Photo depicts Bethany College’s SATC, which ultimately included fifty-two men. Courtesy of Archives and Heritage Center, Bethany College.
Bethany College professors Gustavus A. Peterson, Walter Petersen, and Emil Deere quarreled over what ideals defined Americanism during a faculty-lounge fracas engendered by U.S. participation in World War I. G. A. Peterson, a socialist, defended freedom of speech and of the press against wartime attacks by the U.S. government. Deere, an officer in the Home Guard, called such talk “treason,” while Walter Petersen, who spoke openly in support of Germany prior to American intervention in 1917, came to the defense of his colleague G. A. Peterson by quoting the U.S. Constitution’s definition of treason. A scuffle ensued that made its way through the rumor mill to the local community, the statewide press, and eventually the U.S. attorney in Kansas City. At issue was the question of what was the proper course for an American during the war? Dispute over the war and its relationship with being American was not confined to the ivory tower; the predominantly first- and second-generation Swedes of Lindsborg, whose political loyalties rested solidly with the Republican Party despite a significant minority of socialists, wrestled with questions of loyalty and nationalism too.

Domestic studies of loyalty during World War I often focus particularly on the repression of German Americans by the government and private citizens rather than on how individuals within communities struggled with competing convictions to define their own Americanness in the hypernationalistic environment of war.1 In Kansas, numerous studies demonstrate anti-German action around the state by state or local officials or vigilantes.2 Little research exists on how

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non-German ethnic groups in Kansas, such as the Swedes, were affected by the war and the ways in which these Swedes determined their identities when faced during the war with public pressure to conform, ethnic pride, decreasing Swedish homogeneity in the community, and contemporary American political commitments accompanied by persistent Americanization.

Prior to American involvement in the war, many of the Lindsborg Swedes conformed to patterns for Swedish immigrants found elsewhere in the United States. Rural conservatism, Lutheranism, and ethnic pride combined to create an ideology that preferred isolationism and favored Germany as not only the birthplace of Lutheranism but also a European defender against the Catholic Church and Sweden’s historical enemy Russia. Once the United States declared war on the Central Powers on April 6, 1917, some of these people ardently supported the war effort, while others did so with less enthusiasm. Still others—of Swedish descent or otherwise—persisted in opposing the war and equated their dissent with the purist form of Americanism. What emerges is a reluctant nationalism among the people of Lindsborg, where attitudes regarding the war that initially were openly discussed and diverse gave way only grudgingly to tepid support because such conformity challenged ideals inherited from their homeland that defined their new home.

The Swedish Lutherans who founded Lindsborg in 1869 looked for opportunity and a refuge where they could practice their particular brand of pietistic Lutheranism, free from the control of the state church in Sweden. This independent streak fit well with the republicanism of their new American homeland, an ideology that historian H. Arnold Barton identified as appealing to Swedish immigrants. Barton noted that these Swedes valued the democratic franchise, freedom, and the availability of land, leading them to become ardent followers of the Republican Party into the twentieth century. Reverend Dr. Ernst Pihlblad, who served as Bethany College president from 1905 to 1941, was a frequent correspondent with Arthur Capper, the progressive Republican governor from 1905 to 1941, was a frequent correspondent with Arthur Capper, the progressive Republican gover-

5. Ibid., 119.
world gone mad,” while an August 28 article from New York’s Staat Zeitung called for peace. The inclusion of the latter article from the pen of Herman Ridder, editor of the largest German-language newspaper in the nation, who was implicated a year later in a plot to spread German propaganda in the United States, indicated that LNLR not only promoted peace but lacked anti-German animus in 1914.8

The Swedish-language Lindsborgs-Posten, however, did assign war blame—to Russia. The editor of that paper surmised that the American public misunderstood German intentions and that the Germans—a culture that he associated with religious freedom—were fighting a defensive struggle against the Russians, who were bent on world supremacy for Slavic peoples.9 Given that this paper was read by those who maintained a cultural link to Sweden through language, as opposed to more assimilated immigrants who read the English-language paper, this fingerling of the Russians should not be a surprise. Swedes historically saw Russia as a nemesis, dating back to at least 1809, when Sweden lost Finland to Russia, and more recently to the Russification of Finland that had begun in 1899. The Posten took great interest in Russian activity in the Baltic states and Finland for the remainder of the war, as did the people of Sweden, who were wary of Russian ambition; thus, Sweden remained neutral for the entirety of the war. Like Sweden, the Posten applauded President Woodrow Wilson’s call for neutrality a week later despite Sweden’s historic rivalry with Russia and a belief in the Slavic design for world hegemony.10

