

Home Front in the American Heartland

Home Front in the American Heartland:

*Local Experiences and Legacies
of WWI*

Edited by

Patty Sotirin,
Steven A. Walton
and Sue Collins

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book evolved from a two-day symposium on “Armistice and Aftermath: World War I and the Copper Country” held at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan on September 28–29, 2018. The *Proceedings* are online at ww1cc.mtu.edu. The symposium included three public presentations as well as twenty-four scholarly paper presentations featuring diverse reflections on the cultural, political, and technological experiences and legacies of the Great War. Two keynote speakers included Dr. John Morrow, Jr. (University of Georgia) on “The African American Experience in WWI and Aftermath” and Dr. Lynn Dumenil (Occidental College, Emerita) on “Women and the Great War.” A buffet luncheon for Symposium participants used recipes from a WWI-era cookbook; the Michigan Tech Wind Symphony performed a concert of WWI music; and a screening of Charlie Chaplin’s silent film, *Shoulder Arms* (1918), was accompanied by live organ music and a Four Minute Man performance. The Symposium was supported in part by the Michigan Humanities Council, Michigan Tech’s Institutional Equity office, the Center for Diversity and Inclusion, the Carnegie Museum of the Keweenaw, Finlandia University, and the departments of Humanities and Social Sciences at Michigan Tech.

The entire World War I in the Copper Country (hereafter, WWICC) project spanned the spring and fall semesters of 2018 to commemorate the end of the Great War with campus and community events including films, talks, exhibits, a full scale 150-foot section of a forward firing trench from the Western Front, and a re-enactment of a WWI-era ladies war relief bazaar featuring live performers, cake walk, fashion show, activity booths, and dancing. We thank the numerous students who volunteered in WWICC events, the Copper Country residents and visitors who attended various events, and the participants in the symposium whose paper presentations and camaraderie inspired us to develop this collection.

It is appropriate here to acknowledge the generous support received for the larger WWICC project of which this collection is a part. Funding was provided by Michigan Tech’s Institutional Equity office, the King-Chávez-Park visiting scholar program through the Center for Diversity and Inclusion, the Office of Student Affairs, the Department of Humanities and the Department of Social Sciences. We also received direct and indirect

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The local research that made the WWICC such a success and that is represented in several chapters of this collection would not have been possible without the support, energies, and generosity of the Carnegie Museum of the Keweenaw in Houghton, Elise Nelson, Director; Seth Dahl of Finlandia University whose indefatigable research in the *Daily Mining Gazette* archives at the Houghton County Genealogical Society room at the Carnegie Museum was invaluable to our work; Michigan Tech Library and especially Stephanie Reed, Interlibrary Loan; Michigan Tech Archives, Lindsay Hiltunen, Allison Neely, and Emily Riipa, archivists; Annelise Doll, Scholarly Communications Librarian, who installed our *Proceedings* on Michigan Tech's Digital Commons; the Finnish American Historical Archive, Joanna Chopp, Archivist and the Finnish-American Heritage Center, Jim Kurtti, Director; Chassell Historical Organization, Luanne Hamil, Curator; and friends and colleagues on campus and in the community who shared artefacts, stories, and ideas with us.

FOREWORD

Armistice Day 2018 marked the centenary of the cease-fire on November 11, 1918 that ended World War I. The four-year war, with 68 million combatants on both sides resulting in 10 million dead soldiers, 11 million dead civilians, and another 21 million wounded, was also the first large-scale international mobilization of American soldiers, involving some 4.8 million inducted by the war's end. Such massive and rapid mobilization had profound ripple effects at home. Even before the United States entered the war in 1917, Americans felt the economic effects from supplying the Entente Powers with foodstuffs and badly needed supplies. Ideological rifts between the Allies and the Central Powers simmered beneath the lid of official neutrality. Many recent immigrants, and citizens whose families had been here decades if not centuries, were torn on which side they supported. This meant that millions of Americans of foreign birth were subject to questions about their loyalties. In addition, an anti-dissident movement took hold that confronted scores of people who opposed intervention of any sort. Once the U.S. declared war, American life was profoundly impacted as the vast majority of Americans were inculcated into the national imperative, a process that overwhelmed pacifist and socialist impulses, and to lasting effect.

