Chapter 10--Iowa in World War One & the 1920s, from A New History of Iowa

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Chapter Ten
Iowa in World War One and the 1920s

The First World War brought prosperity to Iowa, as high farm prices and increased employment boosted the fortunes of its inhabitants. The war affected every family in Iowa, as men served in the military, while their families bought war bonds or volunteered for the Red Cross. The conflict heightened social tensions across the country, as patriotic zeal trampled over individual rights. Excessive nationalism in Iowa led to extralegal punishment for those seen as lacking in sufficient wartime patriotism. Modern life conflicted with rural tradition, as Prohibition and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan showed resistance to cultural change in American society. New forms of communication and transportation began to transform Iowa, as radio, improved roads, automobiles, and movies reshaped daily life for Iowans. After the war ended, commodity prices crashed and the state fell into a prolonged agricultural recession. By the time the Great Depression hit Iowa, the state had already suffered a decade of distress.

The United States avoided involvement in World War One for almost three years. Allied nations—Russia, France, England, and others—faced the Central Powers, including the Austro-Hungarians, the Ottoman Empire, and Germany. The war became a stalemate by late 1914 and millions of soldiers were killed. Americans watched the conflict in horror and determined to stay out of the bloodbath, despite submarine attacks that killed Americans. The United States became the “most important factory, banker, and food supplier” for the Allies during the war, argued historian Michael S. Neiberg. American exports to allied countries boosted its economy and demand for corn, wheat, and pork helped farmers in Iowa and elsewhere by raising agricultural prices. The United States was pulled into the war in April 1917. Unrestricted submarine warfare, along with a German promise to return territory Mexico lost in its war with the United States in the 1840s, helped push America into the First World War. The United States declared war on Germany on April 6. A total of 114,224 men and women from Iowa served in the conflict.1

The American government faced a huge task—it needed to train, equip, and deploy millions of men to Europe. The government also needed to raise vast sums of money to pay for the war and encourage the production of everything from ships to shoes. New bureaucracies were created to manage the war effort and gain the support of the population. Controversial legislation, notably the Espionage Act, punished anyone obstructing the war effort or committing spying or sabotage.2

The Red Cross served a vital function during the conflict, both overseas and at home. Hundreds of thousands of Iowa women supported the war effort by completing millions of hours of volunteer work for the organization. Iowa had only nine Red Cross chapters in early 1917, but its volunteer ranks swelled quickly after the war began in April. The organization had more

than one million members and 164 chapters in the state by the time the war ended. A vast amount of labor went into producing supplies for military and humanitarian uses, ranging from surgical dressings to sweaters and socks knitted by volunteers. Much of this material was made in workrooms set up in city halls, schools, courthouses, and private homes. One mother of three soldiers said: “It is for me military duty. It gives me a chance to be a soldier with my sons.” In April 1918, volunteers across the country produced more than 25 million dressings and 400,000 pieces of clothing. Women in Sioux City made 50,000 surgical dressings and knitted 9,611 items. One woman—identified only as Mrs. William E. Wilson—volunteered more than 5,000 hours to the Red Cross in Iowa in 1917 and 1918.3

The Red Cross supplied all nurses for the American military during the war, as well as helping with civilian medical care. Eight hundred and sixty-two Iowa women volunteered for the Red Cross during the war, with possibly one-half serving overseas. Thirteen nurses from Scott County served in Europe, while 21 more were posted around the country or Puerto Rico. Nurses in Europe worked on hospital trains, convalescent hospitals, and near combat zones. Many worked at surgical units immediately behind the front lines, sometimes for 48 hours in a row. Conditions were often horrific and exhausting, with large numbers of badly wounded men. Hospital trains came at night, injured men stumbling through the dark, wrote Lois Orr Preach. She worked at a hospital that cared for 1,000 men 25 miles behind the front. She cleaned up the wounded and dressed burns; men were then sent for medical care farther back. Merle Wright volunteered to serve as a nurse in France in March 1918. She worked in a hospital about fifty miles behind the front lines. Nursing was so different from the U.S., she recalled, as “we did not have the satisfaction of watching our patients recover.” Wounded men went back to the front or left for other hospitals after a few days.4

Much of the Red Cross’ time was spent raising money to assist in caring for troops and suffering Europeans. Iowa chapters were asked to raise one million dollars in the first war fund drive. Much of this money was earned through auctions of antiques, jewelry, or even horses. One boy gave his puppy for auction and it earned ten dollars for the organization. The dog was returned to its young owner. A mock court gave “fines” of one to four dollars to those who violated laws that did not exist to help raise money. Iowans gave far more than their state quota in the fund drives for the Red Cross, usually exceeding requirements by thirty percent. There was public pressure to join the Red Cross or to give it money. Contributions and memberships were solicited by private and public employers, at businesses, at banks, and at clubs. The Iowa Red Cross did its part to solicit the $400 million that the organization raised during the war.5

