found it necessary to arm themselves and patrol rural roads in defense against a new breed—Omaha motorists—who robbed their orchards and watermelon patches and shot their chickens. On August 17, Joe Hipp, a Florence farmer, was shot by men who raided his orchard. Despite good crop yields and the highest stock prices ever, the farmer made little progress in his war against "HCL." Hard-pressed Omaha consumers, feeling the weight of inflation, suggested that farmers advertise their prices in the newspapers and that neighborhood and community groups form purchasing combines.<sup>29</sup> This plan to eliminate the middleman was never successful.

On July 12, John P. Reynolds suggested in the *World-Herald* "Public Pulse" that to fight local profiteers the city might buy a large consignment of war surplus vegetables and meats and sell directly to consumers. At that time Mayor Smith was investigating an offer to buy \$2,000,000 worth of surplus canned meats and vegetables. In early August the city commission approved the

purchase of \$10,000 worth of government surplus foodstuffs, including flour, corn meal, canned vegetables, and meat. These commodities were to be sold at the City Auditorium, the South Omaha City Hall, and at fire stations. The commission requested that various city departments furnish free labor and assistance at the so-called "muny markets" to keep food prices at a minimum. Ice sales began immediately at a municipal store, and a city ordinance which prohibited Sunday sales was repealed. On August 5 twelve thousand pounds of ice was sold at the city store in forty minutes.<sup>30</sup>

"Bring your baskets and your little red wagons and we will help you fight the high cost of living," read an advertisement in the *Daily News*. The public did just that. On August 14 Mayor Smith opened the municipal market in the City Auditorium and began the sale of surplus foodstuffs. By noon the market had to be closed temporarily to allow clerks to catch up. Sales exceeded \$5,000 a day for the first two days, and 10,000 pounds of bacon were sold for 34 cents per pound by August 16. The market at the South Omaha City Hall was opened on that date and amid cries for bacon "in thirty-two languages" the entire stock was sold out within two hours.<sup>31</sup>

By August 18 another 20,000 pounds of bacon, and further quantities of canned vegetables had been sold. By August 20 the markets had to be shut down to re-stock. The city commission counted \$20,000 in total sales and placed orders for seventy more carloads of foodstuffs. The council announced it would add war surplus clothing to the inventory of municipal markets, including Army blankets and 15,000 pairs of reclaimed shoes. The Post Office Department announced that surplus foodstuffs could be ordered by mail and delivered through postal carriers. The War Department established a retail store for the sale of surplus goods, including all-wool blankets for \$4.20 each. Finally, the city in cooperation with the Midwest Milk Producers' Association arranged to sell milk at 10 cents a quart in Omaha fire stations.<sup>32</sup>

Grocers protested. They were squeezed between the high prices of their suppliers and the low prices of their government competitors. The *World-Herald* admitted that the city government was a competitor "who pays no rent, no clerk hire, no delivery charges, and no profit," but it defended the surplus sales as providing "the greatest good for the greatest number." While agreeing that the policy was brutal and unjust to private

merchants, the *Herald* advised them to "grin and bear it, trusting that the reaction of the general public will tend to avert a much worse condition."<sup>33</sup>

The government also took action to meet demands of those who wanted food profiteers brought to justice. On August 1 the U.S. Department of Justice announced it was gathering evidence for a possible grand jury investigation into profiteering of dairy products in Omaha. The next day County Attorney Abel V. Shotwell asked that evidence be obtained for an investigation into price-boosting food combines and a few days later the Nebraska Department of Agriculture entered the probe.<sup>34</sup>

On August 7 Shotwell announced he had received reports from Deputy County Assessor H. G. Counsman that packers in the city were hoarding food supplies in order to control prices. Packers denied the charges. He urged an ordinance be passed to limit length of time food could be stored. On August 8 Smith called for a special meeting of the city commission and ordered an official probe into food wastage after it was found that carloads of food were left to spoil in railroad yards. The next day police discovered seven carloads of spoiled watermelons in the yards and received reports of other foodstuffs dumped in hog yards throughout the city. On August 10 police detectives served fifteen individuals with subpoenas to appear before a special investigation committee comprised of members of the city commission, County Attorney Shotwell, and Assistant U.S. District Attorney F. A. Peterson.<sup>35</sup>