Not only did the city’s two weekly papers agree on American neutrality as a proper course of action, they increasingly took an ambivalent view toward the war and did not demonstrate anti-German bias. Throughout 1914, both papers devoted significant space to war coverage. By 1915, however, that coverage became scarce. In fact, neither paper mentioned the Lusitania disaster save for a three-paragraph column on page 5 of the LNLR two weeks after the attack that reported that prominent Swedish intellectuals had condemned the war policies of Germany that had led to the sinking of the passenger liner. Although lack of war coverage showed ambivalence about the carnage a world away, the papers printed stories that conveyed a certain amount of sympathy for Germany. At the “request of several subscribers,” the LNLR reprinted a story from the Boston Sunday Globe titled “Germans to a Man Support Kaiser,” which portrayed German nationalism in a positive light.11 The city’s lack of anti-German sentiment also appeared at Bethany College, which was a vital part of the community, as it educated many of the young people of Lindsborg and its student body was made up primarily of Swedes from around the area. During the summer of 1915, the college hired Walther Pfitzner, a German national, as a piano instructor. The LNLR reported on the front page that Pfitzner had trained at the Royal University at Leipzig, boasted of his superb performances in Berlin and Bremen, and described him as “a man of the highest culture and attainments.” Likewise, the college newspaper, the Bethany Messenger, praised Pfitzner’s abilities—and those of his musically inclined wife—and wrote that the school was “very fortunate in securing his services.”12


Perhaps American neutrality in the war explains the indifference to all things German in Lindsborg as 1915 came to a close, but indifference was not shared across the rest of the United States. Historian Michael S. Neiberg wrote that Americans underwent an “evolution . . . from impartiality or even indifference in 1914 to an uneasy neutrality in 1915 and 1916 to a determination in 1917.”

Events in 1915 such as the sinking of the *Lusitania*, various acts of German sabotage within the United States, and the sinking of the *Arabic* in August moved most Americans to “uneasy neutrality” due to German provocation. It became more difficult to separate the “two Germanys”: the highly cultured German people who were to be celebrated and the autocratic German government that was to be despised. In 1915 many Americans responded angrily to President Wilson’s “too proud to fight” remark after the sinking of the *Lusitania* and participated in the preparedness campaign that received the loud support of former president Theodore Roosevelt, a favorite in heavily Republican Lindsborg. Yet the people of Lindsborg continued to support neutrality and showed no signs of anti-German sentiment. Their impartiality and indifference persisted. Lindsborgers welcomed Pfitzner, largely ignored German submarine warfare (the *Posten* mentioned the sinking of the *Arabic* in a list of war events for the week), and pursued preparedness only as a debate topic by the Bethany Civic League in January 1916. The people of Lindsborg seemed more reluctant than other Americans to change their views regarding the war.

International events in early 1917, such as the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the revelation of the Zimmerman Telegram, pushed the United States to the precipice of war, resulting in patriotic demonstrations in Lindsborg that had previously been uncommon. On April 1, the first Sunday of Holy Week, the Bethany chorus erupted in the strains of “America” while performers unfurled an American flag before an audience of three thousand people as part of the annual Messiah festival. The outward display of patriotism at a performance of a German composer’s work must have been stirring to all in attendance, as they clung to their view of “two Germanys” while professing their love for America. Equally interesting was how the Topeka press reported the event: “Among those who cheered were probably 2,000 of Swedish descent, many of whom announced their allegiance to the United States.”


When the United States declared war on the Central Powers on April 6, 1917, the question of identity became an easy one for many people in Lindsborg. Their nationalistic exuberance for all things American gushed forth. Young men registered for Selective Service, Red Cross fund-raisers became ubiquitous, Liberty bond drives took on greater importance, food conservation had patriotic implications, and people viewed anything that hinted of German culture with increasing suspicion. The *LNLR* reported with some satisfaction that Bethany College had rejected “Kaiser Kultur” because books in French suddenly outcirculated those in German, which previously had not been the case at the Lutheran college.  