3 Earl Stanfield Fullbrook, _The Red Cross in Iowa_, volume one (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1922), 93, 99, 121; Earl Stanfield Fullbrook, _The Red Cross in Iowa_, volume two (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1922), 1, 5, 8-9, 12, 18-19, 23, 27, 29.
5 Fullbrook, _The Red Cross in Iowa_, volume one, 144, 149-152, 162, 169; Lynn Dumenil, _The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War One_, 94.
Iowa women also volunteered for canteen work, providing refreshments to traveling soldiers, as well as the sick and wounded. Fifty-seven Iowa cities had canteen stations where local chapters sent volunteers to meet servicemen at railroad stations. They handed out cigarettes, candy, coffee, fruit, or other items, such as newspapers and magazines. At some places soldiers could have lunch, while a few had showers, such as Boone, Cedar Rapids, and Council Bluffs. Some canteens provided easy chairs where soldiers could relax and read or listen to music. Chapters paid for these services out of the funds they raised locally. In the first six months of 1919, Iowa canteens helped 311,396 men who were heading home after the end of the war. At the Des Moines canteen, the Red Cross served 1,844 gallons of coffee and 33,345 sandwiches in the first five months of 1919. The Sioux City canteen gave out 94,000 doughnuts and more than 559,000 cigarettes in early 1919.6

The federal government asked Americans to conserve food during the war, so more could be used for military purposes or for European relief efforts. The Food Administration, headed by Iowan Herbert Hoover, also encouraged the increased production of foodstuffs. This agency achieved its goals through public campaigns, which asked American families to consume less wheat and sugar, eliminate waste, grow gardens, and use homemade soap. The government encouraged people to eat potatoes, instead of grains, and to avoid eating a “fourth meal” at social functions hosted by clubs or fraternal organizations. Iowa’s hotels and restaurants took part in the food conservation campaign by avoiding serving meat or wheat on some days. Sugar was provided only on request and limited to one teaspoon per person. Hotels and restaurants limited customers to two ounces of wheat bread, a half-ounce of butter, and a half-ounce of cheddar cheese. Businesses that used too much sugar could lose their access to this rationed commodity. Serious violations of federal rules led to temporary closures of merchants, whose fine was paid by a contribution to the Red Cross.7

The northern Iowa town of Estherville provides an example of American support for the war effort. Fifty-three men from the town volunteered for duty within a week of its start. A total of 612 men from Estherville served in the conflict, with 1,284 registering for the draft. Civilians tried to “make the war more bearable” for those in the military by giving time and money to the Red Cross. Women sewed 87 sweaters, 678 handkerchiefs, and 225 shirts in four months, while the YMCA in the town raised $10,000 for the Red Cross in one campaign. The citizens of Emmet County, where Estherville was located, bought $2,650,000 in war bonds. Some borrowed money from local banks to buy bonds. These bonds often paid less in interest than banks charged to make loans. But individuals and businesses bought them anyway. Farmers plowed up meadows and pastures to bring more acreage into production.8

The war was financed through new taxes and by the sale of war bonds. The conflict cost $35.5 billion dollars, with Liberty Loans (war bonds) raising $21.4 billion dollars. Increased taxes paid for the remaining cost. The Wilson Administration heavily promoted bonds to small investors, desiring the enthusiastic participation of most Americans in the war effort. Newspaper advertising encouraged bond sales with catchy phrases such as, “If you can’t enlist—invest!” Americans were urged to buy bonds “till you feel the pinch of buying.” Iowa’s population was largely rural and spread across the countryside, isolated by poor transportation and

6 Fullbrook, The Red Cross in Iowa, volume two, 40-54. Many men assisted with Red Cross activities, but women dominated canteen service.
communication networks. The government worried that a dispersed agricultural population would not be interested in such purchases. Fortunately, high prices left the state’s farm families better off than before the war. Bonds sold in amounts as low as $50, with interest rates of 3½% at the start of the war; rates increased as the war continued. Interest was exempt from all taxes except the inheritance tax, which affected only the wealthiest. Nationwide drives to buy bonds featured religious and political leaders, as well as movie stars. Information was provided in 33 foreign languages.  

The Federal Reserve set quotas for the sale of Liberty Loans for states, counties, and cities—those who invested too little faced hostility from their neighbors. Iowans responded with enthusiasm to loan drives later in the war, being the first state in the country to reach its quota in three of the five campaigns. The first two loan drives fell short of mandated goals, though, with Story County only meeting one-third of its quota. Businesses, government, media, and neighbors pressured people to buy. Local committees, usually made up of bankers, helped decide how much each family needed to buy. This was based upon income, investments, and savings. In Linn County, families were asked to buy an amount equal to two percent of the value of their real estate. Those who did not quickly buy their allotment of bonds were called before a “loyalty” or “slacker” court, a group of local men who asserted jurisdiction over such matters and forced compliance with quotas. Such “courts” had no legal authority. But they collected information from banks and neighbors to determine who was not buying enough bonds. The Pottawatomie County court “redeemed” 447 “slackers” and those judged as pro-German. The Scott County “Liberty Loan Court” interviewed more than 1,000 men and gained an additional $600,000 in bond sales. Individuals who were judged as insufficiently patriotic could have their names posted in towns. A yellow “slacker board” stood in the main square in Estherville with the names of those who had bought smaller amounts of bonds than demanded. Occasionally, threats such as arson motivated some to invest in the war effort.

