

# HOMETOWN HYSTERIA

## Bemidji at the Start of World War I

Art Lee

"I'LL TELL YOU this much: it didn't pay to open your mouth in those days." So said Herbert C. Warfield, commenting on "those days" of World War I and the home front as he experienced it. "People were just stirred up. They were acting crazy." The particular craziness to which Warfield referred was the mood in his hometown of a lifetime, Bemidji, Minnesota.<sup>1</sup>

People-acting-crazy during the First World War has become a common phrase to describe many Americans and their hometowns during those curious times when citizens believed that our boys "over there" were making the world safe for democracy. Over here in America, however, the basic rights commonly associated with democracy were set aside; civil liberties were repressed while the guns boomed; hometown hysteria all in the name of patriotism took over, most notably during the period of 1917-18. In but the first few months after United States entry into the war, there were enough incidents and events to support the claim that hysteria infected Bemidji.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Warfield, age 86, November 29, 1983, notes in author's possession. The Warfield family is in many ways the bedrock of early Bemidji, for example, Herbert's father and uncle started the first bank (now First National) as well as the first power plant in the fledgling community.

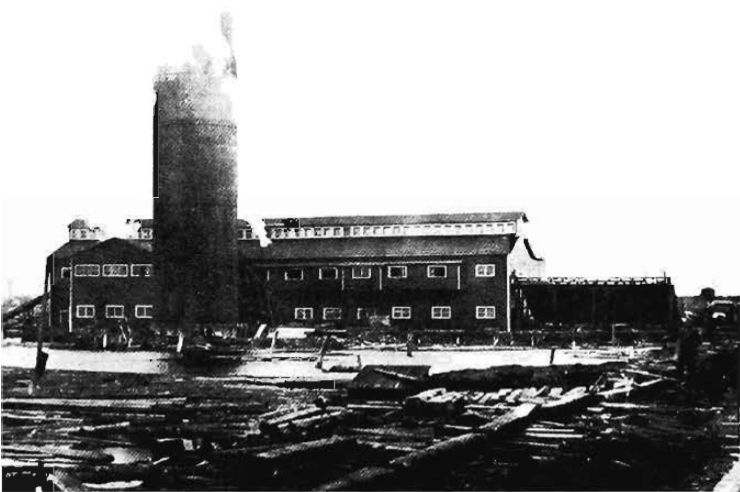
<sup>2</sup>Documentation for this article is primarily limited to Bemidji's newspapers. There were technically three during the Great War, the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* (hereafter cited as *Pioneer*), the *Bemidji Weekly Pioneer* (hereafter, *Weekly Pioneer*), and the *Bemidji Sentinel* (hereafter, *Sentinel*). The *Weekly Pioneer*, however, was only a summary of the *Daily Pioneer* and was edited by the same people.

<sup>3</sup>Harold T. Hagg, "Bemidji: A Pioneer Community of the 1890's," in *Minnesota History*, 23:24, 25, 27, 32, 33 (March, 1942); *Hubbard County Enterprise* (Park Rapids), December 14, 1894; Friedrich Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Ojibwe Language*, 81 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1966). For the presettlement period, see Randy R. McGuire, "The Natural History and Prehistory of the Bemidji Region (10,000 B.C.-1750 A.D.)," Master's thesis, Bemidji State University, 1980.

Bemidji lies in the north central part of the state in Beltrami County. Geographically it is the first city located on the Mississippi River. The first permanent settlement of white people was not made there until 1888. The community took its name from the adjoining Lake Bemidji, a contraction of the Ojibway name for the lake, "Bimidjissin," which roughly translated means "lake lying sideways." In 1894, as migration to the area increased, more than 40 families, half of them Scandinavian, settled in Bemidji Township. In 1896 Bemidji was incorporated as a village and became the Beltrami County seat. The pioneering portion of the town's existence ended in the summer of 1898 with the arrival of the Great Northern Railroad. On a hot August 29, both James J. Hill, president of the line, and his son Louis were on that first passenger train coming into the tiny village. The train stopped in the town and the celebrities "took a good long look at the future Broadway of northern Minnesota," wrote a contemporary newspaper reporter. The advent of railroads brought the transportation necessary to ship the immense amount of virgin timber from the Bemidji area, and this village of less than 500 people in 1898 became a boom town by 1900 with some 10,000 lumberjacks within a ten-mile radius of the town.<sup>3</sup>

By 1903 the first of two large Crookston Lumber Company mills was completed, employing over 450 men, with more than 2,000 others working in the logging camps around Bemidji. Two years later the Bemidji Lumber Company sawmill was finished, employing another 300, and the next year the Douglas Lumber Company built yet another mill, employing 150 men.

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THE CROOKSTON Lumber Company mill as it looked before its destruction by fire in 1917

Lumber was king and the major base of the economy for the new pine-built city. Perhaps a second base of income was getting the money away from the lumberjacks, a goal pursued by the city's approximately 50 saloons and seven houses of ill fame, the latter referred to euphemistically in the newspapers as "sporting houses."<sup>4</sup>

The official population of Bemidji in 1900 was 2,183; in 1910, 5,099; and by 1920, 7,086. Seen in a larger context, the federal census of 1910 showed a Minnesota population of 2,075,708, an increase of 18.5 per cent in ten years. In 1910 Minneapolis, the largest city in the state, had a population of 301,408, while Stillwater, the eighth largest with a population of 10,198, was double that of Bemidji. The total foreign-born population of the state in 1910 — about 25 per cent of the total — was 543,595. Scandinavians were by far the largest block of these foreign born: Swedes, 122,427; Norwegians, 105,302; Finns, 26,637; and Danes, 16,137. The next largest group was the 146,747 Minnesotans born in Germany or Austria. There were also 9,053 Indians in Minnesota at the time, most of them in the northern area.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time Beltrami County, with a total population of 19,337, was home to 5,237 foreign-born whites. Of them, Scandinavians were by far the dominant group: 1,934 Norwegians, 1,256 Swedes, 150 Danes, and 94 Finns. The next largest enclave was 716 non-French Canadians (plus 214 French), followed by 363 from Germany and 148 from Austria. The remaining foreign-born citizens represented a sprinkling of other ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup>