Nothing defined American nationalism in Lindsborg better than the consternation expressed by the editor of the *LNLR* over an intended compliment by a Mulvane newspaper editor regarding the “hyphenates” in Lindsborg enlisting for military service. The editor of the *LNLR* did not want the people of his town “handicapped with a hyphen” when all Americans were of immigrant stock. The Swedes of Lindsborg recognized only “one country and one flag,” and he wanted it known that for the townspeople, “American is their first and final choice.” Clearly, Americanism was strong in Lindsborg.

Nationalistic fervor swept Lindsborg after the U.S. declaration of war, but with it came an end to the toleration, and even celebration, of German culture that had suffused Lindsborg prior to April 1917. Pfitzner, the German-born piano instructor who had arrived on campus two years earlier to much fanfare, announced his resignation from Bethany College early in 1917. The *Bethany Messenger* reported that his and his American-born wife’s departure for a school in South Dakota happened because they had received a lucrative offer from their new employer. The student newspaper described their work at the college as “very satisfactory” and added that “many will regret their departure.” Such lukewarm commentary—especially when compared to the effusive praise heaped upon them at their arrival and after subsequent performances—indicated a possible growing anti-German mentality at the college and around Lindsborg in the months before the United States formally entered the war. Anti-German sentiment exploded after April 6, 1917, and affected the Pfitzners before they left Kansas.

Bethany College president Ernst Pihlblad wrote in a memorandum that was probably sent to the McPherson County attorney that besides being a German citizen, Pfitzner was a reservist in the German army and thus of questionable loyalty. The piano instructor, Pihlblad wrote, had been unable to return to Germany to fulfill his reservist obligations, and the German embassy in Washington, D.C., had instructed him to remain where he was. Pihlblad further described Pfitzner’s political views prior to April 1917 as decidedly “Pro-German” and said that both of the Pfitzners “were in the custom of speaking contemptuously about things American.” The college president wrote that the Pfitzners had remained quiet about their pro-German feelings since April 6, but the feeling around town was that their attitudes “remain unchanged,” which did not sit well with many. To illustrate this point, Pihlblad described how Mrs. Pfitzner had telephoned him on the morning of a scheduled performance in the annual festival in early April to say that the couple did not want to perform due to threatened student demonstrations. After some “parlaying,” Pihlblad had convinced the couple to perform—without incident—but at the event, the “feelings were unfriendly.” The Pfitzners had arrived on campus in 1915 as celebrities but left two years later under a cloud of suspicion.

While many Lindsborgers eagerly embraced the nationalistic spirit pervading the nation in the spring of 1917, the Pfitzners refused to conform and were ostracized as a result. They were by no means the only people in Lindsborg who faced scrutiny, much of it unknown to them. Both the McPherson County attorney and the U.S. attorney in Kansas City asked Pihlblad about loyalty concerns at Bethany College and in Lindsborg. Specifically, these attorneys worried about a strong socialist antiwar presence in Lindsborg and German nationals on the college faculty. Pihlblad’s responses showed explicit concern for protecting the reputation of the college and community, issues that also worried town leaders prior to Pihlblad’s interaction with law enforcement.

The desire to demonstrate a unified spirit of American nationalism in the face of rumors of disloyalty helps explain why the *LNLR* responded defensively to the “hyphenate” comment from Mulvane and why the Mulvane


Reluctant Nationalism
The veracity of public pronouncements of loyalty in the local press flew in the face of truth, as other media outlets and private correspondence revealed discord. On June 1, as part of his correspondence with the U.S. attorney’s office in Kansas City that also detailed the background and whereabouts of Pfitzner, President Pihlblad wrote to inform the government of a “clique of socialists,” numbering around fifty, that had recently been about town organizing resistance to Selective Service registration scheduled for June 5. Pihlblad feared the “disrepute” such action by the socialists might bring to the city and college and hoped that “decisive action on the part of the authorities” might “cool the ardor of these men.”21 Both the Selective Service registration and the patriotic demonstration occurred without significant difficulty, but support for the war effort was not as pervasive as the LNLR had earlier reported. A McPherson paper recounted great patriotic spirit in Lindsborg, and the “anti-draft element” who had promised to raise a ruckus instead only distributed socialist literature “received from Chicago”—as if to indicate that this type of disloyalty was not homegrown—from their cars. Locals who were “out of sympathy were seen, but they made no disturbance.”22 Yet an antiwar element clearly existed in Lindsborg.

