

Stories of Trouble and Troubled Stories: Narratives of Anti-German Sentiment from the Midwestern United States¹

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This article examines narratives of “trouble” from elderly second- and third-generation German American residents of Illinois. During the First and Second World Wars, many German American communities experienced targeted anti-German sentiment combined with government-sponsored efforts to eradicate the German language in schools, churches, and public spaces (Luebke, 1974; Tolzmann, 2001). Elderly narrators who tell stories about this time do so at considerable narrative risk, revealing both troubling memories and troubled tellings in the process. Troubled stories are difficult narrative terrain for these community members, and while they help complicate over-generalized portraits of German American assimilation, they present painful and often buried portraits of the past best forgotten in the minds of many. Despite their taboo nature, these stories of anti-German sentiment offer an important corollary to anti-immigrant feeling in the present day, especially in Midwestern regions that are experiencing heavy migration from newer immigrant communities.

In the United States, immigrants and their children account for more than 60 million people, or a fifth of all residents today (Jacoby, 2004). While contemporary debates over immigration have drawn renewed attention to issues of acculturation, ethnicity, and language, consideration of these issues within the contexts of historical European American immigration is needed as well. Master narratives of European American immigration stress the voluntary nature of cultural and linguistic assimilation (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), yet obscure important variations in the Americanization² experiences of many

¹ I wish to thank all of the participants from Lincoln County who generously invited me into their homes and stories, both those said and especially those unsaid.

² This definition of Americanization includes both the government-sponsored, coercive programs of forced assimilation aimed at immigrants at the turn of the century through

of these immigrant groups. The experiences of German Americans from the Midwestern United States help to complicate these master storylines and highlight the important role that structural conditions, such as war-related anti-German sentiment, played in the ethnic and linguistic acculturation of German Americans.

In this article, I examine personal narratives from second- and third-generation German Americans who came of age during the first half of the twentieth century. The stories from their childhoods chronicle a time of strong anti-German sentiment that accompanied U.S. entry into the First and Second World Wars. The anti-German feeling, widespread in many parts of the U.S. during this time, resulted in the sanctioning of the German language and hostility toward public displays of German ethnicity (Luebke, 1974; Tolzmann, 2001). While most historical studies of German Americans argue that these external pressures to assimilate resulted in the loss of ethnic identity (Neils Conzen, 1985, 2001) and language (Kloss, 1966), an exploration of the consequences of these rapid cultural changes for these later generations remains critically needed. Narratives told by elderly members of these communities highlight discourses of Americanization and anti-German feeling that are still present in these storytelling communities—stories that express some of the confusion and pain associated with these memories that may be difficult to capture in large-scale historical studies.

“Narratives situate narrators, protagonists, and listeners/readers at the nexus of morally organized, past, present, and possible experiences” (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 22). While storytelling may create opportunities for shared understanding and/or an ordering of chaotic life experiences (Arendt, 1968; Myerhoff, 1982) that may become therapeutic or transformative (Booker, 1991), the narratives of Americanization and anti-German sentiment in these communities produced a good deal of hesitation for these narrators. Unlike the celebratory accounts of triumphant family members who migrated and assimilated in a new host nation, Americanization stories are stories of a more troubled nature. These are hidden stories (Marks, 2011), existing just below the surface of the official historical record. Through them, we better understand the uncertainty that these communities lived under and to a certain extent, discursively, still do.

These narrative accounts highlight a unique chapter of American history often overshadowed in present day immigration debates. The

the early 1920s, as well as a “variant of assimilation by which newcomers or their descendants come to identify themselves as American” (Kazal, 1995, p. 440)

stories from Illinois highlight the experiences of many rural, Midwestern German Americans whose process of cultural adaptation was circumscribed by institutional forces of language sanction and accusations of disloyalty. These troubled stories and stories of trouble afford an opportunity to better understand how people made sense of these experiences and what important themes persist in the generational memories of the children and grandchildren from these communities.

Additionally, while elderly members of these German American communities recall troubling stories experienced by their families, younger generations know little about these early periods of anti-German feeling. They know even less about the multiple ways their immigrant family members negotiated—and in some cases, resisted—these external pressures to assimilate. This lack of historical understanding keeps younger generations from drawing critical connections between past and present eras of anti-immigrant feeling, especially in these communities, which are experiencing heavy migration of Spanish-speaking, Méxican and Central American immigrants (Fennelly, 2008) These stories and the troubled nature of their telling may help contextualize our current understanding of present day, white communities in the Midwestern United States who may be hostile towards new immigrants or campaigns for minority language rights in the public schools.