Against the backdrop of these upheavals, this collection offers a multidisciplinary exploration of the diverse impacts of the Great War on home front life in the northern American heartland, an overlooked region of the country in most accounts of the U.S. civilian response to war mobilization and the war's aftermath. Specifically, the focus in this volume is on local communities in the northern heartland states including Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. Although World War I histories of the American home front are generally dominated by national accounts, *Home Front in the American Heartland* shows how heartland locales responded in distinct ways to national calls for civilian war support, reflecting the extent to which federal propaganda campaigns became entangled in local histories and social tensions. Emphasizing the importance of Midwest home front experiences to the exigencies of conducting world war, the book explores how confluences of patriotism, identity, and locale complicated the civilian war effort, and how these inform the legacies of the Great War.

During World War I, the Midwest came into its own. Chicago crested 2 million people just before 1910 and had become the country's "second city" already by 1890. The Midwestern states of Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, and Minnesota had one-quarter of the U.S. population in 1910 (22.5 of 93 million), and provided just shy of one million men (just over 26%) for the American Expeditionary Forces. Although some of the sparsely populated western states would send proportionally more of their population (partly because of their gender imbalance), and the most populous states sent the greatest numbers, every Midwestern state but Ohio and Illinois sent proportionally more soldiers—between 3.9 and 4.8% of their population—than their share of the overall population (2.2–3.0% for these same states). Illinois and Ohio sent the greatest number of troops overall after New York and Pennsylvania. To be sure, the people on the home front in these states invested in supporting the well-being of their "boys" serving "over there" as vigorously as Americans living in more populated states.

The heartland was also the region in which the post-war American order was forged. It was the birthplace of the American Legion, which was founded stateside in a May 1919 conference in St. Louis, swelled to a million members by year's end, and subsequently opened its national headquarters in Indianapolis.¹ Although thought of and functioning as an veterans' organization today, the Legion was not conceived as such but rather as one dedicated to "One hundred percent Americanism" in opposing Bolshevism, socialism, and radicalism of all stripes—all concerns of serious import in the major manufacturing cities of the upper Midwest as the 1920s dawned.² Moreover, the national WWI monument was raised in Kansas City, not Washington or New York, because of local backing and not for any centralized federal or formal response to the conflict (the commander of the U.S. Allied Expeditionary Forces, Gen. John J. 'Blackjack' Pershing was also born near Kansas City in Laclede, MO).

In response to the centennial anniversary of the Great War's end, this book joins other edited collections arising from commemorative scholarly

¹ The American Legion had been founded in March that year in France as an organizing body for veterans to maintain order and morale; see George Seay Wheat, *The Story of the American Legion* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919).

² See Arthur Warner, "The Truth About the American Legion," *The Nation* 113, no. 2922 (July 6, 1921): 7–10; Christopher Nehls, "'Treason is Treason': The Iowa American Legion and the Meaning of Disloyalty after World War I," *The Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007): 131–160.

conferences. Ours was part of an extensive centenary commemoration of the Copper Country home front, the region of Northern Michigan consisting of Houghton, Keweenaw, Baraga, and Ontonagon counties—locally referred to as the “Copper Country” due to the extensive copper mining in the area—during the summer and fall of 2018 on the campus of Michigan Technological University and in Houghton-Hancock, the community in which our university is located. The collection takes a broadly humanistic historical approach, written by scholars of literature and art, twentieth-century history, military history, communication, media studies, and cultural studies and explores local impacts, experiences, and events on the home front from the regional perspective of the heartland. The authors offer historical analyses underwritten by archival and vintage images to locate the lived significance of this momentous historical moment in family histories, minor and disappeared monuments, local theaters, and home front figures. Together, the contributors provide richly textured portraits of response and resilience among the people and communities of the nation’s heartland in the context of the momentous upheavals of WWI.