The pages of the LNLR continually avowed the unanimity of loyalty among the citizens of Lindsborg, but despite its best efforts to put up a front of loyalty for outside readers, the paper consistently revealed an atmosphere of dissent in the town. In a published letter from a recent recruit, Carl W. Hawkinson thanked the “GOOD citizens” and “LOYAL citizens” of the town for a nice send-off, suggesting that not everyone fit into those categories. Methodist preacher Dr. Carl Petrus Eklund wrote that “slackers . . . who spout their treason on our streets” ought of “disloyalty and near treason of a bunch of men” within the city borders of its neighbor to the east. The LNLR dismissed such rumors, referring to those who believed unpatriotic behavior was rampant in Lindsborg as “boobs.” The paper cited a June 5 patriotic demonstration attended by 1,500 people that raised $75 for Company D of the National Guard as evidence of the town’s unwavering loyalty.20

Reverend Dr. Ernst F. Pihlblad, born in Kansas City, Missouri, to Swedish-born parents, was a Bethany College professor before serving as president from 1905 to 1941. Pihlblad strove to protect the college and surrounding Lindsborg from any insinuation of disloyalty or socialist sympathies during World War I. Courtesy of Archives and Heritage Center, Bethany College.

21. Ernst Pihlblad to Fred Robertson, June 1, 1917, box 1917, folder P-S, Pihlblad Papers.
to join the Kaiser in Germany. The following week, Eklund wrote that “Lindsborg is slowly awakening toward patriotism and loyalty” in a column describing how his parents were suffering in Sweden because of the war. An article on a YMCA fund drive stated that “very few refusals were encountered,” yet refusals existed. In April 1918 the *LNLR* reported that McPherson County as a whole had raised only half the amount of money raised in nearby Marion County in the Baby Bond and Thrift Stamp campaigns. The Home Guard—a military-style organization created to protect communities while men of the National Guard served overseas—had fewer than forty members, which annoyed the writer because smaller towns had companies of 150 men. Taken together, these anecdotes show a persistent and significant amount of apathy and even open hostility toward the war effort.

But what was at the root of this dissent? Based on his correspondence with the U.S. attorney’s office, Pihlblad blamed socialists. Lindsborg had a strong socialist presence. In the 1916 presidential election, Socialist Party candidate Allan Benson received eighty-seven votes (just over 9 percent) in Lindsborg, double the percentage that he received nationally and considerably more than the thirty-seven votes he received throughout the rest of McPherson County. A year earlier, a “large crowd” had heard state socialist organizer Thomas L. Buie speak at the Wonderland Theatre, where the correspondent noted that this speaker focused on improving society rather than lashing out at political opponents, indicating that more vitriolic socialists may have made appearances too.

Being a socialist did not necessarily mean being anti-war, and even if a socialist stood against militarism, this stance was not necessarily un-American. Nationally, the Socialist Party famously split on the war issue, which might also have occurred among the socialists of Lindsborg. At least one person made the case that socialism should not automatically be equated with disloyalty. P. E. Zimmerman, the local Harley-Davidson and bicycle dealer, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Topeka Daily Capital* defending Lindsborg’s patriotism and the part that socialists played in it. Zimmerman wrote that a socialist had organized the June 5 patriotic demonstration, proving that not only was Lindsborg not a “veritable hotbed of anti-war and anti-conscription Socialists” but socialists played an important part in rousing patriotic fervor in the city. He asked rhetorically, “Why drag the Socialists in or confuse them with an entirely different breed of insects, making a comparison which is odious to Lindsborg and patriotic Socialists?” The “insects” Zimmerman was probably thinking of were the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Nonpartisan League, organizations that he skewered in speaking engagements across the state by claiming they were collaborating with Germany. Pihlblad, too, criticized the IWW for its “subversive doctrines” that slowed the “amalgamation” of foreigners into American culture.

On the political left, much disagreement existed among and within the various parties, including debate over how to pursue the war effort. In the crucible of war, it became all too easy for government officials—both local and national—to smear political outliers as antiwar and thus un-American. But those with the courage to take unpopular stands during wartime believed they expressed a purer form of Americanism that transcended blind loyalty.