IN THE YEARS around World War I, the Republican party dominated state politics. Its candidates were successful, particularly if their eyes were blue and their last name ended in "s-o-n." Occasionally a Democrat slipped

into office, but this was the exception to the general rule. In certain northern sections of the state, however, including the area around Bemidji, the Socialist party had success. Indeed, in the 1912 presidential election, when voters had their choice of Woodrow Wilson, William Howard Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, or Eugene Victor Debs, founder and perennial candidate of the Social Democratic party, Beltrami County chose the latter.<sup>7</sup>

On the eve of World War I, then, Bemidji was a thriving, if rough, lumberjack community of some 6,500 citizens, with Scandinavians the dominant ethnic group. By 1914 four railway lines provided transportation into the city — the Great Northern; the Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Sault Ste. Marie, the Minnesota and International; and the Minneapolis, Red Lake, and Manitoba, of which Bemidji was the southern terminus. The new city had waterworks, gas and electric lights, three banks, two hospitals, two opera houses, sawmills, a woolen mill, box, brick, tile, and turpentine factories, several hotels and wholesale houses, a creamery, a brewery, a Carnegie library, churches of the leading denominations, a public school system, and a State Normal School (on paper only). Outside of Bemidji, however, not one of the principal villages in the county had a population of more than 800. With the impetus to settlement given by the commercial lumbering interests, Bemidji became one of the last boom lumber towns of the Middle Border. For the first three decades of the century lumbering was the dominant activity in Beltrami County, with Bemidji the hub because of its rail facilities, its population, business district, and county courthouse.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Arthur O. Lee, *College in the Pines: A History of Bemidji State College*, 18 (Minneapolis, 1970); Erwin F. Mittelholtz, "A Chronological History of Bemidji," in *Pioneer*, June 30, 1971, Jubilee sec., n.p. Frequent mention is made of Bemidji's saloons in the local newspapers, but the exact number is impossible to pinpoint. When Bemidji was being considered as the site for a new normal school in 1913, the city attorney told the state superintendent of education that there were "only twenty-nine" saloons. Herbert Warfield scoffed at the figure, suggesting there were closer to 60 saloons at the start of World War I; interview, May, 1969, notes in author's possession.

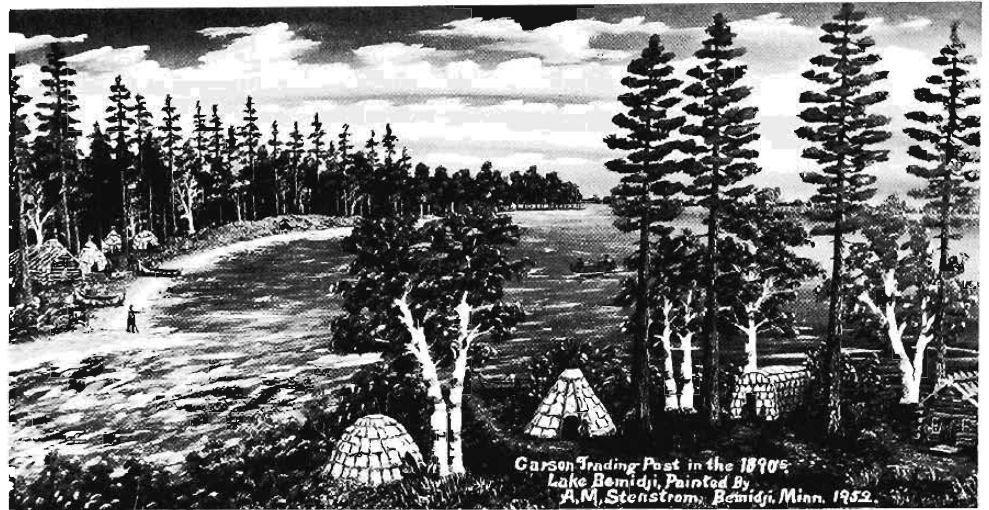
<sup>5</sup> Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1915, p. 212; United States, *Census*, 1920, *Population*, 1:236; 1910, *Population*, 2:958, 959, 991.

<sup>6</sup> U.S., *Census*, 1910, *Abstract with Supplement on Minnesota*, 606.

<sup>7</sup> *Pioneer*, November 8, 1912, p. 1; Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota, 1899-1918*, 55 (St. Paul, 1971). There was then a village of Debs, and there remains to this day a Eugene township, Debs church, and "the old Debs school." Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names: Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 37 (St. Paul, 1969); geographic board files, in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). There was also a socialist on the County Board of Commissioners when World War I began, but the man's seat did not last long thereafter.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. A. Burnquist, ed., *Minnesota and Its People*, 2:373 (Chicago, 1924); Hagg, in *Minnesota History*, 23:33, 34.

AN ARTIST'S conception  
of Bemidji's first white  
settlement



Carson Trading Post in the 1890s  
Lake Bemidji, Painted By  
A.M. Stenstrom, Bemidji, Minn. 1952.

Bemidji at this time also had two independent newspapers, each with a strong editorial presence. The two editors in question — George E. Carson (1866–1934) of the *Pioneer* and Harlan Mayne Stanton (1892–1973) of the *Sentinel* — were solid citizens. Carson was literally the founder of the city; it was he and his brother Marion who were credited with being the first permanent white settlers, who started the first business in “town,” the trading post. Eventually the two erected the first frame store in what is now downtown Bemidji. George Carson appeared to be an adventurous man; his life included running off for a year to Alaska to pan gold in the gold rush of 1898. Both the written statement in his obituary as well as the comments of his contemporaries confirm his activism: “He maintained a vigorous editorial policy, fought numerous political battles and skirmishes, sometimes against a majority of the business men of the town.”<sup>9</sup>

*Sentinel* editor Stanton was considerably younger than Carson at the time of the war. (Stanton ended up enlisting in the army in 1918; when he returned he helped start the American Legion and was its first commander in town.) He was the son of a prominent Bemidji judge, C. W. Stanton.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to lumbering, the economic times just before the Great War were good for Bemidji citizens. The millions of feet of lumber harvested in the area were viewed

as good for both the present and the future, because the expectation was that the cutover area would easily be transformed into farm lands, thereby providing a refuge for permanent settlers as the center of the lumbering operations moved to the far Northwest.