Wartime propaganda pushed the need for national unity and patriotism. The federal Committee on Public Information (CPI) was responsible for mobilizing American support for the war. It used films, literature, and “Four Minute Men” to help secure popular support for the conflict. Publications from the CPI included pamphlets such as “German Plots and Intrigues” and “Why America Fights Germany.” The federal government sponsored lectures by “Four Minute Men,” who briefly spoke about the need to buy war bonds, conserve food, or register for the draft. They often talked to audiences watching movies—it took about four minutes to change movie reels, which gave this group their name. Speakers gave a presentation in Ottumwa between wrestling matches. The woman’s division sent female speakers to women’s groups and churches. In Scott County, about 60 “dependable” men, such as doctors, ministers, and judges, made up the ranks of the organization. They also wrote articles supporting the war for local newspapers. In Maquoketa, the chairman of the local Four Minute Men organization provided

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9 Nathaniel R. Whitney, The Sale of War Bonds in Iowa (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1923), 2-6, 14-19, 52, 95; Jennifer Keene, 32-33; Newspaper Ads, Liberty Loan Papers, Box 1, SHSI-IAC. Smaller amounts could be bought like stamps, which could be combined to buy larger amounts.

material for newspapers to publish. Nationwide at least 75,000 such speakers gave seven million speeches.11

Overzealous patriotism and the intolerance of foreigners undermined civil liberties in Iowa. German measles was renamed “victory measles.” Sauerkraut was called “victory cabbage.” Wartime hysteria demanded 100% Americanism. Immigrants and those who spoke German, or who espoused any sympathy for the Central Powers, were forced to demonstrate their patriotism. Some German-Americans, suspected of disloyalty, were forced to kiss the American flag or kneel before it. Intimidation and physical violence were used to enforce bond purchases or draft registration. Those who did not quickly register with their local draft board might find their names published in their local paper as a draft dodger. The “American Protective League” investigated thousands suspected of disloyalty in Iowa, searching for spies, slackers or the unpatriotic without success. Iowa Governor William L. Harding issued a proclamation on May 23, 1918, banning the use of any foreign language in all public spaces, including churches and schools. Condemnation of his edict did not stop enforcement. Five German-speaking women were fined $225 for talking in a foreign language on a shared telephone line. One Iowan was convicted of violating the Espionage Act. Reverend William Schumann of Pomeroy was jailed for two years for criticizing the war and liberty bond campaigns.12

The nation faced many challenges in building an army to fight in Europe. The military built training facilities from scratch and found that most of its soldiers knew little about weapons. Equipment shortages left many soldiers without a rifle until they departed for France. Some trained with broomsticks in the place of weapons. Many new soldiers wore their civilian clothes for the first weeks of training, due to uniform shortages. Almost one-third of recruits were illiterate—the typical recruit weighed 142 pounds and stood five feet and seven inches tall. Despite insufficient training, a lack of weapons and equipment, and poor leadership, American troops generally fought well. The American role in the war was limited, but it was still bloody. More American troops died in combat in World War One than the conflicts in Korea or Vietnam.13

Iowa hosted training camps for white and black soldiers, as well as African-American officers. Camp Dodge, north of Des Moines, trained tens of thousands of black and white soldiers during the war. Black officers received training at Fort Des Moines—the only such facility in the country. In October 1917, the first class of 639 officers graduated. They served with the 92nd Division in France. One of them was James B. Morris, who grew up in Atlanta and had a close friend lynched when he was a boy. Morris went to Hampton University in Virginia

11 Jennifer Keene, 35; Ralph Cram, Scott County, 66; Robert H. Zieger, America’s Great War: World War One and the American Experience, 80; Committee on Public Information, Purpose and Plan of the Four Minute Men: A National Organization of Volunteer Speakers for Government Presentation of Topics of National Importance to the Nation—Picture Their Audience (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 3-7, 13-14; World War One Materials, box 6, SHSI-IAC.
and earned a law degree at Howard before coming to Iowa. He passed the Iowa bar exam eight days before he joined the U. S. Army. In France, he wrote, “black soldiers were fighting another man’s war for the freedom we might never experience.” He was badly wounded in November 1918. Morris returned to Des Moines after the war and became a lawyer; he found a resurgent Ku Klux Klan in Iowa. In 1922 Morris purchased the most important black newspaper in the state, The Bystander. The KKK demanded that he sell it. Armed with shotguns, Morris and his brother chased them off his lawn and threatened to kill anyone who returned. The KKK did not visit him again. He published the paper for almost fifty years, advocating for black rights for decades. He kept his full-time job as a lawyer.14

Between 10,000 and 15,000 African-American men, mostly from Alabama, trained at Camp Dodge along with many more white troops. The military set up a training base for them in Iowa because the state was more racially tolerant than the South. The NAACP and black newspapers also pressed the government to open up such a facility. Despite this reputation, segregation was widespread in restaurants, hotels, and theaters in Des Moines. Black conscripts were kept in southern parts of the camp, segregated from white troops. Discipline was swift and harsh. When three black men were suspected of raping a white woman, they were quickly hanged before the 43,000 soldiers at the camp. The event horrified soldiers of both races. Iowa’s black soldiers eventually joined the 92nd Division in France, which was mostly used for work behind the lines. Some men experienced combat, where they fought well, despite inadequate training and a lack of equipment.15