Gustavus A. Peterson, professor of Swedish language and literature at Bethany College, was one of the socialists whose Americanism was defined by civil liberties rather than unquestioning conformity. On November 5, 1917, chapel exercises included a presentation by students Miss Cleveland and Mr. Martin, whose purpose was to raise money for the YMCA fund. They had just returned from a state YMCA meeting in Topeka and recounted rather graphic stories about the plight of the armies at the front as a means of raising more money by tapping into raw emotion. The students succeeded in raising around $1,600 in thirty minutes. At the end of the chapel meeting, Peterson commented, “I don’t believe the government wants people to tell such things,” referring to the graphic depictions of the front, because “a paper had been barred for expressing such things.” Peterson was referring to

socialist newspapers that had recently lost their access to the postal service because their content was deemed seditious by the government. For the professor, this loss of freedom of speech and of the press threatened American democracy and was not to be ignored. What ensued cast both Bethany College and Lindsborg under a denser cloud of suspicion, drew the attention of federal authorities, and raised the question of what loyalty actually meant.

Peterson’s comment about freedom of speech rankled at least two faculty members who questioned the professor’s loyalty, leading to a physical altercation in the faculty lounge. According to affidavits by the participants, written at the request of President Pihlblad and the U.S. attorney, Peterson’s statement about the press elicited strong condemnation from three of the four Bethany College faculty members who heard it: Deere, P. H. Pearson of the English department, and J. E. Welin of the chemistry and physics department. Welin wrote that he “resented” Peterson’s comment because he believed that the socialist periodicals had been justly barred from using the mail because they covered “vastly graver things” than the realistic portrayal of the war presented by the students in the chapel meeting. Deere and Pearson went further, charging Peterson with “treason” for supporting periodicals that the U.S. government deemed disloyal and thus barred from using the mail. Walter Petersen, professor of Greek, Latin, and psychology and the fifth person in the room, defended G. A. Peterson by saying that the U.S. Constitution defined treason as giving aid and comfort to the enemy, which he argued had not occurred in Peterson’s remark. An exchange occurred over the definition of “comfort,” leading to threats of “ruffianism” by Deere and Pearson, who subsequently rushed Walter Petersen with “clenched fists,” only to be intercepted by Welin and G. A. Peterson before any blows could be landed.29

That Deere and Pearson attacked Walter Petersen “as if by previous agreement,” according to Walter Petersen’s account, demonstrated anti-German passion that infused the nationalism brought on by the U.S. entry into the war.30 G. A. Peterson made the original statement deemed disloyal by Deere and Pearson, yet they attacked Walter Petersen, who by all accounts had simply quoted the U.S. Constitution. Walter Petersen was of German ancestry (although born in the United States), had studied in Germany, and had vociferously defended German actions during the war prior to April 1917. Peterson wrote in a statement to the Bethany board that before the U.S. entry into the war, Walter Petersen had repeatedly made statements “abusive of President Wilson,” showed “contempt at America’s attitude,” and “justified everything the Germans did,” leading Pearson and others to use “forceful language” to express their resentment. It further infuriated Pearson that Walter Peterson resorted to “sneers” to express his contempt about the war because the present political climate made it impossible for him to express his thoughts.31 It seemed, then, that Pearson and probably Deere were responding to three years of pent-up frustration with Walter Petersen’s pro-German rhetoric more than anything else and took the opportunity to impose Americanism on the recalcitrant professor.

In a strange turn of events, it was Pearson—not G. A. Peterson or Walter Petersen—who found himself run out of Bethany College for disloyalty, but to the college rather than the country. In spring 1918 a small group of senior students demanded Pearson’s resignation, essentially for being a lousy professor. Pearson wrote in a letter to board president E. P. Olson that he had “incurred the ill will” of Walter Petersen, who was the “Guardian” of the senior