ON JUNE 29, 1914, few Bemidji citizens who read about the tragic assassination the day before of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, suspected that the event had any significance for them, or even for the United States in general. While the newspapers in the eastern cities fashioned long, eye-catching headlines to dramatize the event, the Bemidji *Pioneer* report consisted of only a small headline and a brief resumé of the tragedy. Perhaps the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* summed it up best for rural America when the editor wrote: “To the world, or to a nation, an archduke more or less make little difference.”<sup>11</sup>

On the morning of July 28, 1914, however, this rural apathy changed; the *Pioneer* came out with a screaming

H. M. STANTON,  
editor of the  
Bemidji Sentinel



<sup>9</sup>Long obituaries in both newspapers emphasized Carson's importance to the community; *Pioneer*, January 3, 1935, p. 4; *Sentinel*, January 4, 1935, p. 1. One of the pallbearers was C. W. Vandersluis, mayor of Bemidji during World War I.

<sup>10</sup>*Pioneer*, April 10, 1973, p. 12. (The *Sentinel* had ceased publication by that time.) Stanton, who died in Lake Forest, Illinois, was the executive secretary of the Building Construction Employees [sic] of Chicago. He was buried, however, in Bemidji.

<sup>11</sup>The *Herald* quote is from Walter Lord, *The Good Years: from 1900 to the First World War*, 333 (New York, 1960).

headline: "EXTRA! AUSTRIA DECLARES WAR." This first stunning announcement was followed the next week with more big black headlines as one by one the nations of Europe slipped over the brink and into the caldron of war. The *Pioneer* editor, George E. Carson, seemed to write almost with relief as he seconded President Woodrow Wilson's message of American neutrality in what almost all persons regarded as a foolish war.

With the invasion of neutral Belgium by Germany in August however, public opinion left the area of neutrality. The Bemidji press stated forthrightly that Americans had a humanitarian responsibility for helping the unfortunate European brethren in this, the world's greatest tragedy.<sup>12</sup>

When the issue of American preparedness for war was raised, however, especially by the shrill voice of former president Theodore Roosevelt, the *Pioneer* editor made his position clear: "We want no big army, no great military class. The European imbroglio shows how excessive preparedness for war invites war. We are a peaceful nation and proud of it."<sup>13</sup> The Bemidji editors did not budge from this position for the rest of that year.

In the meantime the posture of the United States as an impartial spectator became more and more precarious as the belligerents devised a series of policies that jeopardized the rights of neutral nations. On May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank without warning the *Lusitania*, a British vessel, with the total loss of 1,198 lives, including those of 128 Americans. That sinking turned much of American opinion against Germany, but the opinion was greatly divided on what to do about Germany. Theodore Roosevelt branded the sinking an act of piracy and demanded that the United States instantly join the war. The *Pioneer* responded to Roosevelt by asserting that he was "guilty of fomenting disunity, when solidarity was paramount." Bemidji's other newspaper, the *Sentinel*, added: "If there is one thing this

country doesn't want, it is a war, and certainly we do not want to fight a nation linked so closely to us by ties of kinship and business, as is Germany."<sup>14</sup>

A Bemidji event in June, 1915, however, was to reflect both the shift away from neutrality and a new antileft leaning of Bemidji newspapermen. Eugene V. Debs came to town on June 2, under the auspices of the Bemidji socialists. The *Sentinel* reported that Debs generated "spontaneous applause" when he stated: "There never was a war declared by the working man, but he furnishes the corpses." But to the *Sentinel* editor, the socialists were more than an antiwar group, they were "a revolutionary body," and the paper identified them as "comrades and bearers of the Red Flag."<sup>15</sup>

By that fall Bemidji newspapers changed their minds and called for readiness; the local editors reluctantly altered their position on the question of "preparedness."<sup>16</sup> Plenty of other persons had changed their minds, also.

Important in alerting Minnesotans to the need for preparedness was the Minneapolis affiliate of the National Security League, an organization which favored strengthening military and naval forces, established on August 12, 1915. The preparedness movement was sanctioned by Dr. Cyrus Northrop, president of the Minnesota Peace Society and president emeritus of the University of Minnesota, who believed that "We should prepare against war. This is not militarism. But we

<sup>12</sup>*Weekly Pioneer*, August 20, 1914, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>*Pioneer*, October 22, 1914, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup>*Pioneer*, September 9, 1915, p. 1. *Sentinel*, May 21, 1915, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup>*Sentinel*, June 14, 1915, p. 1. The newspaper estimated the crowd to hear Debs talk at 11,000 or 12,000 people, a figure that seems extraordinarily high, given the city's total population of less than 7,000.

<sup>16</sup>*Pioneer*, October 23, 1915, p. 2.



**Chums**  
 "When I really began to  
 admire You, my friend,  
 was when you pulled  
 that Lusitania job.  
 When You did that,  
 I said to myself—  
 'There's a man after  
 my own heart!'"

realize that we are inadequately prepared should we have to defend ourselves." In Bemidji the *Pioneer* editor echoed Northrop's words and added a pragmatic line of his own: "From a purely economic standpoint it is cheaper by far to take measures to prevent a war than it is to fight one when it comes."<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps a movie shown in a Bemidji theater that summer, *The Battle Cry of Peace*, aided the preparedness support in the area. The film depicted what would happen should New York City be invaded. Whatever the exact implications of the film might have been, the *Pioneer* editor began using the personal approach on the issue: "If this war keeps on for another year we'll probably find out how far a kilometer is."<sup>18</sup>

But a whole year later there was no war for America and little had changed with the Bemidji newspapers. Both editors still favored preparedness but at the same time, neutrality. The one issue in 1916 to which the Bemidji papers responded with gusto was the Gore-McLemore resolution, which would have forbidden Americans to take passage on vessels of the belligerents. All ten Minnesota congressmen and Senator Moses Clapp voted to implement the measure, but Wilson succeeded in having the resolution tabled in both houses of Congress.