On August 15 the *Daily News* reported that U.S. District Attorney T. S. Allen had summoned a federal grand jury to indict local violators of the Hoover Food Control Act (the Lever Act). Federal agents were asked to secure evidence for this investigation. Douglas County food administrators also began to gather evidence of possible violations of the fair food prices fixed by State Food Administrator Gurdon W. Wattles of Omaha. On August 18 the attorney general of Nebraska and other state officials attended hearings in Omaha on food wastage. The next day testimony revealed that Omaha's cold storage warehouses were jammed to the rafters with food, including nearly 17,000,000 pounds of meat, some of which had been packed in 1918. County Attorney Shotwell reported, however, that he was finding little evidence of a food conspiracy and could not prosecute anyone at that time.<sup>36</sup>

The *World-Herald* urged government officials to pass legislation which would place time limits on food storage, require

publication of food prices from the producer and to the wholesaler, and force foods stored in private hands into the market. Meanwhile, the food investigation committee heard testimony which revealed that a pool was monopolizing fruit prices in the city. Despite these findings County Attorney Shotwell admitted that existing statutes on profiteering and price fixing, coupled with insufficient evidence, made it impossible to prosecute any of the profiteering suspects. The other investigators concluded there was little hope for reduced food prices; in fact the consumer was likely to pay even more. A serious sugar shortage was developing but police reported they were unable to find evidence of hoarding. On August 8 the city commission asked retailers not to sell sugar in lots of over one hundred pounds and limited the amount retailers could store at any one time. By the end of the month, wartime restrictions were again placed on sugar, and cafes were limiting their customers to only one teaspoon per meal.<sup>37</sup>

On September 9 the city commission passed an ordinance forbidding deliberate waste of foodstuffs and established a fine of \$100 and ninety days in jail for willful destruction of foodstuffs or their unnecessary wastage or decay. Oscar Allen, a former county food administrator during WW I, organized a price fixing board to publish a fair price list for Omaha consumers. Citizens

*Omaha's Petticoat Lane from 16th and Howard, about 1910.*



complained that the "fair prices" differed little from standard prices and that on some items were above those already prevailing in the markets, while others were only slightly below.<sup>38</sup>

While Omahans, were having little success in their battle against alleged food profiteers, they began to protest as well the profiteering they felt was going on in housing. At the beginning of the summer there was a long waiting list for most rental property in the city and the average small house was renting for around \$100 per month. J. L. Hiatt of the Hiatt Real Estate Company confirmed there were no vacancies in the city and stated that apartment rents were up 50 percent over the 1918 rates. On July 9 the *World-Herald* charged that "syndicates" were speculating in rents by leasing apartments from owners and then sub-leasing for a higher price. As renters urged the city to investigate rental prices, landlords defended the raising of rents and blamed their action on the 20 percent increase in property taxes.<sup>39</sup>

On August 22 the city commission issued subpoenas to a dozen apartment house owners. Numerous complaints were heard from citizens; one reported that a landlord had raised the rent 133 percent for a new tenant. But the investigation of rents, like the food probe, made no headway in prosecuting profiteers. On September 5 Mayor Smith said that although he intended to catch the rent profiteers and punish them, the most effective way to cause rents to drop was to encourage builders to construct more houses and apartments. The *World-Herald* told landlords that if they could not lower the rents they should at least lift the "no children" ban in their contracts because of the severe family housing shortage and "for the benefit of the children."<sup>40</sup>

The population in Omaha was booming in 1919. The 1920 census would reveal that the city had over 190,000 residents, an increase of one-third over the 1910 census and nearly double the population of 1900. Thirty-two percent of the residents were reportedly of foreign birth with Czechs, Germans, Russian Jews and Swedes comprising the major groups of immigrants (between 10 and 12 percent of the foreign born population and approximately 2 percent of the state's population). There were significant numbers of Italians, Danes, Poles, Irish, Mexicans, and Greeks clustered in ethnic enclaves identified by such designations as "Little Italy," south of the business district; "Little Poland," north of the stockyards; and "Little Bohemia," south and east of Little Poland. The Jewish settlement was just

north of the downtown business district and almost identical in its boundaries to that area known as "Colored Town." The over 2,000 Mexicans lived for the most part in a section of "Little Bohemia" near the stockyards, and other immigrants, including nearly 250 Orientals, were settled throughout the city.<sup>41</sup>

