

The Patriotism of Decatur, Illinois: As Shown By *The Decatur Review*

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Decatur, Illinois shows how not only the soldiers were involved in the war effort, but the people of the town as well. Using *The Decatur Review*, one is able to learn about the life and activities of the people in the town of Decatur and surrounding areas during World War One. It was one of two papers printed daily in the town of Decatur, Illinois. The name of the second paper was *The Decatur Herald*. The layout of *The Decatur Review* during the war was a traditional format. The first page usually covered news reports from outside Decatur and the surrounding areas concerning the war. Associated Press news articles from Washington, Chicago, and countries from around the world were usually featured here. Local stories did not regularly make the first page, unless it was something that was incredibly tragic or newsworthy enough to be placed next to events of the war. *The Decatur Review* had other sections that were similar to something you would see in a paper of the 21st century. A sports column, society page, advertisements, business news, and classified area were all common sights in this paper. Other common sights in the paper were marriages, church notices, and local news.

The Decatur Review added a new section when the men went off to fight in the war. This section usually involved soldiers and different aspects of their life. The content of this section changed over the period of the war. At one point the majority of paper was about the draft, and later shifted to letters home or stories of individuals going off or coming home from war. Many times pictures of the soldiers going off to fight were featured in this area of the paper.

Flag Raising

Decatur, like many towns in America, sprang into action to show their patriotism when the war started. One way to show support and something that became a popular event around the first month of the war was flag raising. Flag raising was when a business, school, private citizen, or a an area of city municipals like a fire station paid for a large flag to be placed in whatever location the sponsoring entity wished. There was usually some kind of ceremony involving music, maybe a special guest or guests to raise the flag, and a speaker.

Flag raising was one of the top local new stories covered by *The Decatur Review* early in the war. Most of the coverage came about in the first month and a half after the signing of the declaration of war. Coverage of the event diminished greatly until very little was written about it. Without counting the end of the war celebrations, it was also the most widely attended public event covered by the paper during the entirety of the war. Large numbers of people always came out in support of the events. It was estimated at a new car department flag raising, for example, that between 700 or 800 people who came out to see the event. The description by the writer about this raising seems to indicate a high level of intensity and excitement that seemed to surround the people. He wrote, "there was something about it that set every one's nerves a tingle."¹ "Between 400 and 600 people came out to see the flag raising at the Fairies Manufacturing plant."² Crowds also arrived to see the flag raising at the No.1 firehouse in Decatur on Monday, April 9. Hundreds of people were reported to be at the event. ³

¹"Inspiring sight at Flag Raising," *The Decatur Review*, 5 April 1917.

²"400 men cheer American Flag," *The Decatur Review*, 4, April 1917.

³"Crowds Cheer Firehouse Flag," *The Decatur Review*, April 9 1917.

Flag raising also brought together tribute to other wars or veterans from the past for a showing of unity and patriotism. Veterans of the civil war played a part in the flag raising in one case. At a car department flag raising both civil war veterans and employees hoisted the flag.⁴ In a second case, at the "Decatur Lumber and Manufacturing Plant, they celebrated both the surrender of Lee to Grant and loyalty to the upcoming war" by having a flag raising. The flag purchased by the employees was supposed to inspire loyalty and patriotism.⁵

Announcements were placed in the paper to let people know ahead of time of all the flag raisings. The Wabash Road House flag raising notice was placed in the paper and gave a description of the flag and the pole. It was typical to see in the description of a notice to know how large the flag and pole would be. It was also usual for clubs to announce their presence before the flag raising. The Mother's club, for example, placed a notice of their intentions to be at the flag raising at the Wabash.⁶ A flag raising event was announced at Mueller Plant with yet a description of the flag to be placed there. Flags raisings were also announced to occur at people's homes. The home of Mrs. Charles Pope was announced to be a place where a flag raising was to occur.⁷ This event could occur at any level of society and not restricted to one group or organization.

Flags were sold fast and could not be replaced quickly. By April 8 a large article had been placed in the paper about the coming unavailability of flags. The prices were going up and the flags were flying out the door. Telegrams were sent across the country to manufactures requesting flags because of the decreasing supply. It was estimated by this time "5,000 flags had been sold in Decatur in one week." The flags sold in all different sizes, so it was not the case of a one size flag simply going fast.