class of 1918. He further argued that the students were being manipulated by Petersen and that the charges of poor performance in the classroom were mere subterfuge. Pearson was probably right, but in a way he did not yet fully understand. A hearing was called before the board, and it became apparent that Pearson was being run out of the college for allegedly leaking information to the press about the scuffle in the faculty lounge. The minutes of the board meeting reveal that after a few cursory questions about teaching, several board members commented that “we do not wish to hear anything about your work” and then bombarded Pearson with questions about contacting the Kansas City press about the faculty-room incident; affiliations with the government or local groups interested in loyalty issues; and why he had not responded to President Pihlblad’s request to provide an affidavit, as the other involved faculty members had done. Pearson’s failure to provide his account indicated to one board member that the English professor’s “own skirts are not clear,” suggesting that Pearson was in fact the source of the leak. To remove any doubt that Pearson’s alleged misdeeds were not due to teaching issues, one board member said that “the whole trouble seemed to be due to [the] political (Loyalty) fight that had been going on at Bethany during the last year.” Given that the veteran professor was forced to resign a year later after a leave of absence, board members left the meeting convinced that Pearson had revealed information to the press that had cast Bethany College in a negative light and that his disloyalty to the college trumped any work he was doing to expose disloyalty to the country. As one board member put it, “Prof. Pearson had full liberty to denounce the pro-Germans in his public and private utterances, but that if he had charges of that kind against a teacher of Bethany he should make them to the Board of that Institution.”

32. Ibid.

Swedish immigrants arrived in the United States with a strong sense of Sweden’s historic relationships with German culture and Russian aggression. President Wilson’s pursuit of neutrality suited Lindsborgers; however, when the nation declared war, they, too, expressed a nationalist support. Still, rumors of disloyalty resulted in affirmative public statements such as this loyalty pledge issued by the Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod in 1918.

Resolution adopted by the Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod, April 12, 1918.

The Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod, in annual session assembled, here-with re-affirms its unswerving loyalty to our country, to its Government and to the vigorous prosecution of the present war to a successful issue for the purpose of securing civil, religious and commercial liberty to the world. It pledges itself to do its duty in every way and prays divine guidance for the President of the United States and for all associated with him in the conduct of the affairs of state.

Swedish immigrants arrived in the United States with a strong sense of Sweden’s historic relationships with German culture and Russian aggression. President Wilson’s pursuit of neutrality suited Lindsborgers; however, when the nation declared war, they, too, expressed a nationalist support. Still, rumors of disloyalty resulted in affirmative public statements such as this loyalty pledge issued by the Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod in 1918. Courtesy of Archives and Heritage Center, Bethany College.

Pihlblad’s desire to protect the college revealed itself further in his defense of G. A. Peterson and Walter
Petersen to the U.S. attorney. Pihlblad wrote that G. A. Peterson’s socialism did not make him disloyal to the country. Pihlblad cited a story that he had jokingly called G. A. Peterson pro-German to his face, and the professor had resented the descriptor because he had “no sympathy for the German cause” owing to Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality. It seemed that his socialism made him more antiwar than pro-German, and thus, his loyalty to the country was not suspect. Similarly, Pihlblad defended Walter Petersen’s loyalty to the country by arguing that despite the professor’s pro-German rhetoric prior to April 1917, ever since the U.S. entry into the war, the professor had been on his best behavior, in part because Pihlblad had intervened early on to demand conformity from his faculty. The president introduced these defenses in his report by recounting the story of the faculty-room row without mentioning the physical altercation and reassured the U.S. attorney that a professor with “enthusiastic Americanship” vouched for the patriotism of all involved.34 That “enthusiastic” professor was probably Welin, whose account of the incident described the statements made as in no way “disloyal, unpatriotic, or traitorous” and noted that in fact, G. A. Peterson and Walter Petersen had made donations of $10 and $15, respectively, to the YMCA fund drive from which the altercation had begun. More than anything, Pihlblad sought to protect the reputation of the college (he closed the letter by describing how everyone at Bethany did their “bit” for the war, including young men enlisting), which meant protecting G. A. Peterson and Walter Petersen, whose terminations would only have worsened the reputation of the college and Lindsborg.35 For Pihlblad, alerting authorities to the specter of socialism was one thing in town and quite another on campus. Pearson’s quiet termination for allegedly spreading the rumor of disloyalty served to highlight the point that loyalty to the college trumped all else. After all, the problem with the stories in the state press was how they portrayed Bethany more than their veracity.

