

**TRACES Center for History and Culture**

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# ***The Kaiser, the Killer, the Klan and the Cow War:***

***The Lasting Legacies of Reaction-Based Social Movements in America's Heartland, 1914-34***

## **Project Summary**

The core of this project consists of local libraries, schools, museums, colleges, civic groups, etc. working in concert to host a series of related programs that explore Iowa's social history, with implications for today. Audiences served are evenly distributed: urban and rural, young and elderly, as well as multi-ethnic. Besides popularizing stories facing extinction, these case studies offer a rich resource to those across the region who seek to build and sustain civic-minded, critically-thinking and caring communities.



From March to July 2019, TRACES Center for History and Culture will tour the Hawkeye State with a four-part program series—*The Kaiser, the Killer, the Klan and the Cow War: The Lasting Legacies of Reaction-Based Social Movements in America's Heartland, 1914-34*. Its dovetailing topics explore milestones in Iowa social history:

1) ***"Kickin' the Kaiser: Anti-German Hysteria in the American Heartland during World War I"*** explores among others

- the vast size and extensive scope of the pre-war German-American community in the Midwest (40-60% in places)
- historical tensions between Anglo (i.e., East and later West Coast) elites and "those Krauts out on the prairies"
- the "flip" that occurred in April 1917 when the US entered the war; anti-German sentiment became "*salonfähig*" (German for "socially acceptable") and exploded overnight with, for some, literally deadly consequences
- the US government's efforts to thwart German-American power, influence and institutions on the home front; and
- the hidden connections between wartime anti-German sentiment and subsequent enactment of Prohibition in 1920

2) ***"The Deadliest Killer Ever: 1918's Flu Pandemic"*** outlines

- suspected and documented origins of that disaster, as well as charts and maps of infection's rates, routes and tolls
- articles, photos and other print-media documentation of the disease and its vast impact; a short related film; and
- Iowans' response to it, both measured & hysterical, effective & useless: "How would we respond today...?"

3) ***"The Klan: The White Cancer"*** presents

- Back Stories behind the three waves of America's terroristic hydra, with emphasis on the Second Wave, which in the 1920s stormed the American Heartland but was less anti-African American than rabidly anti-Catholic and -immigrant; mostly-white Iowa had a surprisingly high rate of Klan membership, yet later it was all but erased from public memory

4) ***"The Cow War: Farmer Rebellions in America's Heartland during the Great Depression"*** illustrates (with photos, documents, maps, realia) related yet differing agrarian rebellions during the early years of the Great Depression that mirrored rural folks' desperate attempts to survive, for example:

- the "Farmers Holiday Association," which strove to forcibly increase farm-commodities prices through blockades
- the "Cow War," when Iowa dairy farmers violently stopped Federal agents from TB-testing their herds; and
- loosely-organized "Penny Auctions," which tried to keep bankrupt farmers on their farms through collective action

They will tour diverse venues (schools, libraries, museums, etc.) across Iowa. An experienced docent, Iowa-born historian **Michael Luick-Thrams** will narrate these inter-related presentations, which conclude with first small-group, then large-group discussions; they also can be presented as part of other events, workshops and community forums to participants ranging in age from [also junior] high school to seniors, as:

The Iowa that existed in 1914 no longer exists—or does it? Sweeping, long-term core changes over the last century in the state's agriculture, economy, politics and its demographics have indelibly altered the ways we live. At the same time, sadly, reactionary impulses continue to find audience among some people—think "Build the Wall," "no Muslims welcome" or other anti-ethnic slogans and sentiment, etc. To truly learn from past lessons, however, such significant stories must have space in popular memory; both seniors and parents, though, lament what they decry as a failure to transfer a sense of history—our cultural legacy—to younger citizens. Separately but even more so as a complementary set, these programs combat collective forgetfulness: They are a vivid warning of

what can happen when civil culture fails to protect individual rights, maintain social cohesion and solve shared ills.

While the failure to transfer social awareness stunts young people's later job skills and hobbles their economic performance, the failure to transfer cultural information erodes their social skills as well as discourages their civic involvement. This program develops cultural competency, which in turn informs how we behave as individuals, how we live together and how we govern ourselves. To grow and change, we have to know who we've been.