The African-American population of Iowa was small—it was less than one percent of the total state population until 1970. In 1900 Iowa only had about 10,000 black residents. This number almost doubled by 1920, as increased employment opportunities, as well as the demand for wartime workers, drew migrants. Most African-Americans in Iowa had to work in low-paying jobs, with women laboring as maids and cooks and men working as porters or janitors. But railroads, manufacturers, and meatpacking plants accepted more black workers in the early twentieth century. Some came to Iowa to work for the Illinois Central Railroad, following the railroad route from Mississippi to the Midwest. In Sioux City, African-Americans made up almost half of the employees in meatpacking plants in the mid-1920s. Men worked the killing floor in these places, in hot, bloody, and nauseating conditions. Almost 1,000 workers at the Rock Island Arsenal in 1918 were black. A John Deere factory in Waterloo employed African-Americans. Women were custodians, while men had the most hazardous and exhausting jobs in the foundry. Iowa was not a racial paradise, but it was better than the South.16

The first American units began to arrive in France in the summer of 1917, but significant numbers of troops did not appear until the next year. In between, the military situation deteriorated for the Allies. In November 1917, Vladimir Lenin seized power in Russia and signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers, ending the war for Russia. This allowed more than one million German troops from the eastern front to move west. Germany hoped to win the war with a submarine assault on shipping, as well as a massive spring offensive in 1918.17

Merle Hay, from Glidden, was one of the first Americans killed during the war. Hay was 21-years old and the eldest of three children. He quit his job repairing farm equipment in Coon Rapids and enlisted a month after the United States entered the war. Eight Glidden men, including Hay, enlisted on May 8, 1917. His unit joined the front lines that fall. In the early morning of November 2, 1917, Hay and two other American soldiers were killed during a German raid. He posthumously won the French Croix de Guerre. His body was returned to the United States in 1921, the first of many thousands of American men who fell in France. Only two of the eight men who joined the military with him returned alive from the war. A granite monument in his honor sits in his hometown, about sixty miles west of Ames.18

One unit, full of Iowans, experienced sustained combat in 1918 in France. The 168th Infantry Regiment was originally an Iowa National Guard unit that became part of the “Rainbow Division.” The division received its name because it was made up of soldiers from more than twenty-five different states. They arrived in France in late 1917; elements joined the front lines in early 1918. It was one of the first major American units in combat. They lived in trenches that resembled “a badly drained irrigation ditch,” and took shelter from artillery barrages in gloomy, damp dugouts. Soldiers were often infested with lice. Tangled masses of rusted barbed wire separated them from a barren no-man’s land that existed between German and Allied troops. Snipers and heavy shelling provided a constant threat. Everyone feared a gas attack. Hours of intense artillery bombardment sent them into shelters sixty feet underground. Men crowded together in darkness, unable to even turn around. Some fainted, while the wounded gasped for air. Above ground there was little rest. “A nervous burst of machine gun fire, the boom of a grenade down the line, the crack of a rifle”—such sounds accompanied life in trenches between German raids and artillery barrages. The German spring offensive was halted, thanks in part to American soldiers such as those in the Rainbow Division.19

The second half of the year would be far bloodier. The 168th and the Rainbow Division took part in an allied counterattack in 1918 after the failure of the German offensive. In July, three days of fighting killed or wounded half of the regiment. “Men were torn and blown to atoms before the eyes of their comrades,” Colonel John H. Taber wrote. Soldiers spent cold nights in foxholes filled by rain, kept awake by the crackle of machine guns and the boom of artillery. “When we had completed the heartbreaking task of conquering one hill, there was always another one in front of it,” he wrote. The regiment lost 1,175 men in October, as allied lines moved forward. Corporal Fred H. Takes, a soldier in the 82nd Division, wrote in his diary that his company only had 16 or its original 220 men left by early November. Iowan Arthur Zelle wrote to a cousin three days before the war ended that he had “some awful experiences. I

had thought quite often that the Germans would get me, but I got out of it every time. I called on our good Lord many a time and he sure was with me for my comrades were falling on both sides of me.” By November, the German retreat had turned into a rout. Some days the 168th advanced mostly unopposed. Fred Takes wrote that church bells were ringing shortly after eleven a.m. on the day the war ended. Some French men celebrated, throwing their caps in the air. “We knew the war was over and we expected to see home again,” he wrote in weary gratitude. Iowa soldier Ernest F. Merkles, serving with the 168th, did not survive the war though. The son of German immigrants, he was killed in July 1918 at the age of nineteen.