Place of residence or type of business mattered very little when trying to order flags at this time. New York even had difficult time acquiring flags. It was difficult to order flags because they were being sold to everyone across the country at an unheard of pace. People who were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to order a flag would have to wait up to 60 days, and there was a possibility they may have not received it that soon.⁸ A major firm in Decatur had difficulty getting flags. They put in a rush order for 3,000 flags and only got half that amount. Even their flag stickers were selling fast. Many people used them on stationary. They became a more popular decoration than that of the Red Cross stickers, which had been the previous choice before everyone was buying flags.⁹

It was only a short matter of time before the city ran out of flags. By April 1, the flags all across town had been sold out. Business and organizations who wanted to have flag raising events may have run against two walls. Either they could not find a flag or they could not find a pole. In the case of the Illinois Central company they could not locate either easily. The pole, they found, had to be special order and had to be made in Vandalia. The flag on the other hand was a lot more difficult to locate. The employees of the company went as far as Chicago to look for a large flag with little luck to be had.¹⁰

People determined to show their patriotism was not deterred by the fact that there were no flags available. People got creative when they found out they could not buy a flag. In one instance women employed at Schudel Bros. got creative and made their own. They wanted a

⁴"Inspiring sight at Flag raising," *The Decatur Review*, 5 April 1917.

⁵"D. L. and M. Flag Raising," *The Decatur Review*, 9 April 1917.

⁶"Crowds cheer the flag," *The Decatur Review*, 9 April 1917

⁷"Flags Raising at City Yard," *The Decatur Review*, 12 April 1917

⁸"Take Any Flag that is offered," *The Decatur Review*, 8 April 1917.

⁹"American Flags in Great Demand," *The Decatur Review*, 14 April 1917.

¹⁰"Can find no flag," *The Decatur Review*, 11 April 1917.

flag raising and were able to raise at least 20 dollars for the supplies they needed to make one. Some of them were dressmakers who helped in the creation and design of the flags.¹¹

It seems as if there was competition to see who had the biggest and best flag. Flag raising showed your loyalty and patriotism. Whomever had a large flag or pole showed more loyalty than some who did not. Frank Torrence spliced the flag pole at Nelson Park so it would be twice its size. There was no reason to do this unless he felt he had to show it was better. Staleys had the “biggest and highest flag” to date and had a flag raising with 600 employees present to witness it. Flag raising was seen as a “patriotic renaissance” in Decatur.¹²

Women’s Groups, Women’s Patriotism, and the Red Cross

Women’s groups did their part to help in the war. On April 6, 1917 a women’s club quickly pledged its loyalty to the actions of the president and to support this country. It is important to note that the article also went on to say, “the women of the nation have been an important factor in all great events connected with its history.”¹³ This was a direct quote from Mrs. Mary B. Hankins, who read the resolution for the women’s group. This seems to indicate that the women of the time felt a longtime sense of duty and responsibility to the nation.

The Red Cross membership exploded during the early period of the war in Decatur. On April 4, they were at 180 members.¹⁴ On April 12 they had 316 members.¹⁵ By April 24 it had reached 649 People. You could see increase every week of people joining. As the war progressed, in the later months, less and less information on the Red Cross and its activities were found, especially when comparing it to the first couple months of the war when there was more coverage. Red Cross was still mentioned throughout the war, but information about their local activities was more sporadic and put in smaller articles. It is questionable whether this was an editorial choice by the paper to not talk as much about the Red Cross or if people had lost their initial motivation to be active after the war had started.

Motivation and patriotism were definitely strong in some women. The Red Cross in Decatur began to grow and many women came to ask what they could do to help in the war. There was a unique story printed in the paper about an unnamed female teacher and her determination to go overseas. The woman went to the Red Cross because she felt they could help her get on a warship. The woman was fully aware that only men could fight, but wanted to offer some other service to her country. She came to the office of the secretary of the Red Cross, Mrs. Bender. It was here that the woman asked if she could joined the navy and work on a warship by being a stenographer. Mrs. Bender informed the young lady that women were not allowed on warships. Mrs. Bender then told her perhaps there was another option at home. She could be of use in some government positions were her talents could be put to service for the country. The young woman still insisted on being on a warship. “It wasn't about the money”, she simply wanted to show her patriotic duty and serve her country.¹⁶ After that article, there was no other information on what happened to the unnamed woman.