Early in 1917 Germany startled the United States by announcing the reopening of unrestricted submarine warfare, and President Wilson responded by severing diplomatic relations on February 3. During that next week, the membership of the Bemidji Post of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and the Beltrami Board of County Commissioners both went on record approving Wilson's policy, with the exception of one commissioner, a Socialist named James Hayes. Wrote the *Sentinel* editor of the lone dissenter: "We venture to remark that Comrade Hayes is serving his first and last term as a member of the Board of County Commissioners."<sup>19</sup>

President Wilson requested the authority from Congress to arm American vessels, and Senator Clapp and Representative Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., of the Minnesota Sixth District (both lameducks) joined the supporters of Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette, Sr., to oppose Wilson. The Bemidji papers this time denounced the actions of Clapp and Lindbergh.

On March 1, 1917, the public disclosure of the Zimmermann telegram, in which Germany invited Mexico

<sup>17</sup> Franklin F. Holbrook and Livia Appel, *Minnesota in the War With Germany*, 1:26, 27 (St. Paul, 1928); *Pioneer*, October 21, 1915, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Pioneer*, November 1, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Sentinel*, February 16, 1917, p. 1. Research has failed either to validate or contradict the editor's prediction.

<sup>20</sup> *Pioneer*, April 5, 1917, p. 1. For more on Knutson's career, see Barbara Stuhler, *Ten Men of Minnesota and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1968*, 54-75 (St. Paul, 1973).

# IS THIS YOUR WAR?

**Pres. Wilson**

*says:*

"The right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts."

....

"To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything we are and everything that we have."

*This is*



**MY WAR?**

*"I will smite the German, line in France I will smite them that damn their men in propaganda at home."*

GENERAL FRANKLIN

**Lindbergh**

*(Candidate for Governor)*

*says in his book:*

"It has indeed been humiliating to the American people to see how the wealth grabbers... actually attempt... to drive the people as if we were a lot of cattle, to buy bonds, to subscribe to the Red Cross, to register for conscription and all the other things."

## MINNESOTA Gave This Answer

?

**55,000 MEN IN U. S. WAR FORCES**

**\$216,000,000 IN LIBERTY BONDS**

**\$5,000,000 TO THE RED CROSS**

What Will Be Your Answer to Lindbergh at the Primaries June 17th?  
Vote for One of the Three LOYAL Candidates for Governor

Send for the Book "THIS IS MY WAR," RELIANCE PUBLICITY SERVICE, SAINT PAUL  
Printed, Published and Distributed by THE P. A. ZEPPEL 1124 Marquette Street, St. Paul, Minn.

POSTERS such as this helped to defeat former Representative Lindbergh in his 1918 gubernatorial bid.

to join the war on the side of the Central Powers, accentuated the continuing deterioration of German-American relations. Then in mid-March German submarines committed those "overt acts" that Wilson had referred to, and on April 2 he summoned Congress to joint session, requesting that a state of war be declared between the United States and Germany.

While Congress considered the Wilson proposal for war, brand-new Sixth District congressman Harold Knutson of Minnesota contacted Anton R. Erickson, Bemidji postmaster, asking: "Please wire me sentiment of people in Beltrami county relative to war. I want to get the people's sentiment so I can represent them intelligently." The message back to Knutson, quoted in the *Pioneer*, read: "Bemidji and Beltrami county endorse the President's message. Stand by our flag."<sup>20</sup>

On April 6, 1917, the United States was at war with Germany. However, Representative Knutson, joining 49 of his colleagues, had voted against the war resolution, being of the opinion that "a majority of the common people, who live by the sweat of their brow," were also

against the war. Wrote the *Sentinel* editor on Knutson's negative vote: "The kindest thing we can say about Congressman Knutson is that he had done no worse than Lindbergh would have done. We expected that he would have nerve enough to prove himself a real patriot

but it is apparent that we guessed at this failure to fairly proclaim the sentiments of his constituents."<sup>21</sup>

With America committed to war, it appeared from the newspapers' reports that the people in Bemidji accepted the decisions of Wilson and the Congress. And now that the United States was in it, Bemidji citizens would support the war — and then some.

IT SHOULD BE acknowledged, of course, that newspapers are not objective sources; indeed they are hardly dispassionate chroniclers of the times. Moreover, it is difficult to gauge public opinion by reading the newspapers, and thus it would be an overstatement to claim categorically that all Bemidji citizens supported both mobilization and the war. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to believe, for example, that those Finnish lumberjacks in the Bemidji area put aside their distrust of the bosses and their hatred for Mother Russia for the duration of the war. When dissent is punished, silence does not necessarily imply consent. Given the unnerving if not dangerous times, it is likely that Finnish jacks — as well as any others opposed to the war — exhibited for the most part a well-developed working-class instinct for survival.

In the absence of papers of prominent Bemidji citizens, however, newspaper reports remain the major source available. Did the editors of Bemidji's two newspapers accurately and fairly reflect the people of the community? Judging by all the comments given by those elderly people interviewed about the editors, the answer to the above question would be yes.