The first section, “Heartland Histories,” explores how Americans in the heartland experienced WWI and then came to remember it across the decades that followed the Armistice. The chapters explore the vicissitudes of national memory in the context of regional ethnicities, particularly tensions of loyalty, dissent, and resistance to conscriptions and home front support. Goodrich traces the complexities of family and ethnic-national loyalties through the story of Austro-Hungarian migrants whose sons fought and died in the war. Bellais examines the flux of war support and resistance among Wisconsin residents that is often forgotten in cultural memories of patriotic unity. The chapter features an original map locating Wisconsin WWI memorials throughout the state. Fels shows how one community experienced the war through a close read of Oshkosh’s local newspaper. Virtanen innovatively highlights the resistance of Upper Peninsula men to the newly instituted military draft by examining draft card exemption claims. Finally, Lantry looks at how an Army Air Service (i.e., Air Force) cartoonist from the Midwest rendered his impressions of his POW experience through his art, featuring the first publication of his cartoons. Together, these chapter authors show that what ultimately has become memorialized as a nation-wide mobilization of civil life, in fact involved a pastiche of specific local experiences, conditions, and legacies.

Section Two, “Home Front Propaganda,” identifies the cultural work of state propaganda through local culture and entertainments. These chapters evidence the government’s effort to unify the country around war

mobilization through the Committee on Public Information's (CPI) propaganda initiatives enacted at the local level. Collins underscores the import of the early movie industry in generating support for the war effort and shares a wealth of historical details about the role of local movie theaters in Michigan's remote Copper Country as purveyors of war appeals through entertainment. McCollough argues that the genesis of the CPI's Four Minute Men program was in Chicago and its national success offers an early forecast of contemporary public relations practices. Fulton makes a careful study of the Allied War Exposition in Chicago, highlighting its varied appeals that celebrated military strength, industrial innovation, and domestic stability. Finally, Walton follows the shifting politics and cultural meanings of military hardware as war relics, arguing that the initial role of captured relics to incite enlistment and mobilize support shifted during the war to the celebration of local patriotism and then after the war to memorialization although acquiring, moving, and installing these relics often proved contentious and costly for local communities. This section abounds with colorful stories about the creative and appealing exhibition of government war messages, and in most cases, reaffirms that once the U.S. joined the war, support ran high.

The last section, "Gender in/and War," examines gendered representations of war and the home front as well as social changes in its aftermath. Sotirin investigates how public war support and local home front contributions were energized by an ideal version of the patriotic citizen mother that obscured lived inequities and disciplined women to personal and family sacrifice. Turning to depictions of sexuality in recruitment posters, Price suggests that while many war posters reproduced gender stereotypes, some advanced fluid gender identities complicating male/female and feminine/masculine dichotomies, whether by showing women in male roles in the workforce and on the front lines or men in passive, helpless, or non-aggressive positions. Finally, Frost investigates a neglected implication of the war experience on public imagination and social mores: men's military violence, publicly legitimated during war, primed the media for spectacles of post-war male serial killers. In these chapters, the gendered home front becomes by turns patriotic, gender fluid, traumatized, and vulnerable as gendered identities were reframed to both mobilize (and thus, inadvertently change) traditional associations and energize alternative possibilities of identity.

Taken together, this book's authors highlight the significance of local perspectives in understanding communities' critical relations to conscription, war mobilization activities, war memorialization, citizenship, propaganda,

and the varied experiences of women during the war. They invite a closer consideration of the local experiences and activities of the WWI home front in America's northern heartland.