Women did make it overseas, albeit not to serve on a warship. Decatur’s first nurse, Florence Hinton, went to France in May of 1917. She was with 200 others from across the United States to offer medical attention to soldiers in France. She was in a group known as the

11“ Couldn’t buy Flag Made one,” *The Decatur Review*, 14 April 1917.

12“Biggest and Highest Flag,” *The Decatur Review*, 11 April 1917.

13“ Woman’s Club Pledges Loyalty,” *The Decatur Review*, 6 April 1917.

14“Boom Membership in Red cross,” *The Decatur Review*, 4 April 1917.

15“Decatur Red cross Members,” *The Decatur Review*, 12 April 1917

16“Young woman wanted to work on Warship,” *The Decatur Review*, 6 April 1917.

“Red Cross Base hospital unit No. 12.” This was a collection of medical personnel sent overseas.¹⁷

Women’s contribution to the war through patriotism can be seen in different areas as well. Mrs. Frank Oren, for example, was written about on November 11, 1918. One of her remarkable accomplishments is that she had handmade over 600 service flags since the ideas started in Decatur. She was seen as a Decatur version of Betsy Ross. It was not simply American flags she was making, but British and Italian ones also. Some of her flags of the allies ended up in Staley Park and the Lincoln square theatre.¹⁸

Gender played a huge part in what you could do for the Red Cross. Men could be mechanics, cooks, plumbers, electricians, and carpenters. A woman could be a masseuse, housekeeper, and waitress. These were only just a few options of many available to be offered by the Red Cross. There were some duties that both men and women could apply for, like cooks or telephone operators. To help determine a position they sent out cards requiring people to write out their personal information. Questions that were asked were things which established who you were and how you could help out the organization. These questions included, family name, given name, date of birth, place of birth, when and where did you acquire citizenship, single or married, what foreign language do you speak, and a variety of other personal questions.¹⁹

The Ethnic Group Response To The War

The Decatur Review did not print many stories on the German presence in the city. There was no news reported in any situation in which the Germans in the area were harassed because of their ethnic background. One story was more of a misunderstanding than a form of harassment. Principals and teachers were walking around their districts so they could both “get more acquainted with their area and get a more complete count of the persons of school age” by collecting a census. They came across a German house where the woman thought they were government spies. She shouted, “Get out of here!” Her daughter, who spoke better English than the woman, managed to straighten out the misunderstanding. Apparently the woman thought they were taking a military census. A son offered his commentary on the war and if he would go over. He was hoping, if he was called to service, that he would be able to stay in the states. He would go over to fight, but the idea of fighting his German brothers was not a pleasant thought. The daughter also said she loved the Kaiser, and “hoped that Germany would one day be a republic and he the president.”²⁰

There were instances of patriotism being shown by the Germans. A committee of German residents helped to sell liberty bonds. This committee was not simply one organization. There were different committees for the German Jew and German gentile who had no church connection, “and other residents.” They did have some difficulty finding people to buy bonds because many at this time had already purchased them at banks or regular areas of purchase. The German committee, however, did feel it “was having success and progress.” These ideas were reflected in the words of Chairman Anthon Spaeth. The paper continued to say, it “shows that the German residents are showing that they are real Americans.”²¹

German also participated in flag raising. About 1,500 people were estimated to be at the flag raising of Marietta and Wood street in Decatur and most of them were believed to be

17“ Decatur Nurse off to France” *The Decatur Review*, 15 May 1917

18“She Has Made Nearly 600 Flags,” *The Decatur Review*, 11, November 1918

19“Supplies arrive for Red cross” *The Decatur Review* 24 April 1917.

20 “Government Spies,” *The Decatur Review*, 26 June 1917.

21 “Germans make fine progress,” *The Decatur Review*, 17 April 1918.