Even before the war ended a new enemy was attacking humans around the world—an influenza outbreak killed fifty million people worldwide. It took the lives of about 675,000 Americans, including 7,700 in Iowa. This epidemic, which probably originated in pigs in western Kansas, spread across the world in 1918 and 1919. This particular influenza virus mutated sometime in 1918 after being transmitted to Europe—it came roaring back to the United States that autumn. The disease was devastatingly lethal. “In the U.S. at least a quarter of the population was infected and in the military an even higher proportion became ill,” wrote historian Gerald N. Grob. Dorothy Unmack’s whole family was sick—her brother Roy with a 105 degree temperature. She remembered her father kneeling by her brother’s bed and praying for him. “We all survived that winter,” she wrote in her memoir. Young people were hit the hardest and more military personnel died form the virus than had died in battle. At Camp Dodge almost half of the men were sick in the fall. In some towns, city councils ordered all schools, churches, and movie theaters shut. Businesses reduced their hours and the football season was delayed. Doctors could do little but ask patients to stay in bed, keep warm, and hope. Supposed cures included whiskey, kerosene, or lemon juice. The flu killed Iowa soldier Arthur Zelle in January 1919, who had returned from France only to fall ill at Camp Dodge.

The Red Cross gave whatever assistance it could to combat the influenza outbreak. It sent out 140 nurses in October and November 1918 to help stricken Iowans, both military and civilian. In Waterloo, 36 women provided 860 hours of service as drivers in late 1918, ferrying people to and from hospitals and homes. At Camp Dodge, 30 cars driven by female Red Cross volunteers carried 5,000 to 6,000 people a day to hospitals, often working sixteen hours a day. When a patient died, female volunteers opened their homes to bereaved families, often cooking them meals, as well as arranging for the transfer of remains. The motor pool helped many parents see their son before he died, ferrying them from hotels to barracks. Volunteers also made phone calls on behalf of the sick. Female drivers made thousands of trips in Iowa, bringing

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blankets, meals, and supplies to suffering men and taking doctors and nurses to patients, even while they were sick themselves.  

By the end of the war, Iowa native Herbert Hoover had gained renown nationwide for his administrative and humanitarian efforts during the war and after. Hoover was born in West Branch, Iowa, in 1874. He was orphaned as a young boy and often hungry. A keen student despite his poverty and lack of education, he was admitted to the first class of Stanford students. He earned a degree in geology and became an engineer. Intelligence and relentless determination, along with a bit of luck, led him to become a mining engineer for a company in Australia, despite the fact that he was only 22, with little work experience. The poor orphan thrived over the following decades, his obsession with work and cold demeanor serving him well in business. He became a talented manager, extracting efficiency from his employees. Hoover traveled endlessly, living in China and England, and inspecting mines from Burma to Egypt. By the time World War One erupted, he was worth at least four million dollars. He led the Food Administration during the war and organized food relief for Europe after the conflict. When the Republicans won the presidency in 1920, he became Secretary of Commerce. In 1928, he was elected president, the only Iowan to hold the highest office in the country.  

But even the genius of Herbert Hoover could not help the American farmer after the war ended. The collapse of farm prices after the conflict brought an end to the booming agricultural sector in Iowa. Demand for corn, wheat, and pork during the war had kept prices high. Money flowed into the wallets of farm families. They brought marginal land into production to meet wartime needs or bought additional property. “This boom was soon felt in the prices of farm products and ultimately in the price of farmlands,” wrote Lonzo Jones. Farm income doubled, but mortgage debt doubled as well. Land increased in value in some places in Iowa from $82 an acre to $400. But, the wartime boom collapsed.  

Iowa and other farming areas fell into a prolonged economic recession that lasted throughout the 1920s. The federal government kept wheat prices artificially high for eighteen months after the war ended in November 1918. Surplus grain went overseas to feed the hungry recovering from the conflict. But, in early 1920 the government removed price supports and commodity prices plummeted by two-thirds by mid-1921. Export markets dwindled, as the world slowly recovered from the Great War. Prohibition undermined the demand for barley. Farm prices fell further, pushed down by a bumper crops in the early 1920s. Land prices plummeted, too. Farmers could not pay the debts that they had incurred during wartime. By 1921 farm journals carried bankruptcy guides. One million families across the country lost their land.  

The instability of the war years contributed to the brief success of the Socialist Party in Iowa. In April 1920 Davenport elected a socialist mayor and a socialist city council majority. Surprisingly, this came in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and an anti-communist hysteria. This was no radical departure from American politics in the early twentieth century.

22 Fullbrook, The Red Cross in Iowa, volume two, 36-38.  
The labor leader Eugene V. Debs had received almost one million votes in the 1912 presidential election and the party elected 1,200 official nationwide. The socialists campaigned on a local platform of increased teacher pay, free textbooks, and lower streetcar fares. They benefitted from the votes of Germans, who were driven away from the usual political parties by wartime intolerance and anti-immigrant frenzy. Their mayoral candidate was also a popular doctor. A postwar recession forced the socialists to raise taxes and cut infrastructure spending; their ambitious agenda of the nationalization of private resources was never enacted at the local, state, or national level. Charges of waste and corruption also hurt their chances at re-election in Davenport. In 1922 they lost power, never to regain it in the state.26