SECTION ONE:
HEARTLAND HISTORIES

CHAPTER 1

DYNAMIC LOYALTIES: MARIO RUCONICH AND AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MIGRANTS IN MICHIGAN DURING THE GREAT WAR

ROBERT GOODRICH
NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

On July 1, 1918, two weeks after successful action at Belleau Wood, the 2nd Division, 23rd Infantry Regiment stormed the little village of Vaux, near Chateau Thierry, 80 km east of Paris. In the action, at 6:15 p.m., U.S. Army PFC Marius “Mario” Ruconich (Figure 1-1) of Company L was killed by German machine gun fire. He had volunteered for the U.S. Army in January 1917, mustering at the Columbus Barracks in Ohio and his division had been among the first to land in France in the early months of 1918. On his enlistment papers, he listed his home as “Michigan,” and his military service record registered his nationality as “Austrian.”¹ Ruconich, as a fallen U.S. veteran but also an Austro-Hungarian who listed Michigan as his home, raises questions about immigrant loyalty in Michigan during the Great War.

Ruconich had indeed grown up in the village of Ossero (now Osor, Cres Island, Croatia) on the islands of Cherso-Lussino in the northern Adriatic Sea in Austrian Istria, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. His parents, Domenico and Caterina Gercovich-Gerconi, were illiterate Roman Catholics who spoke Croatian and the local Italian dialect, Istriot. Their children—all fifteen of them—attended a compulsory state school but were free to choose from the Istriot, Croatian, or German schools. The family was relatively comfortable, having moved just before the war from

¹ For the family history reported throughout this paper, I am grateful for the personal correspondence with Renzo Rocconi, great nephew of Mario, now living in Venice, see online at, <http://www.worldwar1.com/itafront/rocconi.htm>.

the impoverished village of Trsich on the same island. They owned sheep, goats, chickens, and a horse and fished to supplement their diet and income.



Figure 1-1. Mario Ruconich, 1895–1918, prior to emigration in 1914. Courtesy of Renzo Rocconi.

They were loyal Austrians, showing no tendency towards any of the political currents then challenging Habsburg authority. The war, however, changed everything. As citizens of Austrian Istria, the brothers were all liable for military conscription. Mario was the third of the four oldest brothers (Domenik, Johan, Mario, and Anton; Figure 1-2) of military age, and eventually all but the youngest died in combat. Domenik, the oldest, was killed in action in 1915 on the hills of Oslavia, north of Gorizia on the Isonzo Front fighting the Italians—that is, fighting those who spoke his native language but who were in the Allied army from Italy. Johan was taken prisoner on February 26, 1915 by the Russians in the Carpathian range and was detained at Chistopol, Kazan region (on the Volga River around 800 km east of Moscow). In 1917 he was going to be transferred to

another camp but disappeared on the Eastern Front in the wake of the chaotic Russian Revolution. Anton was conscripted in 1915, also served on the Eastern Front, survived multiple wounds, and only returned home after a three-month odyssey from Odessa on the Black Sea in the midst of revolution. Mario, as we know, died in France in 1918 fighting the Germans as an American soldier.



Figure 1-2. [LEFT] Anton Ruconich (1897–1985), Austro-Hungarian Infantry Regiment n. 55 (IR 55), 3rd company, c.1915. [RIGHT] Johan Ruconich (1894–1917), seated, 2nd reserve company of Austro-Hungarian Territorial Infantry Regiment n. 5 (LIR 5), c.1915. Courtesy of Renzo Rocconi.

For such a family, the questions of loyalty and identification with a home front are not straightforward. They were Istriot-speaking Austrians, subjects of the Habsburg emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, living in a predominantly Croatian part of the empire whose political elites oriented themselves on Germanic culture, but which also faced the Venetian-centered northern Adriatic. The Monarchy eschewed nationalism, promoting instead an ethnically pluralistic dynastic loyalty. Yet this state collapsed in 1918, to be replaced in Istria by a variety of successors who engaged in ethnic cleansing: annexation by Italian fascists, integration into a newly-conceptualized confederated Yugoslavia (initially a conservative

monarchy, later a socialist republic), and, ultimately the creation of an independent democratic Croatia. Large numbers engaged in various forms of internal, seasonal, regional, and transatlantic migration, all of which was disrupted and redefined by the war. Loyalty, therefore, was complicated, since it was predicated on a sense of territorial identity. For immigrants from Austria-Hungary such as Ruconich, that sense of space and homeland bore little resemblance to their new realities in Michigan. The extreme tests of war and dislocation forced a reorientation of these sensibilities.