Source of the photos, Penny Morse wrote "burning German books in 1918 in front of the Cedar Valley Seminary" in Osage, Iowa.

## Project Narrative

### 1. Organizational Information — Our Mission, History, Activities, Populations Served, Future Plans and Partners:

TRACES Center for History and Culture sees history as encounters among various ways of living, which transcend borders or eras. We invite people to converse about their history and origins, and the history of their regions or nations as well as their families' roles in that history. As we tell stories, we experience history. And, in so far as we live our own stories authentically, we shape history. Out of this awareness arises a responsibility to shape our world justly and peaceably. Committed to universality and accessibility by all, TRACES does not espouse partisan politics or prescribed worldviews.

Volunteers founded TRACES ([www.TRACES.org](http://www.TRACES.org)) in 2001. We built a diverse project out of old letters, photos, dusty journals, yellowed articles, art or other artifacts, and hundreds of recorded interviews. We preserved, then popularized the last "traces" of encounters between Germans and Midwesterners from 1933 and up until 1948. We showed in concrete ways how war affects people on both sides of a conflict.

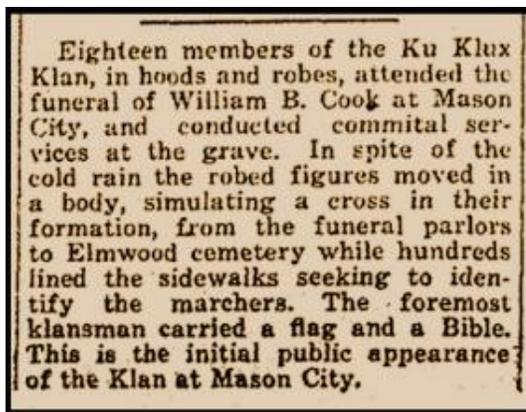
Out of that material, we first created an extensive web site, then multi-media exhibits. Except for celebrities with connections to Iowa such as Anne Frank and the von Trapp Family Singers, we sought obscure biographies. We showcased, for example, the impressions of Iowa's 1936 Olympic team, who in Berlin witnessed Nazism up-close. We exposed Midwesterners who at least initially favored the Nazi project: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh and others. We quoted an Iowa graduate student who was studying in Berlin when Hitler took power: Clear-Lake-native Harold Vedeler watched the torch-light processions and, later, observed the Nürnberg Trials as an agent of the U.S. occupational forces. We

interviewed over 100 POWs: Germans who'd been held in Iowa and Iowans held in Nazi Germany.

Granted IRS 501(c)(3) status two days after "9/11" 2001, TRACES built upon academic research, documentation and interpretation undertaken by Iowa-born, Ph.D.-historian Michael Luick-Thrams. Its WWII-focused projects reflected the times—for one, issues related to war: human rights, propaganda, censorship, incarceration (refugees, POWs, civilian internees), due process... and other moral issues.

Winning a Humanities Iowa "outstanding project" award in 2003, TRACES proved singularly successful in reaching its goals. We made a precious legacy accessible to people in all corners of the Midwest—over 4,000 communities in 25 states: all combined, more than a third of a million people. We published 13 books, read by tens of thousands; similar numbers utilized our web site. The overall project reflects TRACES' enduring mission as embodied in its logo "We bring history to life," in that we make history relevant to all audiences—from students to educators, from youth to seniors, hobby historians to academics, professionals to laborers, and from farmers to corporate executives. Particularly gratifying, veterans from both sides of WWII have been able to understand their fading experiences anew, as have one-time refugees and internees; the widows and descendants of such imprisoned players of that war, as well as countless others, have expressed deep gratitude for what we manage to do, on little money.