The 1920s brought major changes to daily life, especially in rural areas. While Iowa escaped widespread industrial strikes and the terrible racial violence that plagued other parts of the country, it did experience profound upheaval. Iowans eagerly bought automobiles and the new form of transportation began to reshape their lives. People in towns and on farms went to movies for entertainment and eagerly listened to their new radios. The struggle over Prohibition and the threat of the Klan threatened Iowa in the decade, as well.27

Prohibition was the not the success that its supporters had hoped for. Iowa voters choose to outlaw liquor sales in 1917, years before the federal government did. The production, transport, and sale of alcohol were banned by the 18th amendment, but all of its ingredients were easily available. Home consumption was still legal. Americans could easily brew their own beer or make their own gin. Whiskey could be made with a few pieces of equipment, as well as grain, yeast, water, and sugar. In the Iowa town of Templeton, almost every family was involved in producing the famous rye whiskey named for the place. Men sold half-pint bottles at dances, recalled Gerald Goodwin. He was afraid to drink it though, as homemade liquor “was made in the most unsanitary conditions.” In eastern Iowa, illegal alcohol producers and distributors known as bootleggers provided their product to customers in milk jugs painted white. In Estherville, suppliers left booze near designated fence posts; locations were revealed to customers after payment. Alcohol could also be easily found at local speakeasies or underground bars. Canada and Mexico did not ban alcohol—organized crime made vast sums of money from the smuggling or production of liquor. The amount of money provided to enforce prohibition was meager and enforcement usually a failure. Repeal came in 1933.28

The KKK experienced a revival in the United States and Iowa in the 1920s. The Klan had been created after the Civil War with the goal of asserting white supremacy in the South. In Iowa, it experienced a rebirth that was the result of white resistance to immigration and cultural change. Members may have also feared the loss of economic status due to the long recession of the decade. The KKK reformed in Georgia in 1915 as opponents of foreigners,

blacks, Catholics, and Jews. Members swore allegiance to “100 percent Americanism” and promised to fight immigration and uphold prohibition. They found serious support in the Midwest, especially in Indiana, where an estimated 300,000 joined the KKK. James B. Morris estimated that the Klan had 100,000 members in Iowa. The Klan’s prejudice in Iowa focused on Catholics, who were thought to support bootlegging. They burned crosses, staged marches, and intimidated and terrorized many. Three thousand members marched in Des Moines in June 1926. They managed to divide communities, but their influence in Iowa was fortunately brief and, as far as we know, non-fatal. The Klan dominated the town of Argyle in southeast Iowa, controlling local businesses and influencing local politics. Farmers who refused to join were beaten, as were local Catholics. One member in central Iowa wrote to his girlfriend, complaining of squabbling and disorganization among his klavern (local unit). The second Klan collapsed in the late 1920s after a series of scandals, including rape and murder, involving its leaders.29

One immigrant group began to move to Iowa in increasing numbers in the 1910s and 1920s, drawn by employment opportunities and pushed out of their homeland by a civil war. A tiny population of Mexicans lived in Iowa in the late 1800s—the census only counted 29 in 1900—but their numbers increased in the early twentieth century. They came to Iowa to work on farms and railroads, fleeing the bloodshed of the Mexican Revolution and limited economic opportunities. A labor shortage during the First World War helped draw immigrants to Iowa and the United States; families followed men to the state. David Macias left Zacatecas, Mexico and came to live in Bettendorf in 1914. His brother Manuel Macias followed, as did other Mexican workers. Many Mexican migrants to Iowa had lived in Texas and suffered from the ugly racial repression and segregation of that state. They did not escape such discrimination in Iowa, but their small numbers and recent arrival provoked less backlash from the white population. By 1920, Iowa had more than 2,500 Mexican inhabitants.30

Mexican immigrants lived in difficult circumstances and usually worked the toughest jobs. Laborers often came to Iowa on work contracts and could be deported if they quit their jobs. The U. S. Department of Labor often restricted them to agricultural work and ensured that they could not become American citizens. Mexicans lived in towns and cities, usually in areas with other immigrants. Men worked as farm laborers, completed railroad maintenance, or toiled in meatpacking or brick factories. David Macias came to work for a factory in Bettendorf, losing his left arm in a near-fatal accident. Others worked in sugar beet fields in northern Iowa or southern Minnesota. They also worked as day laborers, hoping for temporary employment. Carl Hamilton, who grew up near Glidden, remembered that railroad laborers were often Mexican.