A Storm of Anti-Germanism

The United States entered World War I in April 1917. The U.S. government's interception of the Zimmerman telegram, proposing an anti-U.S. military alliance between Germany and México, confirmed widespread public fears of German sabotage and fueled already growing anti-German feeling. While many German American ethnic organizations and newspapers promptly declared loyalty to the United States, a “storm of anti-Germanism” raged in the period leading up to and following U.S. entry into World War One (Kirschbaum, 1986; Neils Conzen, 1980). Legislation such as the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917, Section 19, was designed to suppress all foreign language publications and was emblematic of the connection, thereafter, of the German language with all things anti-American (Baron, 1990, p.108). Anti-German campaigns swept many regions of the country, leading to suspension of ethnic clubs and associations, newspapers, and school programs. Baron (1990) notes German was targeted as an enemy language “to be rooted out” and many states, including Illinois, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, passed English Only

constitutional amendments in schools and public places (p. 109). Within this climate of heightened nativism (Higham, 1967), state governments were pressured to create councils of defense responsible for investigations of loyalty and patriotism, particularly in schools, universities, churches, and unions (Manley, 1964). Widespread language restriction often led to attacks on German American church leaders and newspaper editors and many German books were banned from libraries or burned (Manley, 1964). Although the signing of the Armistice in 1918 officially ended World War I, “the war against German language and culture in the United States continued with scarcely any diminution” (Luebke, 1980, p. 11). Beltramo (1981) notes that this “was a time to submerge all signs of German-ness, and the German community never recovered” (p. 352). Burnell (1982) dismally concludes: “No other North American ethnic group, past or present, has attempted so forcefully to officially conceal their ethnic origins. One must attribute this reaction to the wave of repression that swept the continent and enveloped anyone with a German past” (p. 22). Wiley (1998) argues that an understanding of this historical time period has largely been forgotten or repressed in the collective memory of descendants of European immigrants—so much so, that later generations, “have come to assume that their grandparents and great grandparents all willingly deserted their ancestral tongues and cultures” (p. 236).

It is important to keep in mind that, just as Wiley (1998) and Kibler (2008) have noted, German Americans were subject to hostility during a particular historical time period that is not comparable to the long-term cultural and linguistic discrimination faced by Native Americans, African Americans, Asian or Latin American immigrants, or other European immigrant groups such as the Irish during the 19th century. German Americans and the status of the German language were relatively privileged in relation to these ethnic and linguistic minorities prior to anti-German hysteria. Despite this privileged position, the status of German as a minority language and ethnicity were forever altered from that point forward. The experiences of this rapid and far-reaching ethnolinguistic repression for German Americans is an important chapter in the American story and may provide a necessary context in making sense of anti-immigrant discourses in these communities today.

Noisy Silences and Hidden Stories

In line with the broader narrative turn that sees narrative inquiry as an important tool of interpretation (Bamberg 2004a, 2004b; Clandinin, Huber et al., 2006; De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006), this article like that of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), is interested in the social functions that narratives perform in the lives of people: in “how people actually use stories in every-day, mundane situations in order to create (and perpetuate) a sense of who they are” (p. 2). Beyond the everyday stories, there are also taboo stories or more difficult to tell stories in these communities. Linde (2009) argues that in every community there may stories that are not occasioned as freely as others, some that are rarely told, what she terms “noisy silences”; “matters of contested concern ... that officially may not be spoken of but that must be discussed nonetheless” (p. 197). Similarly, Marks (2011) argues that narrative interpretation must be more than listening to “nice stories.” Rather, “there are stories that are hidden between the lines; these need to be noticed and retrieved” (p. 1). In the following narratives, there is a tension between the desire to tell a personal narrative that celebrates family heritage and a need to reveal stories that push against these more easy portraits of generational upward mobility and cultural assimilation. While stories of anti-German sentiment present opportunities to share a largely unknown history, they do so at a considerable cost to the storytellers. For these narrators, it became clear that narratives of anti-German sentiment were *troubling and troubled* in content and practice. These troubled stories highlighted narrative processes that are highly contested in these communities and continue to be so today.

Storytelling Contexts

The narratives analyzed here are part of a larger sociolinguistic study of two counties in Illinois that experienced intensive periods of anti-German feeling between the First and Second World Wars. These small, rural counties are part of a large semicircle of German American communities that stretch east and south from St. Louis, Missouri. This article includes narratives drawn from the life history interviews of seven participants from one of these counties, Lincoln County, who are second and third generation German American, ranging in age from 79 to 93 years old.