Ruconich was a sailor, drawn to the nearby booming industrial port of Trieste. He served aboard the Austro-Americana Line's passenger steamship SS *Argentina*, making runs from Trieste to America. He was a crewmember when the *Argentina* arrived in New York on July 16, 1914 with 291 passengers. When the *Argentina* eventually returned to Trieste, Ruconich was not on board. Without any plan, he had decided to stay in the United States. War fever had gripped Europe, conscription was a certainty back home, and the trip home might have been perilous. Naval warfare, conversion of passenger ships to wartime use, tight control of Austro-Hungarian ports to prevent draft dodging, and later submarine warfare brought transatlantic Austro-Hungarian passenger service and immigration to a halt. The crossing of the *Argentina* was in fact the last for the Austro-Americana Line. The next time Ruconich appears on any known historical document came with his military induction. He may have in effect been the last Austro-Hungarian immigrant to the United States.

This leaves open the question of how and why Ruconich made it to Michigan. As a young man seeing the writing on the wall for the coming war, he may simply have jumped ship and entered the U.S. illegally (there is no record of him at Ellis Island). This was not hard for crewmembers, who generally were allowed shore leave. From there, he could have made his way to Michigan along with other Istrians looking for work, perhaps on the ships of the Great Lakes. A large Istrian population worked in the Upper Peninsula in the mining and lumber industries, and a well-established labor migration pattern from the ports to that region existed.² In fact, the booming mining town of Calumet in the Upper Peninsula's

² Francis E. Clark, "The Croats in Croatia and in America," in *Old Homes of New Americans: The Country and the People of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Their Contribution to the New World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 189–205.

Copper Country was the first significant Croatian settlement in the U.S.³ In 1910, a Croatian school teacher emphasized the links to Michigan:

Today they are telling in the village that fifteen are ... on their way to America With what anxiety and joy do they wait for the news from the agent that their dear ones have reached New York in safety. Their relatives are already expecting them, and the journey can be peacefully continued in their company. Our people generally go to Michigan. In one town [Calumet, MI] there are so many that our people call it "New Lipa."⁴

Lipa was an Istrian village; New Lipa was a Michigan one. A 1909 report of the U.S. Immigration Commission reinforced the popularity of the U.P. among Croatian immigrants, estimating their population in Calumet at around 2,000, the third largest immigrant group.⁵ Ninety percent had immigrated to the U.S. between 1900 and 1909.

As for joining the U.S. military in January 1917, we have no idea of Mario's motives. By 1917 the prospect of returning to Istria and inevitable conscription could not have been appealing. Yet, there was no draft in the U.S. until May 1917, and the U.S. was still neutral when he joined. He had shown no hostility towards the Monarchy, nor was the local Istrian population in Michigan known for nationalist radicalism.⁶ If anything, attention in the U.S. in early 1917 was more towards the Mexican border than anything in Europe.

Since no records exist between his arrival on the *Argentina* and his enlistment, Ruconich exemplifies how difficult documentation of migrant history can be, especially given the transitional nature of many migrants' tenure in Michigan and the chaos of Europe after 1914. However, this lacuna does not make his story irrelevant for the Michigan home front in World War I. In fact, his story illuminates critical aspects of migrants

³ Daniel Cetinich, "Croatsians," in *American Immigrant Cultures: Builders of a Nation*, edited by David Levinson and Melvin Ember (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997), 191.

⁴ Emily Greene Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow-Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 184–185, and for further information, see also Balch, 175–176.

⁵ Senate Committee on Immigration, *Reports of the Immigration Commission: Immigrants in Industry*, 61st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1910, S. Document 633, 82–83.