Because of the large number of foreign-born and first generation Americans in Omaha, the continuation of wartime prohibition was an unpopular measure. The *World-Herald* warned that state authorities would have a hard time enforcing prohibition in Nebraska "where home-made beer and wine is very popular and where men will defend their right to homebrew to the bitter end."<sup>42</sup> Newspapers were filled with letters from citizens who bitterly opposed prohibition and demanded a popular referendum vote. On July 4 Matthew J. Greevy, a disgruntled veteran, wrote: "America is dry because the stay-at-homes from a frightful world's war made it so. . . . No longer can we have in our sacred homes and about our hearthstones the wines served at the last supper of Christ on earth."<sup>43</sup> Dry advocates saw a definite link between the immigrants' demand for alcoholic beverages and further depravity of the nation. "Why should millions, both men and women, that our country could be proud of," they asked, "be dragged into the gutter because the Claus Hansens want their drink of mild wine and cider? . . . Drink good cold water, mister, it will clear your brain."<sup>44</sup>

Aside from prohibition, Omaha citizens frequently lashed out against immigrants. A letter in the *Daily News* claimed that "civilization is being dealt a severe blow by the Poles, Ukranians, Rumanians, and Bolsheviks and other dregs, monsters, and barbarians who have no regard for principle, justice, the laws of morality, and government by the people."<sup>45</sup> The *Mediator*, a pro-labor weekly publication, was outraged at the activities of certain Greek men it charged with insulting "American Girls" and suggested that the police deal energetically with these "no good bums" and that the government deport them if necessary.<sup>46</sup>

Because of the uneasy situation some aliens preferred to return to Europe and a steamship agent reported that nearly 1,000 immigrants did so after the war ended. The Immigration Bureau reported that naturalized aliens even took out passports to return to their native countries.<sup>47</sup>

While Congress was turning down a move to repeal wartime prohibition, Calvin R. Emmett, a leader in the Omaha Socialist

Society, stated that "the greatest asset the social revolutionary party has is national prohibition." Emmett felt that it would cause the working man to buy "less beer and more books," as Socialist leader Eugene Debs had advised. He felt that by becoming a thinking man the worker would be more dangerous to industrial autocrats and predicted that the country would be ruled by the workers within fifteen years as a result.<sup>48</sup>

A spectacular solution to the prohibition problem was proposed by A. A. Wilson of Bloomfield, Nebraska. He was interested in establishing a wet colony in Mexico and investigated an offer to buy 500,000 acres in Coahuila where he hoped to establish "a new El Dorado where dryness will be unknown."<sup>49</sup> A dry advocate who had campaigned for prohibition in Nebraska reported talking to men whose English was so limited that the only response he got from them was, "I tink a man ought to have te right to get a glass of peer." He expressed hope that all such men would leave the country and join the wet colony where they could "souse to their hearts' content."<sup>50</sup>

While the issue was being debated, state and local prohibition agents, known popularly as "booze hounds," were trying to enforce existing laws. Regular officers combed the city, and six special officers were stationed on the Douglas Street Bridge to check bootlegging activities between Omaha and Council Bluffs. A police motorboat patrolled the Missouri River. Omaha police nabbed Henry Wegworth (alias Frisco Pete) and David Gallinski, believed to be members of Omaha's largest booze ring, for possession of twenty-four pints of liquor. On August 3 police raided one suburban residence and seized \$15,000 worth of liquor, the largest haul of the year.<sup>51</sup>

The *Bee* discredited police efforts and claimed the department was merely "putting on a show for the public." Anyone who paid the police protection money could haul unlimited quantities of liquor into the city, the *Bee* said. The *World-Herald*, normally sympathetic to the police, claimed the only deterrent against alcohol in Omaha was its exorbitant price. Bootleg whiskey sold for between \$5-\$8 per pint during the summer and was reportedly hard to obtain. Homemade beer, wine, and other forms of alcohol apparently were more plentiful. Thirty-two citizens were arrested on July 4 for being drunk in the streets. Any beverage with an alcoholic content was exploited for profit, including patent medicines and dandelion wine. While some fake medicines were

being marketed purely for their alcoholic content, in other cases people tried in desperation to get prescriptions for genuine alcoholic medicines. A prominent doctor was arrested for selling his patients Jamaican ginger, and a well-known druggist was arrested for selling "jake" (Jamaica ginger).<sup>52</sup>

Omaha police, handicapped by fake "booze hounds" who confiscated liquor from private homes for their own purposes, and anti-prohibition magistrates who refused to sentence confessed violators, experienced difficulty in enforcing an unpopular measure. S. Leonard Rodgers, writing in the *World-Herald* "Public Pulse," wrote of prohibition in Omaha:

Alas, that I should see the day,  
when prohibition holds its sway,  
when freemen languish deep in jail,  
who dare to brew a pot of ale.<sup>53</sup>

Another significant social issue that came to the fore in the summer of 1919 was woman suffrage. While suffragists in Nebraska were hoping that the federal amendment for woman suffrage would be ratified by 1920, the State Supreme Court upheld the right of women to vote for all state, county and local offices in Nebraska not excluded by the state constitution. In July, Governor Samuel R. McKelvie was criticized for allowing a woman to serve as an elector in violation of the state constitution, but no action was taken to remove her. On July 19 the first political meeting ever held by Omaha women as party workers took place at the Fontenelle Hotel, where plans were made for a state Democratic conference. The conference was held on July 26 in Omaha and was attended by Mrs. Elizabeth Bass, director of the women's section of the Democratic National Committee. In August, while the State Legislature was ratifying the national amendment to the Constitution granting woman suffrage, Republicans appointed Mrs. Luella Andrews, a well known anti-suffragist, to lead the Nebraska Women for the Grand Old Party auxiliary. Earlier in the summer the anti-suffragists had circulated a petition calling for a referendum vote on the question of woman suffrage. When the petition was found to contain the names of deceased persons and addresses which were vacant lots, however, the Nebraska Supreme Court declared it fraudulent and assessed anti-suffragists \$15,000 in litigation costs.<sup>54</sup>

Women were winning political recognition, but in the labor market they were having little success. While the Federal Wage

Board reported in July that \$15.50 was the lowest weekly wage a self-supporting woman could live on, the average weekly wage for women in Omaha department stores was \$14.50.<sup>55</sup> Politics was not the only traditionally male realm in which women made inroads. In July members of Ak-Sar-Ben civic organization discussed letting wives into a slightly censored show at the Ak-Sar-Ben Den. Douglas County veterans went on record favoring inclusion of those women who had served in uniform during the war into the American Legion, the men's WW I organization for ex-servicemen.<sup>56</sup>

A large number of veterans returned from war during the summer of 1919, but since the government provided only \$60.00 severance pay, their lot was often difficult. Employers often had little to offer except the standard victory rhetoric and a slap on the back. On August 27 the American Legion "Welcome Home" celebration honoring returning veterans at Krug Park consisted of a free barbeque picnic, boxing matches, and baseball game. The Legion brought in Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., to help its membership drive, which in three days recruited 3,500 new members. The local organization passed formal resolutions calling for the adoption and teaching of a national creed in public schools, condemnation of the War Department for its pardoning of conscientious objectors, condemnation of employers who refused to rehire veterans in their former jobs, endorsement of a land reclamation bill, opposition to foreign-language newspapers, and a demand that all citizens show proper respect for the national flag and anthem.<sup>57</sup>

A number of former soldiers refused to join the Legion, charging that it had been organized by ex-high-ranking officers and demanded that enlisted men be given a chance to participate as officers. Serviceman W. Ernest Kreitz wrote: "I don't care to belong to any organization which will be run and controlled by a bunch of politicians that received their commissions in the Army through their political pull."<sup>58</sup>

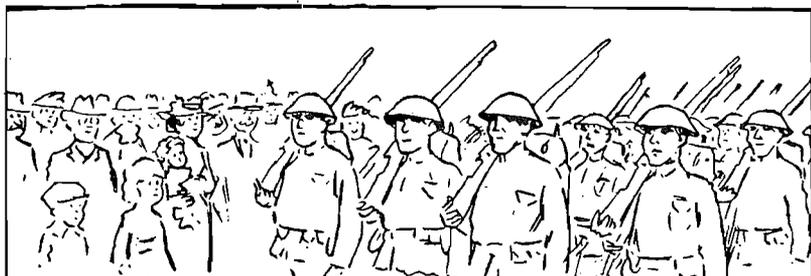
In September President Woodrow Wilson appeared in Omaha during his whistle-stop tour to drum up support for the Versailles peace settlement and made his prophetic warning that "there will be another world war if the nations of the world do not concert the methods by which to prevent it."<sup>59</sup> One bitter veteran, using the *World-Herald* "Public Pulse," said in an open letter to the President that more important than the League of Nations was the

question of whether or not returning veterans were to be treated fairly. He said it had been necessary for him to go into debt in order to support his family while he was in the service, and when he returned home his old job was no longer open to him. While he did get a job that paid 40 cents an hour, less than he had earned prior to the war, he complained that the increase in prices had reduced his pay to a less than adequate wage. "Is this country worth fighting for, for a poor man?" he asked. He expressed his anger in regard to those who stayed home and were living well as a result. "A poor man ought to think of himself and his family and forget any stuff about patriotic regard for a country that cares little if anything whether he starves or not."<sup>60</sup>