Now that the generation that lived WWII is mostly gone, however, TRACES is shifting its focus from preserving "traces" of World War II to issues of civic life: What have been our strengths and weaknesses over time as communities; what resources do we possess at present; what futures are open to us—solo and as a society—as we face numerous trials and grope our way forward? In response to current shared challenges, TRACES focuses on issues of family history juxtaposed to that of communities as a fulcrum for conscious social change. Thus, TRACES' newest project, *The Kaiser, the Klan and the Cow War*, considers the lessons of the past as it ponders potentials for the future. As we revive and publicize mostly-forgotten stories from and about Iowa, we find keys to better understanding who we are, how we became who we are, and who we might yet become as families, as communities, and as a people—as Iowans, as Midwesterners, as Americans and as global citizens. This is now TRACES' sole mission.



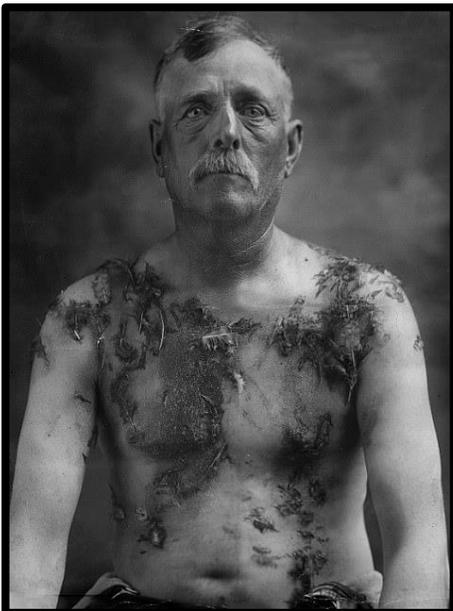
*preparing a Ku Klux Klan parade in Mason City, Iowa—mid 1920s; article about a funeral procession in the same town, same era*

To craft such a comprehensive, ambitious project, TRACES has launched networked collaboration with would-be partners, including: the state genealogical societies, statewide AARPs, retired school personnel associations, local Lifelong-Learning institutes, plus local hosts; see our website for fuller lists. We also partner with local historical and genealogical societies, community libraries and area museums.

## 2. Project Description — Needs or Problems It Addresses, Activities Planned, Project Timeline and Key Staff:

TRACES' newest project, *The Kaiser, the Killer, the Klan and the Cow War*, offers Iowans unique programming that is a starting point for community discussion, supported by a mix of interactive activities, and local engagement: e.g., senior citizens speak in schools after a program; evening public forums can conclude a community's program experience; follow-up offerings assure lasting impact after the speaker departs—as do social media, on-line teaching materials available to educators, and related books. It strengthens civic culture, accentuates lasting community connections and reinforces regional identity. Knowledge of the past sheds insight about the present and imparts wisdom for the future.

As of September 2018, an initial programming series will tour the Upper Midwest for the first time. The pervasive goal guiding *Kaiser/Killer/Klan/Cow War* is that visitors leave it or related programming with a fuller, clearer sense of how our past cast the present, and how lessons learned from previous successes or mistakes might effectively inform future choices. Above all, that exploration starts with family and community histories, which are both implicit as well as explicit parts of these fading stories. It is our programming's inquiring nature that has led Humanities Iowa and Illinois Humanities to award underwriting grants to support presenting this series in their states; a Humanities Nebraska grant is still under review, but we are confident in our chances to secure that funding, as we've found keen partners.



*Johan Meints, a German-American farmer near Luverne/MN, tarred and feathered in August 1918 for allegedly not buying "enough" Liberty bonds: He later took his assailants to court—and lost, as "treasonous."*



*children inspecting anti-German sign posted at an entry to the Chicago suburb of Edison Park/IL, after the US entered World War I in April 1917*