German. This event was created by a naturalized citizen and grocer named Frank Skugina. The flag was placed in front of his store. The German band that was present at the event played patriotic music. This incredible event was the first to be put on by a “private individual with such ceremonies.”²²

There was very little on the black response to the war in the paper, except of the instance of Elder Higgins. Higgins was seen as one of the most respected colored men in town. He was always well dressed and was seen as a hard worker. There was a full length article concerning Higgins and seeing if he was going to war. The article also mentioned that many of the black men in the area were wondering that too, because Higgins held three job titles. If he had left for war there would be job openings for blacks looking for work. He does not give a definite answer to what he will do in this article. He merely states that if his employer goes to war, he will.²³ What was most interesting about his article is how he talks about his own people.²⁴ In part of the article it tells how other blacks are encouraging him to go to war. Telling him it is his responsibility as a black role model to be an inspiration to his race. While at the same time they want him to recommend the three jobs he had at the time to other black workers. The afternoon of the same day he talks to Mr. Harry, his employer and says, “is that gambling nigger Joe asking you for my job?” Mr. Harry responded, “part of your job Elder.” Elder responded back, “Mr. Harry you have nothing to do with that nigger while I am around here.”²⁵ It would be interesting to see how he was actually viewed by the black community in town. More research should be done on him if possible in order to determine this better.

Small Town Patriotic Response To The War

The Decatur Review not only printed stories about events in the city, but other smaller towns around the area. Tuscola, for example, had over 600 people participate in a parade. The parade consisted of bikes and cars decorated with flags and patriotic symbols. It was their way of proving that they were loyal to their country and its efforts. Other participants in the parade included the Knights of Pythias Lodge.²⁶

In a remarkable show of patriotism the township of Bement had over 700 Red Cross members, which was approximately one third of the entire population. At home women gave all their time for work “to support the country.” This is a case where small towns managed to outshine their bigger neighbors. Bement had also raised 50,000 dollars in bond when 40,000 were expected. This shows the extraordinary amount of patriotism going on.²⁷

Lovington showed its patriotism by merchants putting flags around their business. Auto sellers joined in the showing of patriotism by putting flags on their cars. A church was decorated with a “large flag over the pulpit.” There is something to note about this article, it is called “Show Patriotism in Lovington.” And a quote from it says, “patriotically Lovington is waking up.” It is inferred from that statement and title that up to April 17 Lovington had not been showing its support for the country.²⁸

²²“1500 People at Flag Raising,” *The Decatur Review*, 16 April 1917.

²³ I am not sure if he ever did or not, but I was able to find out on findagrave.com that he died in 1931

²⁴ I do not know how blacks referred to each other back then or if it is similar to today.

²⁵“Elder will go to War if Mr. Harry does,” *The Decatur Review*, 8 April 1917.

²⁶“Tuscola has big Patriotic Meeting,” *The Decatur Review*, 14 April 1917.

²⁷“Piat County is Proud of Bements Record,” *The Decatur Review*, 18 July 1917.

²⁸“Show Patriotism in Lovington,” *The Decatur Review*, 18 April 1917.

Local War Coverage in the Paper

Local war coverage about the home front efforts in *The Decatur Review* after the signing of the declaration of war by Congress was very strong in the beginning. Patriotic actions, women's groups, and displays of other forms of loyalty could be seen through a lot of the paper. As time went on, however, it is noticed a drastic decrease in the amount of coverage of local news or support of the war efforts in town and the surrounding areas. Again, it cannot say be distinguished by the evidence if the lack of coverage was an editorial choice by the newspaper or if the people of the town had simply decreased their activities. The local coverage did however pick up once the draft had begun and men began to be sent out for training. As the war progressed there was more coverage but nothing compared the amount of loyalty demonstrated by the community in the early weeks after the signing of the declaration of war.

Patriotic Church Sermons

The churches of Decatur had a strong sense of patriotism too. *The Decatur Review* occasionally printed Sermons from pastors and some of them preached about the war. The rev, N.M. Riggs addressed his congregation at Grace Methodist Church in Decatur and spoke of what they could to help in the war. He called for them to all enlist in something that would help in the war, whether it be canning, or conserving food. Things like tea parties were trivial things that could be put off to a later date. He is quoted as saying "If we can't all go to the front we can all get in the front by doing a supporting work that can be done nowhere else than right here at home."²⁹ Sin was associated with loss and virtue with winning. The Reverend Frank Fox stressed at his congregation at the First Congregational Church that waste was a major sin that American participated in. In order for the country to win the war the people should be less wasteful.