The social and economic unrest in Omaha also turned into political discontent. Mayor Smith seemed to be losing the confidence of the people and his reform administration was charged with misuse of tax funds, with neglect in providing municipal services such as garbage collection, with unnecessary involvement in labor disputes, and with merchandising surplus Army goods. One Omahan sent this prayer to the *World-Herald*: "O, kind providence, how long wilt thou permit this city commission stench to rise to the nostrils of thy saints and permit us Omaha people to smell it right at its sources?"<sup>61</sup>

Petitions for recall of the mayor and four city commissioners were circulated throughout the summer. However, the effort gained only 5,000 signatures and fell 1,300 names short of the number required for a recall election. Editorials in the *World-Herald*, the paper most sympathetic to the city government, vacillated between supporting the Smith regime and severely criticizing it. In June, Smith himself admitted the city council "had not anywhere nearly measured up to what our friends expected of us."<sup>62</sup>

Most damaging was the criticism directed toward Police Commissioner Dean Ringer and the Omaha police department by both the press and citizens. The *Bee* and the pro-labor *Mediator* were most vicious but even the *Daily News* and the *World-Herald* found operations of the department less than praiseworthy. The *World-Herald* charged that Ringer was narrow-minded, provincial, prejudiced, intemperate, and altogether "not the kind of man Omaha needs to direct its police department."<sup>63</sup> It also expressed the view that he was demoralizing the city and causing unnecessary antagonism between races, creeds, and social classes.



HERETOFORE AT OUR "RECEPTIONS" FOR THE SOLDIERS THE BOYS HAVE FURNISHED MOST OF THE ENTERTAINMENT,



BUT NOW WE'RE GOING TO TURN IN AND ENTERTAIN THE BOYS

*A celebration honoring returning World War I veterans was held August 27, 1919, at Krug Park (Omaha Morning World-Herald, August 27, 1919).*

The *Bee* attacked the police morals squad and produced evidence to show that these officers had allegedly abused their authority. In one such case on June 24, Officers George Armstrong and John Herdzina entered a woman's apartment and arrested her on charges of running a brothel. Though the suspect was subsequently found innocent of the charges which stemmed from the alleged bootlegging activities of one of her tenants, she charged the officers were intoxicated at the time of the arrest, did not have a search warrant, and had jailed her without offering bond. Though the *World-Herald* called the police action "lawless and invasive of the rights of citizens," Mayor Smith and the city commission absolved the officers of all charges and Commissioner Ringer even called for the resignation of Ed Hegy, a policeman who had testified against Armstrong and Herdzina. Herdzina was later charged with assaulting three members of the Tony Purucello family during a raid, and Armstrong became involved in a Labor Day vice raid at the Plaza Hotel in which an unarmed Negro bellboy, Eugene Scott, was fatally wounded by police bullets.<sup>64</sup>

This incident intensified the anger of Omaha citizens toward Mayor Smith, Commissioner Ringer, and the police department. All newspapers denounced the police action in this case and the *Monitor*, a Negro weekly, called it an act of "cold-blooded murder." Though Omaha citizens demanded an inquest into the case, on September 16 Mayor Smith and the city commission voted not to suspend the policemen involved. The morals squad, however, was eventually abolished.<sup>65</sup>

The crime rate in Omaha was generally high throughout the summer. There were a large number of murders and other acts of violence. Within a three-day period in August, for example, one man shot his wife, murdered his 4-year-old son, and took his own life. Another man killed his 22-year-old son, then committed suicide. But the crimes which drew the most public attention were the alleged sexual assaults of black men on white women. Police records indicated that between June 7 and September 27, twenty-one attacks on women had been reported in the city and that sixteen of the attackers were alleged to be Negroes while only one of the victims was a Negro. These incidents described in sensational front-page articles in the *Bee* and *Daily News* stirred the anger of Omaha's white population. Although these papers carried vivid descriptions of the arrest of Negroes charged in these