These men replaced rails and repaired the track, living in “work cars” parked along the tracks. It was “tough, hard work,” Hamilton wrote.31

Mexican families lived in shacks, cottages, and railroad boxcars, as in the neighborhoods of Holy City in Bettendorf and Cook’s Point in Davenport. Other Mexican immigrant communities developed in other towns, mostly in eastern Iowa. The Bettendorf Company, which supplied manufactured good for railroads, provided rent-free—and primitive—housing for some of its workers. The neighborhood known as Holy City grew in Bettendorf, where Ernest Rodriguez wrote that living conditions were “austere.” Rodriguez and his sister Patricia were born in a boxcar converted into housing. Bathing was done in the river and toilets consisted of community outhouses, he recalled. There was no electricity or running water—coal for stoves was often taken from freight trains. The first homes in Cook’s Point were built about 1916 on an empty two-acre lot bordering the Mississippi River. By 1927 about 100 people lived there; this number increased to about 270 by 1949. A community faucet often provided water; residents chipped ice from it in the winter. Families usually did not have access to electricity or running water at Cook’s Point either. They used kerosene lamps for lighting and stoves for heating. There were no paved streets or sidewalks. Women and children spent much of their time hauling water for cooking and bathing. Women usually worked in the informal economy, limited by racial and gender discrimination to domestic labor. They supplemented family income by taking in boarders or by doing laundry or sewing; Mexican women also raised chickens, grew gardens, and sold eggs for extra income. Farm work paid little and wages fell during the 1920s. Unlike earlier waves of immigrants, few Mexican families could accumulate capital to buy their own land. Despite being denied opportunity and equality, scores of men from Cook’s Point and Holy City fought for the United States in World War Two.32

Automobiles brought greatly increased mobility for Iowans who could afford them, but early cars provided many challenges for their owners. The first autos were primitive, often unreliable, and open to the weather. Such vehicles could only be “used when road conditions were good,” wrote Kenneth Hassebrock, who was a child living near Lakota, in north-central Iowa, in the 1920s. Travel could be unpleasant, with gravel roads developing a washboard surface that “induces a maximum impact on the rear end,” he added. Clouds of dust and small stones kicked up by passing cars rained down on passengers. Windshields could shatter when hit by larger rocks. A 1904 rural speed limit was set at 20 miles per hour—driving over 45 miles per hour was not recommended. Long trips required advance planning, as restaurants and gas stations could be rare. Drivers often had to ask for directions to the next town, as road signs did not exist, wrote Keith Graham. H.E. Wilkinson recalled that roads were so bad that a rainstorm could strand travelers away from home overnight until roads dried out. “The natural course of human events dictated that the act of getting stuck to be reserved for those trips where all passengers were dressed in their Sunday clothes,” noted Hassebrock. George B. Hippee suffered from deep mud, flat tires, and breakdowns on a trip from Des Moines to Spirit Lake in 1905, which took four days. “If I had not sworn so much, I would not have been so tired. I would swear awhile and then Herndon would swear awhile, but we were both justified in it.”

Enterprising farmers charged one dollar, or more, to help retrieve vehicles stuck in the mud. They often used horses.  

Autos reduced the obstacle of time and distance for rural folk. They were quite useful for a dispersed rural population, which often lived ten or more miles from the nearest town. In 1905 there were 1,573 registered cars in the state. But car ownership spread quickly. In Greene County, about one in five families owned an auto in 1920. Farm families found that autos allowed them to easily market crops, visit doctors or neighbors, or travel to nearby towns for entertainment, shopping, or school. Elizabeth R. Miller wrote that her family could reach the nearest town, which was seven miles away, in only twenty minutes by car. Driving a horse took ninety minutes. Farmers used vehicles to take commodities to market. Cars might tow a trailer full of goods to town. One 11-year old boy used the family auto to deliver milk in Jefferson. Many grocery stores delivered to their customers who lived in town. This was usually not an option for those who lived away from cities and towns. With a car, families had greater access to foods not produced on their farm, often at lower prices.

The famous Model T, produced by Ford Motor Company, helped make car ownership available to millions of families. More than half of the cars sold in the United States in 1923 were Model Ts. It was a sturdy, generally reliable, and affordable vehicle for Americans. It was easy to service and parts could be purchased through mail order catalogs. Ford dealers and service stations were found in hundreds of locations, many of them in small towns. By 1926, 93% of farm families in Iowa had cars, a higher percentage than that in urban areas. Keith Graham’s father bought an early Model T for less than $400 in 1913. While the vehicle made their lives much easier, its peculiar design made for some occasional odd driving. The car’s gas tank fed the engine by gravity—on steep hills the fuel could not reach the carburetor. Drivers sometimes had to back up a hill to ensure that fuel reached the engine.

Cars did more than move much faster than horses—they began to reshape the commercial and social landscape of Iowa. (They also did not leave manure behind.) Vehicles freed urban residents from the tyranny of set travel schedules of streetcars or trains. Cars allowed rural families to venture away from their nearby communities or their local general store. Businesses in small towns and at crossroads began to decline as autos allowed people to travel farther from home. Other local institutions, such as one-room schoolhouses, suffered when students left for larger schools with more resources. Fewer people went to church when families went on Sunday outings.