Pastors were not the only one to speak at churches. Former governor of Illinois Richard Yates also came to Decatur to speak to the congregation at First Presbyterian Church. He stressed that whatever your occupation, each person had his place in supporting the war effort.³⁰

The Life Of Soldiers and the Draft

One of the major local stories that had reached the first page of the paper was the death of the first Decatur soldier in the war. Orvill Moyer died in action on November 3, 1917. At the time of his death he was battling alongside a Canadian battalion. Where he died was not given. The news was first received by his mother, Mrs. Mary Wilkerson, by telegram. Another sad note about the article is that his enlistment would have been up in February. He was to come back and be married.³¹

The draft signaled the coming of a new section in the paper. The first men called up for duty were Ralph J. McClure, George W. Wallace, William E. Knodle and Thomas B. Scanlon. Within that article that day was a list of those who were called up for duty. This roster included men from both Macon and Piat County.³² The paper was also a place where you could see if you had been called up for active service. After the draft came about and men began going to war, the section was mainly about their life at home and on the front.

The draft affected the community in different ways. Many people in the public school system both teachers and student had to leave for the war. On July 21 of 1917 six teachers from

²⁹"Everyone Can do His Part" ,” *The Decatur Review*, 30 April 1917.

³⁰"Dick Yates Speaks," *The Decatur Review*, 2 July 1917.

³¹"Orville Moyer Dies in action" *The Decatur Review*, 17 November 1917

³²"Decatur's First Men Called by the Draft" *The Decatur Review*, 20 July 1917.

the public school system were taken. It was not known if some of the teachers would be exempt and more information regarding this could not be found. There may have been more enlisted men who were going to war they just applied in their hometown. No one was immune from the draft in Decatur. Both professional and business residents along with the educators were taken.³³ The article does show that men were taken from all aspects of society and people did not know what the long term affects would be.

Letters from soldiers were printed along with letters from the soldier's friends if they had been killed in combat. In an article called, "Letters from the Training Camps" you can see, not all soldiers were eager to serve their county. In one example Mr. Richardson describes his experience with the examination board. He tells how quickly they were done with him and went on to the next victim. Richardson also lets the reader know that in a week's time he "would know his fate, the worst or the best." He spoke in context of either having the chance to go on the reserve list or going into active duty.³⁴

Letters from soldiers who served with the deceased were also printed. One such letter was from a French soldier the mother of a dead American soldier, a Mrs. Lena Hamilton of Decatur. He felt it was his responsibility to tell her of her son's passage, because he would be the only one to understand the loss and put it into words. The letter was in French because he believed his native tongue was best in sharing his grief. The French soldier wrote of the fallen Decatur man's courage and how he was never to be forgotten.³⁵

Child Patriotism

Photos of children were often placed in the paper, with it was written they had signed up and bought liberty bonds. Of course most of the time they did not buy the bonds themselves but it showed that children were doing their part to help in the war. ³⁶ The photos also were an excellent use of children to advertise the bonds.

In the early part of the war, children were seen showing their patriotic spirit. In one example, a pair of boys came to the Red Cross and wanted to know what they could do to help their country. Instead of playing, they wanted to donate their time. These two boys, who were brothers donated one dollar each to the Red Cross.

Girls showed their patriotic sprit as well. A girl wanted to put a quarter in a comfort bag, but didn't have the money. Comfort bags are something that woman made to send to soldiers. She was then told how to earn it and then went out to make the money.³⁷ Whether or not she was successful is unknown. In many of these stories, not just the ones about children's roles, there was no follow up, so it is hard to determine what happened after.

The Broom and Flags parade was a popular event in Decatur. This event was inspired by a Dutch admiral who tied a broom to the mast head of his ship when sailed out to meet the enemy over 800 years ago. Boys who enlisted as members of the cleanup brigade showed their patriotism by tying flags on tops of brooms. This symbolized how America was going to clean up overseas. The amount of boys involved directly with the parade was estimated to be between 800 and 900. These boys were urged by teachers to join the parade and members of the committee who ran the cleanup brigade went to every school trying to get boys to join.³⁸

³³"Decatur Schools Hit by Draft," *The Decatur Review*, 21 July 1917.