⁶ For general histories of Croatsians in the U.S., see George Prpic, *The Croatian Immigrants in America* (New York: Philosophic Library, 1971); and Ellen Shapiro, *The Croatian Americans* (New York: Chelsea House, 1989).

generally (and Austro-Hungarians specifically) and their loyalties during the World War.

First, Ruconich's roots as a villager facing economic pressure from overpopulation and limited economic opportunity back home fits the most powerful "push" factor for Austro-Hungarians to migrate. However, his search for work via internal migration to an urban part of the Empire, the commercial and military port of Trieste, was more typical than emigration. Indeed, relatively few Triestine emigrated. The local economy was powerful enough to offer ample employment locally. When local industrial capacity could absorb the excess rural population, people generally chose to remain in their homeland rather than leave. His older brothers had remained, which is why they were caught up in military service, and we have no indication that he intended to emigrate.

Second, migration was complicated, even in a single family. Different members often revealed divergent attitudes towards migration. Some refused to migrate, some left only once a family connection had been established abroad. Some migrated with the intention of returning, others planning never to return. Ruconich presents yet another reason: contingency. Sometimes unusual and unpredictable circumstances determined migration. Indeed, both his decision to apparently jump ship and the ending of the migration wave were caused by World War I, a global event that few had predicted. The war, from a personal point of view, was a completely random occurrence.

Third, Ruconich's apparently itinerant and so far undocumentable life between 1914 and 1917 typified single young males who comprised the bulk of Austro-Hungarian migrants. Michigan's mines, lumber camps, and industries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attracted these men more than any other group.⁷ They moved frequently as they heard of new opportunities. Most planned a return home; but after 1914 most stayed, cut off by the Great War as well as ensuing civil wars. These men often only appear in the records of the shipping companies, their employers, and occasionally on the police records for drunk and disorderly charges as they celebrated after payday, and yet "Hungarian Hollows"

⁷ Annemarie Steidl et al., *From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations: Austro-Hungarian Migrants in the US, 1870–1940* (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2017). For detailed statistics on immigration, see Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, eds., "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850–2000," *Population Division*, Working Paper No. 81 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

were a common feature in industrial and extractive towns across the country. The numerous Austro-Hungarians who fit this category in Michigan often did not set down roots in the state.

Fourth, Ruconich's illegal entry was atypical. Entry to the U.S. prior to the 1920s was well regulated but not a deterrent. Like Ruconich, many Austro-Hungarians used the same port and shipping company for which he worked. There was little reason for most immigrants to jump ship. With \$20 in the pocket, an address of someone in the U.S., tolerable health, and a willingness to swear that one was neither a polygamist nor an anarchist, just about anyone who made it to a U.S. port was admitted. So unless Ruconich had a dark secret, there was little reason for him not to come through Ellis Island. We can only surmise that he may have been worried about the looming war (Central Powers' ships were about to be interned) and his lack of any immigration paperwork via the ship's passenger manifest. He may have simply thought it easier to just walk away once on shore rather than reporting back through the formal process.

Austro-Hungarians at home and abroad seem to have reached a complicated equilibrium as long as external factors did not disrupt the delicate balance. The war, however, was most decidedly disruptive. While the Monarchy stood, some men served loyally in the imperial army (Ruconich's brothers); some emigrated to avoid such service (probably not the case for Ruconich); and a very few, under extenuating circumstances, served the enemy (formally the case for Ruconich, though his motives are unclear and his service was never directed against the Monarchy). In any event, conscription was a factor in decision-making about emigration for the young men of the Monarchy, but there is no evidence that it made them either less loyal to their homeland or to their adopted homes. Only the unexpected convulsions unleashed by World War I forced immediate reconsideration of traditional loyalties and migration patterns. This brief study will try to explicate a dynamic and contextual transnational understanding of identity and loyalty of migrants in the U.S. coming into and during the World War.

Understanding the Austro-Hungarian Empire

To understand the question of loyalty during WWI for a man such as Ruconich, we must briefly step away from Michigan and into a now vanished, almost entirely forgotten, and mis-remembered world of non-