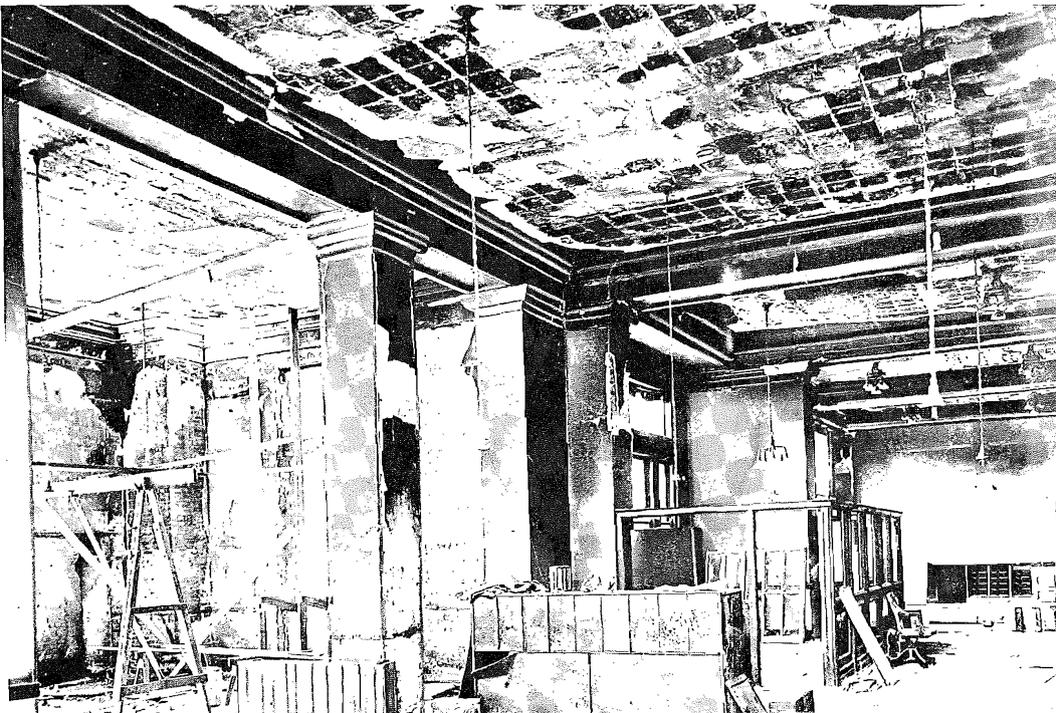
incidents, when suspects were released for lack of evidence the papers often made no mention of it. When no convictions were obtained in any of these cases, some Omaha citizens became even more critical of the police department. The *Mediator* warned that vigilance committees would be formed if the "respectable colored population" could not purge those from the Negro community who were assaulting white girls.<sup>66</sup>

The black community, consisting of approximately 10,000 Negroes, was congregated for the most part on the near north side and made up approximately 5 percent of the Omaha population. Their numbers had increased 133 percent since the 1910 census with the biggest gain coming in the war years. While H. J. Plunkett, a black Army officer and veteran of the war in France, pointed to increased real estate holdings, improved conditions of labor, and the prosperity of churches to indicate the improved conditions of Negroes, the weekly news voice of the black community, the *Monitor*, was not so optimistic about Negro progress. The *Monitor*, edited by the Reverend John Albert Williams, a local leader in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, cited evidence of increased racial tension and offered explanations. It blamed hostile attitudes on white WW I veterans, who it said, had been propagandized against blacks by white southern officers, and pointed to labor competition between races when Negroes were used as strikebreakers. With some reason the *Monitor* accused the *Bee* and the *Daily News* with sensationalism in coverage of alleged racial assaults in Omaha and race riots and lynchings in other cities. The *Monitor* chided them for their biased treatment of blacks, which it felt had contributed to racial prejudice and tension in the city.<sup>67</sup>

Omaha citizens had managed to keep the assorted tensions under control during the hot months. Labor disputes had not been allowed to erupt into violence, collective action had been taken to fight inflation, citizens used democratic means to voice their objections to such controversial issues as prohibition and city government, and for the most part ethnic and racial animosities had been kept below the surface. Yet the volatile ingredients for a serious crisis remained, and as summer merged into fall the eruption came. On September 28 the anger that had been building exploded over an incident in which a black man allegedly raped a 19-year-old white girl. A manhunt was organized and within a