³⁴"Letters from the Training Camps," *The Decatur Review*, 5 August 1917

³⁵"Letter From French Officer," *The Decatur Review*, 16 June 1918.

³⁶"Some of Decatur Young Patriots," *The Decatur Review*, 17 June 1917.

³⁷"Boys do Good Work," *The Decatur Review*, 6 April 1917

³⁸"Brooms and Flags in Big Parade," *The Decatur Review*, 26 April 1917.

Child patriotism was not always welcomed with open arms. In one case a boy put a small flag he found on a stick and stuck it in the “bridle of a harness in a barn where a local store keeps it teams.” When the driver who uses that harness came in he found the flag and threw it down. Police looked at it as an alleged assault on a flag. He was believed to have said “he didn’t want that dam thing on his harness.”³⁹

End of the War Celebrations

Decatur and other small towns had their celebrations when Germany finally signed the Armistice. The city of Decatur closed at noon while over 20,000 people came downtown to celebrate. There was singing and music all around.⁴⁰

Small towns all around Decatur each had their own celebrations. In the town of Macon for example bells rung for 4 hours. One of the residents, “Miss Despres, rang a bell for an hour and half all by herself.” Maroa had a big bonfire with large parades all over town. In the town of Cisco people got up at 2 in the morning and shot off fireworks and made tons of noise. There was no parade in Argenta, although the bells did ring. Many of their residents came to Decatur for the celebration. Warrensburg also didn't have much of a celebration, but they did make a lot noise when the news was heard that the war was over, “They made plenty of racket.” Mt.Zion made a lot of noise, in which the paper states, “was necessary to properly observe the occasion.” About 300 people came out to celebrate in this town. At Niantic the celebration festivities included a parade and music by the town’s band. Dalton City had most of its residents celebrating with fireworks and paraded around a big truck. It was viewed as an “occasion to remember.”⁴¹

The parades celebrating the peace in some of these small towns were also unique. Bethany for example had brought a big coffin for a parade symbolizing the end of the Kaiser. There were a bunch of boys around and on top of it. One boy played the Star Bangled Banner. A bonfire was started here too and apparently every loose scrap piece of wood that the hundreds of residents could lay their hands on was used in its creation. The town of Cerro Gordo put on several parades instead of just one. The town of Illiopolis threw “75 to 100 good hats” into a fire to celebrate the peace. This was not a planned event, but something that happened on the spot. While celebrating, someone caught up in the excitement grabbed another person’s hat to throw into a bonfire. Others saw what had happened and in a spur of the moment reaction joined in.⁴²

Conclusion

The Decatur Review provided an excellent perspective on how people showed their patriotism. There were always stories from different perspectives and activities from many levels of society. The paper showed it was not just about soldiers, but also what people did on the home front. I was not able to obtain any census data at this time. It would have been interesting to see how many Germans or blacks were living in the area. The Review did not have many stories concerning the black population and Germans.

There is much more research to do about how people in Decatur and the surrounding areas saw the war and how accurate the newspaper was in reflecting their feelings. A major question that needs to be asked is why did all the flag raising celebrations end? Was it because

³⁹“Alleged Assault to U.S. Flag,” *The Decatur Review*, 24 April 1917.

⁴⁰*The Decatur Review*, 11 November 1918.

⁴¹“Nearby towns observe occasion“ *The Decatur Review*, 11 November 1918

⁴²“Threw Hats into the fire,” *The Decatur Review*, 11 November 11 1918.

there was such a massive amount of displayed patriotism early on that places to put flags ran out? That idea may be a possibility. I only wrote about some of the flag raisings in this paper. There was so much more occurring all over town every day. It seems that every business had one. Another question that needs to be raised is why was there such a gap between local coverage of local war efforts before the draft in *The Decatur Review*? After the end of flag raising it seemed local participation on a massive scale decreased significantly. Coverage of Red Cross efforts also decreased during this time. It may be a good idea to compare the type of coverage *The Decatur Review* and *The Decatur Herald* had in common to see what the differences were. Perhaps by looking at both papers a better picture can be produced of what a World War I, Decatur, and its surrounding areas looked like.