A number of men who knew both editors personally did not hesitate to discuss them. R. Grant Utley, editor and owner of the neighboring *Cass Lake Times* from 1916 until 1977, was well acquainted with both men. Said Utley: "Those men then . . . they told it like it is." He went on to contrast present-day small-town editors — "Afraid to take a stand" — with the editors of his day: "Rip-roaring promoters, maybe, but they stood up for what they thought was right." Herbert Warfield, who commented on the local air of hysteria, referred to Stanton as "an active sort of a young fellow" who tried to dig into everything. "He grew up here; his was a respected family."<sup>22</sup>

Said another Bemidji citizen of a lifetime, Leonard R. Dickinson, "The *Sentinel* had a good reputation, and he [Stanton] was the main cog. Good man." On Carson as editor: "Would I believe him? You bet I'd believe him. He told the truth. He wasn't a guy who could be pushed around." And the major published historian on

the Bemidji area. Harold Hagg, did not hesitate on the subject of the Bemidji editors during World War I: "These men, I believe, reflected accurately the people of this community."<sup>23</sup>

BEFORE either federal or state authorities made an organized effort to mobilize public opinion, prowar enthusiasm was brewing in Bemidji. When Congress declared a formal state of war, a wave of patriotism swept the city, generating a momentum that did not let up until war's end. Loyalty resolutions were adopted by the GAR, the Odd Fellows, and the Elks Club; on the day of the war declaration the mayor, Charles W. Vandersluis, issued via the newspapers a long proclamation for loyalty to the cause, a statement which urged all Bemidji residents to "display the American flag from their homes and places of business . . . as an expression of patriotism and desire to support the President and Congress in taking positive action for defense of American rights and American honor."<sup>24</sup>

To more than carry out the mayor's statement, the Bemidji Box Factory ceased operations for an hour to conduct appropriate flag-raising exercises. Before this ceremony, some workers had become perturbed when a fellow employee refused to contribute toward the purchase of a new flag for the plant. The aroused patriots, dubbing the malcontent "the friend of the Kaiser," simply doused him in a barrel of water, holding him under until there was audible evidence that he had changed his mind and was more than willing to donate to the cause. (In September of 1917 another box factory worker had bravely boasted: "One German can whip any six Americans." The same water barrel came into use again, with the boaster soaked generously until he apologized for his unpatriotic remark.) Yet while alleged German sympathizers were roundly squelched, there was apparently

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<sup>21</sup> Holbrook and Appel, *Minnesota in the War*, 1:54; *Sentinel*, April 13, 1917, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Interviews with Utley, November 29, 1983, and Warfield, November 29, 1983.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Dickinson, January 3, 1984, and Harold Hagg, January 7, 1984, notes in author's possession. When asked if the IWW deliberately burned the large Crookston Lumber Mill in 1917, Dickinson replied, "Naw, they didn't do it. It was an accident. People were just looking for someone to put the blame on at the time." Dickinson, a former state legislator (1943–49, 1951–53, 1961, 1963–65, 1967), also ran unsuccessfully as the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor; W. F. Toensing, comp., *Minnesota Congressmen, Legislators, and other Elected State Officials*, 29 (St. Paul, 1971).

<sup>24</sup> *Pioneer*, April 4, 1917, p. 1. The same paper, May 24, 1918, p. 1, reported that a citizen approached to donate to the Red Cross said, "To hell with the . . . of a Red Cross," which led to a fine of \$25. The man was arrested and charged with being "of enemy foreign birth," although he was a United States citizen.



no overt discrimination against local, loyal German Americans.<sup>25</sup>

In anticipation of the war, a group calling itself the Patriotic League of Bemidji was formed on April 4, its duty being to promote loyalty, to act on behalf of the families of the militiamen, and to "take any action deemed necessary to suppress sedition and treasonable utterances and acts within the city." The organization's first official act on the day war was declared was to stage a Loyalty Parade followed by speeches. These included an inflammatory statement from a local attorney: "There is a certain renegade in Bemidji who fled here from

another city, a man who has no respect for God or country. He is a disgrace to the city, and at present there is no city ordinance or any means of stopping him. I would suggest that the City Council take action at once to stop all unpatriotic meetings, and that an ordinance prohibit the posting of all objectionable bills be passed." The man referred to, Morris Kaplan, was an emigrant Jew from Russia, a Socialist and a sympathizer with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He was also a prominent businessman in town, owning several stores and a hotel. The council acted quickly to carry out the attorney's requests, passing ordinances "to prohibit promiscuous speeches by irresponsible persons and to prevent the distribution of undesirable literature."<sup>26</sup>

Both contributing to and highlighting this early patriotic fervor was the sudden drafting into military service of the Bemidji Naval Militia. This group of 45 men trained on Lake Bemidji. (Although other states and other units have laid claim to be first, the Bemidji Naval Militia maintained that it was the first unit to be called into service in World War I.) Certainly the men had expected that they would have to leave soon for war, since war was declared, but both the manner and timing for the call-up was extraordinary. A public reception at the local armory was scheduled for the Friday evening of April 6 to honor the militia. Highlights of the reception included a speech, entitled "Patriotism," by a local judge. The speeches were followed by a dance, and it was late in the evening when the dancers were stopped to hear the telephoned message to Lieutenant Earl A. Barker, commandant of the militia: "We have been ordered to report for mobilization tomorrow at Duluth. You will report to the armory at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning."

The next morning commercial activities in town came to a standstill as men, women, and children assembled throughout the downtown and in the vicinity of the Great Northern depot. Starting from a local restaurant where the management had served a complimentary meal, the Bemidji Naval Militia was escorted through

<sup>25</sup> *Bemidji Weekly Pioneer*, April 12, 1917, p. 1. Information on treatment of German Americans from interviews with Frank Markus, age 90, December 28, 1983 ("They were good citizens and they acted that way."); Herbert Warfield, November 29, 1983 ("I wasn't aware of any of this stuff."); Utley, November 29, 1983 ("No, no bad incidents that I ever heard of.") — all notes in author's possession.

<sup>26</sup> Here and three paragraphs below, see *Pioneer*, April 5, 7, 1917, both p. 1; *Sentinel*, April 6, 1917, p. 1. The headline of the latter read, "Thousands Gather at Depot as Militia Leaves; Patriotism Sways Entire City." Not only the events of the day but the frenzied flavor of the times are captured in this day's paper.



MORRIS KAPLAN, photographed at about age 55

THE BEMIDJI Naval Militia received a warm send-off as it left for military service in World War I.



the downtown streets by the Ladies Carnival Association Drum Corps, the veterans of the Civil War, the fire department, a fleet of decorated automobiles, and hundreds of people who cheered the blue-clad contingent.