*Red Cross women in their quarters following Omaha riot of September, 1919. Below: Interior of Douglas County clerk's office, Omaha courthouse, after the riot.*



short time a suspect was arrested. Will Brown, a 41-year-old Negro packinghouse worker who suffered from acute rheumatism, was charged with the crime and transported to the courthouse where over 6,000 citizens gathered and permitted themselves to be worked up to the point of frenzy. When the signal was given, the mob took over and charged the courthouse, set it afire, and raided the jail. Frightened prisoners turned Brown over to the mob which stripped him of clothing, severely beat him, dragged him to the street, hanged him, riddled his body with bullets and burned it. When Mayor Smith tried to halt the mob, rioters attempted to hang him, and only the quick action of police officers in cutting him down from a lamp pole saved his life. Unable to stop its own momentum, the mob pillaged the downtown section and terrorized blacks wherever they could be found.

Over eight hundred federal and state troops were brought to the city under the command of General Leonard Wood, martial law was declared, and within a short time an uneasy calm returned. The passions of the tense summer had been vented in tragedy.<sup>68</sup>

## NOTES

(Unless noted otherwise, all newspaper references are to Omaha publications.)

1. For a comprehensive history of Omaha prior to 1919 see Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha from Pioneer Days to the Present* (Omaha, 1923). See also George R. Leighton, *Five Cities, The Story of Their Youth and Old Age* (New York, 1939). In 1919 Omaha citizens could get three different perspectives on the news from the city's three major daily newspapers. The *Bee*, the oldest established paper in the city, served as the political organ of the Republicans and enjoyed an estimated daily circulation of 63,000. The *World-Herald*, the Democratic organ and the most moderate paper in the city, offered two daily editions with an estimated circulation of 70,000. The *Daily News*, with an estimated circulation of 80,000 was politically independent and was owned by the Scripps-McRae syndicate.

2. Henry B. Parkes and Vincent P. Carosso, *Recent America: A History*, Book I (New York, 1963), 312; *World-Herald*, June 21. For a brief account of the Winnipeg general strike of 1919 see William Lewis Morton, *Manitoba, A History* (Toronto, 1967), 364-373. For an extensive treatment of the subject see D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto, 1950).

3. *Daily News*, June 26, 1919; *Bee*, June 25, 1919.

4. *World-Herald*, June 20, 26, 1919.

5. *Daily News*, June 26, 1919.

6. *World-Herald*, June 24-26, 1919.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Bee*, June 28, 1919.

10. *World-Herald*, June 22, July 21, 1919.

11. *City Council Journal*, Document 4211, August 7, 1919.

12. *World-Herald*, August 8, 1919.

13. *Daily News*, July 19, 1919; *World-Herald*, July 18, 1919.