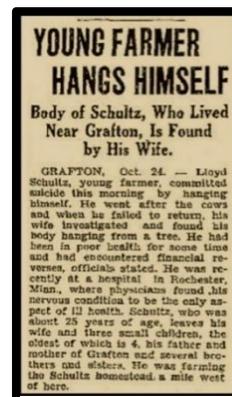
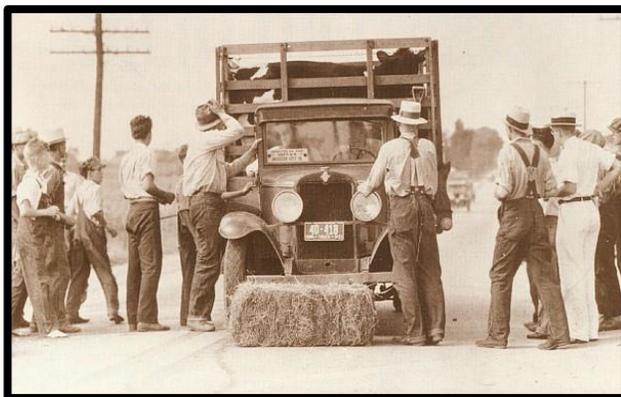
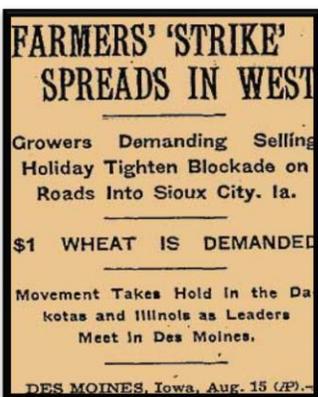
Most people aren't trained historians. Still, Iowans care deeply about their families, friends and communities. By attending programs in this series, they take with them empowering tools—knowledge and resources to use as they form anchored opinions and well-founded stands in the future. **about the speaker:** Having grown up on his family's Century Farm in Northcentral Iowa, **Michael Luick-Thrams** (Ph.D. 1997, awarded by Humboldt Universität in Berlin) divides his time between Germany and the American Heartland, as he serves as executive director of a non-profit, educational organization in each country—Spuren e.V. ([www.de.TRACES.org](http://www.de.TRACES.org)) & TRACES ([www.roots.TRACES.org](http://www.roots.TRACES.org)); both provide social-history-based public programming to educational and cultural institutions of various kinds. He is the recent author of a genealogically-based Midwest social history, *Oceans of Darkness*,

*Oceans of Light—a Pentalogy: Our Troubles and Treasures in the New World.* (For details, see <http://roots.traces.org/michael-luick-thrams> or find the author’s complete works at [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com).)

TRACES offers *pre-visit* activities for a program in a given community, as well as *post-visit* ones. We encourage hosts to offer follow-up public forums. TRACES’ social-media portals (Facebook, blog) provide a platform for those who wish additional contact. The series also will be available in catalog form, since many prefer print media to electronic; through it, all ages can access its contents long after a program.

### **3. Project Evaluation — Expected Outcomes and Methods to Evaluate “Successful” Results:**

For our organization, “success” looks like this: lowans of all ages attend our programming, view our catalog, attend a related workshops or an intergenerational (typically, evening) community forum. “Success” includes the sale of narrative-history books by regional authors about their lives in the Midwest or by TRACES, about any of the numerous topics which we’ve previously featured (German or Iowa POWs in either country, refugees at Scattergood Hostel near Iowa City, Anne Frank’s Iowa penpal, etc.). “Success” involves spontaneous as well as facilitated conversations between docents or community members; it includes follow-up exchange via social media or other forms. We will have been “successful” if after a given visit to a community, it’s obvious that a relatively large number of residents have considered the story of reaction-based social movements in the Midwest, and subsequent discussion to consider our state’s current issues. Ultimately, TRACES strives so that through the resources we offer them, the people we serve better understand who we are, how we became who we are, and who we might yet become as families, as communities, as a people... and as lowans.



*photo: Webster County (Iowa) farmers block other farmers’ taking goods to market in order to force commodities prices up*

As TRACES has done after all past programming, we will review evaluation forms from program hosts and participants, received both during a given visit (submitted directly) and post-visit, emailed. We integrate all grading (we use a point system; we can provide evaluation-form templates for both hosts and participants) as well as consider all written-out comments. We invite participant feedback during an exhibit showing or program, as well as that from hosts at short “debriefing” sessions as we close a program or end a forum. We also have asked a professional historian, Matthew Schaefer of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch (Iowa), to serve as an external evaluator. Other trained individuals will evaluate the effectiveness of both our physical resources (the Power Point presentations, videos, catalog, etc.) and intangible programming throughout. ***See you at the program!***