At the depot the members of the company were allowed to mingle with their friends and families for a last farewell. The local press described the obviously emotional scene: "All knew what it was and there were many genuine tears of sympathy shed for those who suffered most, and the eyes of many a big, strapping young man, who held no claim to sentiment, moistened as he hugged closely an aged mother, father, or others of those near and dear to him." Upon the arrival of the train with a special car for the militia, a large banner was attached to the car, bearing in bold letters: "Bemidji Naval Militia, Fifth Division." The farewell of mixed emotions reached a climax as the Great Northern train departed for Duluth with what the *Pioneer* editor called "the flower of the young manhood of Bemidji."

The patriotic fervor of the large crowd took a darker turn soon after the militia left. That morning all of the business places flew the American flag outside their buildings with the exception of one merchant, Morris Kaplan. Kaplan himself well understood the public attitudes, as he later wrote: "In fact, some of the citizens of Bemidji believed that I was a revolutionist shipped over from Russia to harbor myself in Bemidji where I might work furtively at undermining the United States government."<sup>27</sup>

Anyway, on that same morning after the militia left, a "delegation" — as the *Pioneer* phrased it — armed with sticks and ax handles and led by the mayor, made its way to Kaplan's store, ordering Kaplan first to kiss an American flag brought with the delegation. Then the "patriots" demanded that Kaplan display his own flag, but he had no flag to show them.

Kaplan later reported that Mayor Vandersluis, "who stuttered when he became excited shook his stick at me and managed to get out the words, 'Now, Mr. Kaplan, y-y-y-you b-b-b-Be Good'." My wife who was fearful that there would be violence and that I might even be forced to climb the flagpole was extremely upset.

I also believed optimistically that the assemblage of conscientious citizens would be persuaded to listen to my side of the story — but then again who could tell?

My wife became suddenly and briefly the spokesman for both of us. She had gone into my office and found the letter confirming that a flag was being sent to me. The gathering listened attentively while she read the letter to them. Afterwards, a few who were interested looked at the letter. Apparently everybody was satisfied. Everybody left in an orderly fashion." (Warfield's version of this incident suggests little orderliness: "I was there. It was scary! I was over on the side of the crowd. Many couldn't get into the Kaplan store so didn't know what

was going on. They were hepped up, and many of them were hollering 'Take him out in the street and lynch him!'"

The week after the Kaplan incident, the state legislature established what was to become an infamous organization, the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety. After the passage of subsequent statutes which allowed it "to do all acts and things non-inconsistent with the constitution," the commission virtually superseded the government of Minnesota. The commission took its work seriously, too seriously; its power was to be felt in every county. In the performance of its duties, it founded subordinate bodies in the counties. In Beltrami the Bemidji Home Guard was established to include 52 to a maximum of 72 members, with membership consisting of draft-exempt men from 31 to 52 years.<sup>28</sup>

Known as Company D, Tenth Battalion, this local unit was commanded by Thomas W. Swinson, a Spanish-American War veteran appointed by Governor J. A. A. Burnquist. The local commission was authorized to hunt for draft evaders, be informed of acts of disloyalty, observe the activities of aliens, conduct other kinds of investigations, and maintain public order.<sup>29</sup> It was to touch every segment of life for the people of Bemidji.

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<sup>27</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see Morris Kaplan and Mildred Kaplan Light, "Recollections of a Small Town Merchant," 87–89, in Morris Kaplan and Family Papers, department of archives and manuscripts, MHS, copy at North Central Minnesota Historical Center, Bemidji; Warfield interview, November 29, 1983. In Bemidji the rumor persists that Mrs. Kaplan suffered a heart attack immediately after the incident and was taken to a Minneapolis hospital where she made a slow recovery. Afterwards, the story goes, she refused to return to Bemidji, where her husband continued to run his businesses into the 1950s. In a letter to the author, December 6, 1983, in author's files, Mildred Lohmann (formerly Mildred Kaplan Light) of Minneapolis wrote, "it did take a great deal of courage to forge away from the urban areas which people like my father were accustomed to. My mother never had a heart attack. She was twenty years younger than my father. She was a Presbyterian of Swedish, German and French descent. There was a great difference between them, in ideas, disposition, and values. My mother, sister and I lived in Minneapolis most of the time. My father came to visit. It was an unusual situation. The flag incident may have caused her much anguish, but I really do not believe that she became ill from it." Morris Kaplan ran for United States Congress on the Public Ownership ticket in 1912, finishing third among three candidates with 7,408 votes. In 1934 he made a bid for U.S. Senate as the Socialist candidate and came in fifth out of five, gaining 5,618 votes; Bruce White *et al.*, comps., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors, 1857–1977*, 41, 97 (St. Paul, 1977).

<sup>28</sup> William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:556 (Revised ed., St. Paul, 1969); *Pioneer*, June 4, 1917, p. 1; *Minnesota, Session Laws*, 1917, p. 374.

<sup>29</sup> Although no reference to the following appeared in the Bemidji newspapers, Kaplan wrote in his recollections, 90, of former Congressman Charles A. Lindbergh's appearance to



**SURE**  
*we'll*  
**Finish**  
*the*  
**Job !**



**VICTORY**  
**LIBERTY**  
**LOAN**

(Eventually this Bemidji group would determine the appropriate amount of Liberty Bonds that each citizen should buy, a duty sometimes carried out in the evenings with knocks on the doors and demands to see the occupants' bonds.)