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drives. The automobile helped to transform daily life in Iowa and other rural states throughout the twentieth century.³⁶

More cars meant a demand for better roads, which were quite terrible in the early twentieth century. They were usually dirt and passable only in good weather. Iowa had more than 102,000 miles of roads in 1904, with less than two percent improved with gravel. A road trip from Clinton to Chicago took nine hours in 1904. The journey included 101 miles of near-death experiences on rocky roads, which often went through herds of cattle. A passenger noted: “A succession of hair-breadth escapes forces on you the conviction that you were not born to die so soon.” Ruth Wenger wrote that it took her family a whole day to travel 130 miles from Winterset to Waterloo. Eula Van Meter’s family took a trip from Iowa to California in 1915. Directions west from Iowa City included: following a trolley line and turning right at a gymnasium. Iowa state law delegated road maintenance to the most local level in some places until the 1920s. Townships and counties built and maintained roads, with rural residents paying a road tax. This levy was often paid when people completed road work, usually close to their own property. Men might haul gravel or level a stretch of a dirt road. Such local institutions could not handle increasing traffic and maintenance costs.³⁷

The American government began to spend money to deal with the growing problem of inadequate road networks. The Federal Highway Act of 1916 provided federal money to match state spending—it spent $75 million dollars in its first five years. States spent an equal amount. Iowa received $146,200 the first year and $731,000 in 1920. Concerns about national defense after the conflict helped to spur new spending. In 1919 an army convoy, which included an unknown officer named Dwight D. Eisenhower, took two months to travel across the country. The convoy spent a week in late July in Iowa, visiting towns from Clinton to Denison. It made a detour to visit Merle Hay’s hometown of Glidden. Dry weather sped their progress, even if it left men covered in dust. This trip highlighted the poor condition of American roads. New taxes on gasoline—sometimes as high as three cents a gallon—paid for improved roads. Iowa paved 5,900 miles of road and placed gravel on a similar distance of dirt roads. By 1930 a vehicle could travel from Des Moines to all 99 county seats on paved roads.³⁸

The Lincoln Highway, which runs across Iowa from the Mississippi River to the Missouri River, was a segment of a trans-continental highway that stretched from New York City to San Francisco. In 1913 the road was named after Abraham Lincoln, to help gain support for its creation. Supporters debated routes, raised money and got states to promise aid. By 1916 the Lincoln highway consisted of barely linked dirt and gravel roads. The First World War

interrupted any grand plans for a trans-continental road. In the 1920s construction on the Lincoln Highway took off as the country fell into a road-building frenzy. The highway ran from Clinton on the Mississippi River to Council Bluffs in the west, passing through Cedar Rapids, Marshalltown, Ames, Jefferson, and other towns. At first, the highway was mostly mud, dirt, and gravel, with limited sections that were paved. By the late 1920s the Lincoln Highway was mostly paved and well-marked across Iowa. 39

Radio was a “revolution in entertainment,” as historian Maury Klein noted, even if it did not radically reshape life like automobiles. It brought music, news, sports, drama, comedy and politics directly into people’s homes far quicker than newspapers could. Americans learned more about the world and could immediately follow sporting events or listen to concerts. By 1922 more than 500 stations were on the air. Iowa farmers gathered around a radio at a local gas station to listen to boxing matches or baseball games, wrote Robert Stech. Margaret Ott Onerheim remembered her family’s first radio, which they bought in 1928. It filled a corner of their living room and its battery was as large as the one found in their car. The battery ran low regularly and had to be taken to town to be recharged. Her family listened to music from station WOI in Ames in the morning; in the afternoons they caught a station from South Dakota, which played “the music of a little known band led by Lawrence Welk,” she recalled. In the evenings the family sat around a table with a kerosene lamp and read the newspaper, finished homework, or wrote letters. By 1930 more than twelve million families owned radios, out of the thirty million families in the country. 40

While families often listened to the radio for news and entertainment, they began to visit movie theaters more often. Films became longer and more complex in the 1910s, with comedies and cowboy films being staples of the early industry. Everett Ludley, who lived in Manchester, remembered a serial called the “Hooded Terror,” where a villain tried to kidnap an unsuspecting heroine, who was rescued by a dashing hero. The Keystone cops or Fatty Arbuckle usually followed. Half of the theaters in the country were in small towns. The movie theater was often the most impressive building in such places. Virgil Lagomarcino fondly remembered the one movie theater in Waverly as an “exciting place even before the day dawned when actor’s voices could be heard.” Dialogue appeared between scenes on screen; the climax of a movie was heightened by live organ music from a local musician. Lagomarcino recalled that films were mostly silent in small town Iowa in the 1920s. Iowans flocked to movies, which provided a cheap escape. Mexicans and African-Americans in Iowa sat in segregated balconies in movie theaters in Des Moines, recalled John Rivera. 41

Iowa looked more like the world that we live in today by the end of the 1920s, with paved roads full of automobiles and urban areas with movie theaters. The First World War had


41 Miller, 192-197; Virgil Lagomarcino, A Window on Main Street, 49-50; Memoirs of John R. Ortega, 58, SHSI-IAC; Everett Ludley, “It Always Has,” 49-50, SHSI-IAC.
brought general prosperity, even as it had unleashed a war hysteria and shameful intolerance. The state suffered from an extended agricultural downturn after the end of the conflict, even as new technology radically reshaped daily life. Opportunities for entertainment had greatly expanded with radio and movies. The arrival of the automobile heralded great social dislocations in the future, while providing improved transport. The temporary rebirth of the Klan had brought crime and violence to the state, as had the prohibition on alcohol. The stock market crash of late 1929 brought an end to fifteen years of tremendous social and economic change and ushered in a decade that would challenge all Americans.