Besides working for Bethany College, Pihlblad, Pearson, and G. A. Peterson shared something else—Swedish heritage. Their varied conceptions of loyalty during the faculty-lounge dispute were shared by other Swedes around the community. People of Swedish heritage publicly professed their allegiance to the United States, although an undercurrent of skepticism about the war persisted. The Posten, which openly blamed Russia for the war in 1914, changed its message after April 1917. The paper ceased being a Lindsborg weekly in 1916 and became the organ of the Kansas Conference of the Augustana Synod. The new format meant the paper covered topics related to the church on a regional basis but still spoke about general attitudes held by Swedish Lutherans in the Midwest. One columnist, David Nyvall of North Park College in Chicago, wrote about how the violent tactics of the German government—not the German people or culture—deserved blame for the atroc-

Intergroup tensions arose over not just loyalty, but also patriotism and military service. Lindsborg Swedes grew at odds with Mennonites who also lived in McPherson County. The pacifist Mennonites were given draft exemptions, which increased the enlistment quota burden on non-Mennonites. Both groups shared the experience of having their loyalty questioned, as exemplified in this public affirmation in the Topeka Journal, dated September 12, 1917.
ities being committed across the Atlantic. His comment echoed the thoughts of President Wilson in his war message to Congress and continued the “two Germanys” idea from early in the war. Further, Nyvall compared the United States being dragged into the Great War to President Lincoln reluctantly leading the Union against Confederate aggression.36 In both cases, war was the last resort in epochal fights for human liberty. Dr. G. A. Brandelle of Denver asserted that Swedish immigrants were loyal to their new homeland above all else and that Swedes in America would take up arms against their former countrymen should Sweden enter the war on the side of the Central Powers. Still, those comments came after a few paragraphs illustrating the futility and wastefulness of war, thus making the case for Swedish American loyalty less than enthusiastic.37 All the articles expressed sympathy with the course of action taken by the United States, but they were more circumspect than the jingoism found in other periodicals across the nation at the time.

It was not only in the pages of the Posten that Swedish heritage and Lutheranism proved problematic in the hypernationalistic atmosphere of 1917 and 1918. In fall 1917 President Pihlblad wrote the Swedish filmmaker Axel Palmgren that showing his Swedish travel films in Lindsborg would not be “profitable” for either party because it might place Bethany College in an “unfavorable light” due to “strained conditions between Sweden and America.”38 Pihlblad worried that Swedish neutrality during the war aroused questions of loyalty about the community of predominantly Swedish immigrants, and the films would only fuel that concern. Palmgren’s films, while designed to promote tourism in Sweden after the war, may have had a political element that worried Pihlblad. The Brainerd Daily Dispatch in Minnesota reported in February 1917 that Palmgren, the editor of the conservative Stockholm Dagblad, had shared stories of the “terrible results of the European War” along with showing films of the Swedish countryside.39 If Pihlblad knew of this commentary, he certainly sought to protect Bethany College and the community by ensuring that Palmgren did not visit, thus preventing another episode of alleged disloyalty for press outlets around the state to fixate upon.

The Swedish Lutherans of Lindsborg sought other ways of maintaining the appearance of loyalty. At the April 1918 meeting of the Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod in Lindsborg, those assembled crafted a statement that was telegraphed to President Wilson expressing their loyalty and support for the war effort. An image of the statement, written in English and adorned with a waving American flag, appeared in the published minutes of the meeting. Wilson responded later with a message of thanks for the continued support of Swedish Lutherans in America.40 Such action on the part of the synod happened for good reason. As Pihlblad explained in a private letter to Rev. Adolf Hult of Moline, Illinois, American Lutherans might be creating a “self-imposed martyrdom” because of vociferous condemnation of the American war effort from certain quarters.41 Men such as Pihlblad and Hult backed American involvement in the war, but they also knew many of their compatriots in the Swedish American Lutheran Church did not or were lackluster in their support. They worked hard to maintain a facade of overwhelming loyalty within their communities to protect their churches, colleges, and even their own livelihoods, but a thoroughgoing nationalistic spirit came reluctantly, if at all, to many in Lindsborg.