ONE OF THE FIRST perceived problems to face the local Home Guard was a labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World — the Wobblies. The IWW was founded in 1905 and was a revolutionary union whose members wore overalls as a badge of courage. Bemidji was its regional headquarters with a union office located downtown. As to its existence, the *Sentinel* edi-

tor wrote: "Bemidji is not proud of the fact, but it is true that there are a number of I.W.W. agitators making this city their headquarters and they are spreading their poison throughout this district. Here is an opportunity. Clear the city and county of the traitors."<sup>30</sup>

There had been plenty of IWW actions and consequent hostile publicity against the organization in the Bemidji area in the months preceding American entry into the war. Of major importance was a large lumberjack strike against the Virginia and Rainy Lake and International lumber companies involving camps and mills ranging in the west from Gemmell (in Koochiching County), north to International Falls, and east to Virginia. This particular strike began on December 28, 1916, when some 1,000 men left their jobs. Many Gemmell strikers journeyed to Bemidji to proclaim their side of the issues. The reaction of the region's press bordered on the hysterical. Editors wrote wildly of Wobbly-led "armed squads" and "gun attacks" and "reign of terrorism," and this rabid anti-IWW fever was picked up and repeated by other papers, including the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Using highly illegal but highly effective policies — policies approved almost unanimously by the Minnesota newspapers — the strike was broken by the end of January, 1917. By then the major IWW leaders were either in jail or expelled from the region, leaving the remaining rank and file to try to regroup or to fend for themselves. Given the hysterical times — and the laws aimed at the IWW — the Wobblies did not fare well; it was the beginning of the end of that organization's heyday.<sup>31</sup>

speaking in Bemidji on the Fourth of July weekend, 1917. Lindbergh spoke to a large group outside the city limits. "There was an undercurrent of opposition [to the speech]. . . they loudly proclaimed their contempt for 'yellow cowards.'" To make sure that Lindbergh supporters understood the message, yellow paint was splattered on the cars of all attending, including Lindbergh's. "Task completed, away they scurried too fast for us to apprehend them." Earlier that day, according to Kaplan, "Some rowdys [sic], unbeknownst to me had raised a red flag on the Kaplan building." Red flags on the building were a common occurrence throughout the war, denoting ongoing suspicions of Kaplan.

<sup>30</sup>Sidney Lens, *Radicalism in America*, 220 (New York, 1966); *Sentinel*, July 13, 1917, p. 4. Warfield called the IWW "off-brand characters talking the wrong language. But they were some tough cobs"; interview, November 29, 1983.

<sup>31</sup>John E. Haynes, "Revolt of the 'Timber Beasts': IWW Lumber Strike in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 42: 162-174 (Spring, 1971). An editorial in the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, July 28, 1917, p. 10, "The I.W.W.'s heated Season," took what appeared to be delight in how the Wobblies were being mistreated both in Minnesota and neighboring states: "Bemidji seems to prefer the vulgar boot, the outgoing 'freight' and the defensive shotgun and other things like that. . . . Verily, it looks like a 'roughhouse, heated season' for the I.W.W.'s."

One of the first legal acts to deter the Bemidji local came in June, 1917, with the arrest of its former secretary, Archie Sinclair, who had been active in the strike at Gemmell. Sinclair was arraigned before the local court for saying: "There is your peace president. Three

months ago he was hollering peace and praying for peace. Now he wants everybody to enlist and go to war. That is the kind of president you have got. Any man who will enlist is nothing more than a murderer."<sup>32</sup>

On July 22, 1917, Frank Ripple, the Bemidji chief of police, arrested Jesse J. Dunning, secretary of the city's branch of the IWW, at the downtown headquarters. He charged him with the possession of two books, in violation of the state criminal syndicalism statute, enacted April 13, 1917, which made it a felony for an individual to display any book or material that advocated or taught sabotage. The two books that the police chief found were both entitled *Sabotage*, one by "the rebel girl," Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and the other by Emil Pouget.<sup>33</sup>

At the subsequent trial in the Beltrami County courthouse, Dunning was found guilty of indeed displaying these two books, and he was sentenced to serve two years in the state penitentiary at Stillwater. Thus Beltrami County had the dubious honor of being the first in the state to convict anyone under a criminal syndicalism law. The *Bemidji Weekly Pioneer* announced with apparent pride that "Beltrami County will go down in the annals of Minnesota as the first county to act under the new law, and she made good."

BUT LIKELY the greatest public hysteria in Bemidji during World War I, hysteria that could easily have led to massive violence, occurred after the burning and complete destruction of the Crookston Lumber Mill No. 1, the city's largest employer. Located on the southeast corner of Lake Bemidji, it operated 24 hours a day and employed almost 500 men in the plant alone. Its destruction on Saturday, July 21, 1917, was a major blow to the city's economy. The mill was also the largest taxpayer in the entire county. Exactly what touched off the destructive fire has never been proven conclusively but local residents raised the likelihood of arson by the IWW while the mill itself was still burning.<sup>34</sup>

At a meeting of the city Commercial Club the following Tuesday, an executive of the mill issued a virtual ultimatum to the businessmen, stating that unless Bemidji made an effort to clear the Industrial Workers of the World from the city, the mill would not be rebuilt. That was all it took. By the next afternoon the ugly mood of the committee gave rise to extralegal action. Led again by the mayor, a "small knot of Bemidji's most respected and level headed citizens" covered the town and rounded up 24 card-carrying IWW members and marched them to the Great Northern depot where they were confined to the baggage room to wait for the train. A sign was posted on the depot wall: "I.W.W. Attention — This Is An Unhealthy Town." The mayor himself purchased the one-way tickets for the unholy group, and when the train arrived they were sent on their way, but not before all were forced to salute the flag. Then they boarded the

westbound train for Elbro, a minuscule community near Fosston, some 35 miles away. A mob of about 1,000 loyal townspeople saw them off.<sup>35</sup>

According to a Minneapolis newspaper, "The first test of Minnesota's sabotage law, directed against I.W.W.'s and others who teach similar criminal practices, will be made at Bemidji. Governor Burnquist yesterday directed officials in Beltrami County to make a thorough cleanup of I.W.W. leaders, following the destruction of one of the Crookston Lumber Company's largest mills. The Governor instructed the county attorney to use every means of ridding the county of the influence of the I.W.W."

The vile mood of the crowd that day did not subside until it visited a number of alleged IWW sympathizers in the city, including Morris Kaplan once again, warning all not to aid the IWW in any way. The crowd went to the OK Restaurant and threatened to deport the proprietor if he continued to show any sympathy to the IWW; the same threats went to a socialist attorney in town as well as two junk dealers. In the latter two places, the American flag was left and put on display. Meanwhile both the police and the Home Guard stopped and searched questionable characters, such as strangers in town, for IWW credentials. On the lookout for slackers, the Home Guard heeded the call to have all young men "work or fight." On one occasion, contemporaries claim, the guard marched a young man with no identification off to the army recruiting office where he became an instant U.S. soldier. The policy was clear: run the Wobblies out of town.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>*Sentinel*, June 13, 1917, p. 2, *Pioneer*, September 2, 1918, p. 1. Sinclair, banished from Bemidji for his remarks, relocated in Minneapolis. He continued his outspokenness on the war, apparently became involved with IWW leader William D. ("Big Bill") Haywood, and was later arrested in a federal action against the union.