14. *Daily News*, July 23, 24, 1919; *World-Herald*, July 19, 1919.
15. *Bee*, August 6, 1919.
16. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1919; *Daily News*, August 9, 26, 1919; *World-Herald*, August 16, 1919.
17. *World-Herald*, September 11, 1919.
18. *Ibid.*, June 25, 1919; *Daily News*, June 27, 1919.
19. *World-Herald*, July 18, 1919.
20. *Ibid.*, August 1, 1919; *Bee*, July 11, 1919.
21. *World-Herald*, September 2, 1919.
22. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1919.
23. *Ibid.*, July 16, September 2, 1919.
24. *Ibid.*, September 3, 1919.
25. *Ibid.*, August 13, 1919.
26. *Bee*, August 22, 1919.
27. *Daily News*, July 22-23, 1919.
28. *World-Herald*, August 13, 1919.
29. *Ibid.*, September 5, 1919; *Daily News*, August 18, 1919.
30. *World-Herald*, July 12, August 8, 1919; *City Council Journal*, Document 4201, August 5, 1919; *Daily News*, August 12, 1919; *Bee*, August 6, 1919.
31. *World-Herald*, August 15-16, 1919.
32. *Ibid.*, August 18, 19, 21, 26, September 3, 1919; *Daily News*, August 15, 20, 1919.
33. *World-Herald*, September 4, 1919.
34. *Ibid.*, August 2-3, 1919; *Bee*, August 6, 1919.
35. *Bee*, August 7, 1919; *World-Herald*, August 9, 1919; *Daily News*, August 11, 1919.
36. *Daily News*, August 15, 1919; *World-Herald*, August 20, 1919.
37. *World-Herald*, August 21, 1919; *City Council Journal*, Document 4285, August 8, 1919.
38. *City Council Journal*, Document 4746, September 9, 1919; *World-Herald*, August 30, September 4, 1919.
39. *World-Herald*, June 27, July 9, 1919; *Daily News*, July 8, August 15, 1919.
40. *City Council Journal*, Document 4561, August 22, 1919; *World-Herald*, August 23, September 5, 1919; *Daily News*, September 5, 1919.
41. U. S. Bureau of Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 Population*, III, 590. For statistics on the immigrant population see above, 593. For the latest and most complete study of social and residential mobility in Omaha between 1880-1920 see Howard P. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans* (New York, 1972). For a description of the immigrants and their ethnic communities in Omaha see T. Earl Sullenger, *Studies in Urban Sociology* (New York, 1933), and with Lillian Hill, *The Immigrant in Omaha* (Omaha, 1932), both written for the Bureau of Social Research at the Municipal University of Omaha. For a short comprehensive history of the development of the Italian community see *The Italians of Omaha* (Omaha, 1941), a study written and compiled by the Nebraska Writers' Project of the WPA and sponsored by the Order of the Sons of Italy. For a study of the Jewish community prior to 1915 see Carol Gendler, "The Jews of Omaha: The First Sixty Years," unpublished thesis, Municipal University of Omaha (Omaha, 1968). For information on German settlement between 1870-1910 see Frederick Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics* (Lincoln, 1969). See also Jeronimas Acenas, *The Lithuanians in Omaha* (Omaha, 1955), and Rose Rosicky, *History of the Czechs in Nebraska* (Omaha, 1929).
42. *World-Herald*, July 9, 1919.
43. *Ibid.*, July 9, 1919.
44. *Ibid.*, August 22, 1919.
45. *Daily News*, July 15, 1919.
46. *Mediator*, September 19, 1919. For a description of previous hostility toward Greeks in Omaha see John Bitzes, "The Anti-Greek Riot of 1909-South Omaha," *Nebraska History*, 52 (Summer, 1970), 199-224.
47. *Daily News*, August 16, 1919.
48. *World-Herald*, August 16, 1919.

49. *Ibid.*, July 1, 1919.
50. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1919.
51. *Ibid.*, July 12, 15, August 14, 1919.
52. *Ibid.*, July 29, August 6, 9, September 19, 1919; *Bee*, July 1, 1919; *Daily News*, July 5, 1919.
53. *World-Herald*, July 11, 1919.
54. *Ibid.*, July 16, 19, 21, 26, 28, August 14, 1919; *Daily News*, June 29, 1919.
55. *Daily News*, July 13, 1919.
56. *World-Herald*, July 19, 1919.
57. *Ibid.*, August 28, 1919; *Daily News*, June 26, 1919.
58. *World-Herald*, July 14, 1919.
59. *Bee*, September 9, 1919.
60. *World-Herald*, September 8, 1919.
61. *Ibid.*, July 21, 1919. For a more detailed account of local political developments during this period see Louise E. Rickard, "The Politics of Reform in Omaha, 1918-1921," *Nebraska History*, 53 (Winter, 1972), 419-445.
62. *World-Herald*, June 22, 1919.
63. *Ibid.*, July 25, 1919.
64. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1919; *Bee*, June 25, July 7, September 2, 1919.
65. *Monitor*, September 2, 1919; *City Council Journal*, Doc. 5037, September 16, 1919.
66. *World-Herald*, August 20, 23, 1919; *Daily News*, September 27, 1919; *Mediator*, July 18, 1919.
67. *World-Herald*, June 23, 1919; *Monitor*, July 10, 24, 1919. For statistics on the black population in Omaha during this period see *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 609. For a description of the black community see T. Earl Sullenger, *Studies in Urban Sociology*, and *The Negro in Omaha* (Omaha, 1932). The employment conditions of blacks in Omaha are described by James Harvey Kerns in "Industrial and Business Life of Negroes in Omaha," unpublished thesis, Municipal Univ. of Omaha (Omaha, 1932), 1-20.
68. For a more comprehensive study of the riot see Arthur Age, "The Omaha Riot of 1919," unpublished thesis, Creighton University (Omaha, 1964). See also the *World-Herald's* Pulitzer Prize winning editorial of September 30, 1919.