City leaders tried to promote the area’s patriotism while hiding the simmering dissent by highlighting men who enlisted in the military or dutifully accepted their conscription. Such men included Emil Pinkall, a second-generation German immigrant and, ironically, the only man from Lindsborg to die in action during the war. The LNLR recorded the conscription of these men with patriotic flare, covered their journey out of town to Camp Funston for training, and printed letters that they sent to loved ones at home. The newspaper reported that Pinkall left for Camp Funston on October 4, 1917, and reported his death just over one year later, when he was shot in the right leg at the Battle of St. Mihiel and died two days later in a French hospital from complications.42 Pinkall’s thoughts on being a drafted soldier in the American army

38. Ernst Pihlblad to Axel Palmgren, September 11, 1917, box 1917, folder P–S, Pihlblad Papers.
42. “Camp Funston Calls Again,” LNLR, October 5, 1917; “First Lindsborg Boy to Make the Supreme Sacrifice on the Battlefield of
were not recorded, but letters printed in the LNLR and the Messenger indicated that these men generally felt a great sense of national pride regarding their service, as was common around the country.

Still, a patriotic attitude toward wartime sacrifice was not universal among men joining the military. When Selective Service began in the summer of 1917, Lindsborg residents resented the draft exemption of Mennonites in the southern part of McPherson County because it meant men in the northern part of the county had to fill a greater percentage of the quota for the county. Lindsborg draftees suggested that the “original quota” for the county be reduced on account of the exempted men, thereby lessening the total number of conscripted men from the county. Their anger resulted not from the perceived cowardice or lack of patriotism of the pacifist Mennonites but from the increased likelihood of military service for the Lindsborg men.43 Had enthusiasm for the war been rampant in Lindsborg, the increased chance of being selected for service would have been a virtue rather than a vice.

While some young men hoped the Selective Service process would fail to yield their name, others enlisted for service prior to the draft. However, even these acts of patriotic service exposed tension within the city. The brothers Homer and Willard Larson enlisted in the military in spring 1917 and were to leave for Fort Sill in September. Dr. Walter Petersen as class guardian toasted the men at a campus ceremony. He praised the “true patriotism” of the boys and contrasted their “silent patriotism of deeds, which involves the complete sacrifice of giving one’s all, to the sham patriotism of loud words in which the war-propagandist indulges with the view of urging others to enlist in order that he himself may be materially profited thereby.”44 For Walter Petersen, deeds mattered, whether enlisting for service, defending free speech, or dissenting in a free society; these qualities de-


44. “Goodbye Senior Soldiers!” Bethany Messenger, September 29, 1917.
fined true Americanism. He had little tolerance for unquestioning loyalty and blind deference to the jingoistic shouts coming from self-appointed patriots. A few months after toasting the Larson brothers, Walter Peterson found himself embroiled in the faculty-room scuffle, and one wonders what he thought of the actions of the Bethany administration regarding Professor Pearson and himself. Did the actions of college administrators in protecting the institution’s reputation that shielded Walter Petersen while costing Pearson his job make them “true” or “sham” patriots? Whatever the case, Walter Petersen was surely relieved that the college’s interests were better served by obscuring the professor’s war criticism than by pursuing President Pihlblad’s pledge to the U.S. attorney of zero tolerance for “any disloyalty to the American Flag.” For all involved, sincere views on U.S. participation in the war often ran headlong into local concerns, making deeds difficult for them to pursue and for others to comprehend.

The crucible of war often makes people act in ways they never thought possible. When the war ended, the people of Lindsborg celebrated by adorning their homes with flags, singing patriotic songs, and dragging an effigy of the Kaiser down Main Street as members of the Home Guard riddled it with bullets. Four years earlier, nobody in the town could have imagined such a scene: American involvement in the war seemed unlikely, Lindsborg celebrated German culture, many blamed the Russians for the fighting, and the citizens were united behind neutrality. Yet there they were in November 1918 with a mutilated stuffed Kaiser in the town square, everyone in town deeply affected by the experience of war as they struggled to define the appropriate responses. Some had embraced the nationalistic spirit that enveloped the country, especially after April 1917, and probably headed the ad hoc effigy committee, but a significant number resisted this hypernationalism, either by publicly maintaining their principled views of American values or acquiescing for fear of reprisal. What these dissenters thought of the macabre Armistice Day celebration is unknown, but they surely rejoiced that the war was over while contemplating what results their reluctance to submit to the narrow bounds of nationalism imposed by some might have yielded had the war continued much longer.

45. Ernst Pihlblad to Fred Robertson, April 27, 1917, box 1917, folder P–S, Pihlblad Papers.
46. “Everybody Celebrated,” LNLR, November 15, 1918.