<sup>33</sup>Here and below, see *Sentinel*, October 5, 1917, p. 1; *Weekly Pioneer*, October 4, 1917, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup>*Sentinel*, July 27, 1917, p. 1. To either prove or disprove who, let alone what, started the fire is an impossible task now and may have been impossible at the time it occurred. Perhaps Warfield summed up the situation best. "People believe what they want to believe," and the vast number of Bemidji citizens in 1917 believed that the IWW was guilty of arson, interview, October 18, 1983, notes in author's possession. This writer asked some 15 elderly Bemidji citizens if they believed the IWW burned the mill, and all responded with a variation on the word, "No."

<sup>35</sup>Here and below, see *Sentinel*, July 27, 1917, p. 1; *Pioneer*, July 26, 1917, p. 1. The rebuilding costs were put at \$250,000. The rebuilt mill burned again in 1924. The mob did not act entirely on its own initiative; it was not only given permission, but was egged on. *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, July 24, 1917, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup>*Sentinel* and *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, both July 27, 1917, p. 1, Warfield interview, November 29, 1983. The

To the above-mentioned activities, all dutifully reported in the newspapers but in a somewhat bland reporting style, a contemporary witness to the deportations and what followed that day gave more detailed information. According to Herbert Warfield, the mayor and the crowd following him went from place to place seeking out one alleged troublemaker after another. "They went to McLaughlin's place. He had a news-service business. They wrecked the place and then painted the store-front yellow. McLaughlin had liked to argue the German side." As for the junk dealers mentioned in the news article, Warfield added: "It was more of a secondhand store. Owned by a guy named [E. W.] Hannah, and a [David] Robinson was his partner. At that place the guys threw the whole store out on the street."<sup>37</sup>

Warfield observed that the socialist attorney "was W. N. Weber. He was pro-Wobbly. They — Weber and Vandersluis — slugged it out and Van beat the hell out of him. The guy had it coming. He was always shootin' off his face before, but after that he was scared. They were all scared for their lives. I was there watching, and I was kind of scared too." According to Warfield, Weber left town after this incident and never returned.

Some present-day critics have argued that Vandersluis' motives may not have been patriotic, that he found this wartime hysteria to be a convenient way to punish his personal enemies and business competitors, like Kaplan. This position is not supported by those who knew the mayor. Frank A. Markus, for example, both

worked for and later was in partnership with Vandersluis in the hardware business. Said Markus: "Mr. Vandersluis acted only out of patriotism. You couldn't beat him for an outstanding citizen. Heck, there wasn't a fairer man in the county, and he helped lots and lots of people. Now, he always stood up for what he believed was right. He didn't beat around the bush; you knew where you stood with him. He was a fine man." Other contemporaries like Warfield, Utley, and Dickinson all maintained that Vandersluis had no ulterior motives in his attempts to uphold American loyalty. They did agree, however, that the mayor had a bad temper and was apparently no one to confront physically, either.<sup>38</sup>

For his efforts and those of his supporters in running the Wobblies out of town, Mayor Vandersluis received a telegram from a Minneapolis attorney for the Crookston Lumber Company: "Accept our congratulations on your clean-up. Talked with the governor and attorney general and they are with you. Don't hesitate to call on us for assistance in the event of further trouble with men coming in."<sup>39</sup>

The deportation affair was kept alive by IWW member Dunning, the alleged saboteur, and one William Shorey who began to circulate a petition asking the governor to punish all those Bemidji citizens who had participated in the incident. As a sign of the times, news of the petition brought the arrest of both men on a charge of vagrancy. And both were deported: they were placed on a southbound train and told not to return to town.<sup>40</sup> In a curious continuation of this strange era, however, Dunning was rearrested a month later and brought back to Bemidji, presumably put into custody so that he would not skip out on his pending court trial.

Another Bemidji man rearrested at this time was Archie Sinclair. Considered an important troublemaker, he was sent to Chicago where he became one of the 113 IWW defendants to go on trial before Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis. Sinclair, together with union leader Bill Haywood, was found guilty of "wilfully [sic] conspir[ing] by force to prevent, hinder and delay the execution of the laws of the United States pertaining to carrying on the war with Germany." He received a total of 28 years in the federal penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and a total fine of \$30,000.<sup>41</sup>

So much for civil liberties in wartime Bemidji.

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*Tribune* reflected on the Bemidji policy: "'Keep 'em Moving.' This is the word which spread through northern Minnesota yesterday following the actions taken by citizens of Bemidji in forcing I.W.W. members to leave the city." The account put the mob figure at 2,000.

<sup>37</sup> Here and below, see Warfield interview, November 29, 1983.

<sup>38</sup> Markus interview, December 28, 1983. Markus, who tried unsuccessfully to enlist in 1917, was drafted a year later and went to France. After the war he returned to the Bemidji area, went to work for Vandersluis, and eventually bought into the store, running it with Vandersluis' son until his retirement. The possibility of an ulterior motive was raised by historian David B. Danbom, Northern Great Plains History Conference, September 30, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> *Sentinel*, July 27, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Sentinel*, August 10, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Pioneer*, September 2, 1918, p. 1. The government complaint against Sinclair was reprinted in the *Pioneer*, October 2, 1917, p. 1. Record of how long Sinclair actually served is unavailable. Haywood jumped bail two and one-half years after the trial and fled to Russia; Lens, *Radicalism in America*, 253.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS on p. 66 and 71 (bottom) are from the Beltrami County Historical Society; the portrait on p. 67 is from *Men of Minnesota*, 107 (St. Paul, 1915); the one on p. 71 is from the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. All other illustrations are from the MHS audio-visual library.



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