While the strongest forms of anti-German sentiment occurred in urban Midwest cities, such as St. Louis, Chicago, and Minneapolis, rural communities located adjacent to these cities were also affected. Interviews with Lincoln residents highlighted the close proximity of Lincoln's farming towns to St. Louis and the importance of commercial, professional, and personal connections to the city. Similarly, when English Only language ordinances were passed statewide, such as the Edwards Law in Illinois (Kloss, 1966), residents from adjacent rural towns felt these restrictions intensely, precisely because of the reliance on German in many schools and churches, as the following narratives bear out.

As noted, the initially striking element of these stories was the difficulty with which they were told. Initially, narrators were excited to share their family stories. Many dutifully assembled artifacts for the interview, such as family photographs, family albums, official documents such as deeds to land, plat books, and citizenship papers (Thompson, 2011). However, when I began asking about the difficulties experienced by their families during the First or Second World War, specifically aspects of anti-German sentiment that might have impacted their childhood or schooling experiences, many narrators became quiet, telling me softly, they couldn't recall any "*trouble*" like that in their town. Some participants physically displayed their discomfort, stiffening or looking down, telling me that they didn't remember "anything like *that*" or noted, "we really didn't have any trouble like that around here." The notion of what "that" was exactly remained unclear. It was apparent then that I was treading on sensitive, emotional ground, what Marks (2011) perfectly termed, "trespassing against the taboo" (p. 104).

Some interviews never pushed beyond this point and I was obliged to return to stories of relatives and the farm that came more easily. Other participants, however, shared a wholly different series of narratives. These accounts were vivid and focused principally around the experiences of discriminatory treatment of neighbors or experiences with language loss at school and at home. In these stories, often untold for decades, it was possible to understand something of what it was like to be marked as ethnic outsiders, or speakers of an "enemy" language during a particular historical period. It was also possible to understand something of the discomfort and disorientation that comes with sharing difficult stories, or living with hidden stories long term. What happens to narratives when they aren't told? When they are *troubled* by contexts of

discrimination and suspicion that may persist long after the experience? This question will be considered in the following examples.

Troubled Stories

The following narrative excerpts from Hazel³, age 90, and Jane, age 79, illustrate some of these initial responses to my questions about difficult times for family members during the war years.

MT: Were there places in the county where Germans were having a hard time?

Hazel: Oh no, we didn't have any of *that kind of trouble* in here. Everybody here were German—there weren't no one different.

MT: Did they ever talk about any difficulty that they experienced as German people in the area?

Jane: You know, there were so many Germans around here that they were really the majority.

MT: So, they never talked about being treated badly?

Jane: No.

In these examples, Hazel and Jane note there weren't any difficulties for German Americans during their childhoods, what Hazel refers to as "trouble," and they provide similar reasons for why this was so. Their communities were majority German, so there were no outsiders to give them any problems. Their responses were not uncommon among the initial interviews in the study or in casual conversations I had with people in the field. The story was initially simple. Despite an abundance of local evidence to the contrary (Thompson, 2008; Olson, 1980; Schwartz, 2003), their communities were spared from regional anti-German hysteria because of the isolated location and majority German constituency of their towns. Yet the same narrators answered the question quite differently later in the same interview. Consider this narrative from Jane and how it contrasts with her earlier story:

³ All participant names, counties, and towns used in this article are pseudonyms.

- MT: Was there any talk about people making it bad for Americans living in Carlton during the war? Do you remember hearing anything about that?
- Jane: There was one. He had a grocery store here. His name was Reinhard. And they always thought that he was a spy for Germany because there was a fire, and he had a grocery store, and he had a fire in his apartment, and they said he ran up into the flames to get something, and they figured it was something that would tie him in with this thing that they suspected him of. I was still pretty little but it still made a great impression on me because we only lived a block away.
- MT: How did your parents feel about him?
- Jane: Well they said it had never-now my dad always said and he was always so logical-he said it's never been proven, and he said we've always shopped there and we're not going to stop now because of gossip. And he did, he had good meat and everything there you know so, but some people didn't feel that way.
- MT: Some people treated him badly?
- Jane: Uh huh and didn't shop there anymore.

Jane was born in 1926 and was 79 at the time of our interview. She was third-generation German American and grew up speaking English at home. Her father ran the local funeral home and Jane spent much of childhood and early adulthood helping to run the family business. She was nineteen during the outbreak of the Second World War. The story of Mr. Reinhard stands in stark contrast to her earlier response to my question about difficulties for German Americans. While she specifies the singular nature of this event, we wonder how common this experience may actually have been for others who found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tolzmann (2001) and Schwartz (2003) note that aspects of anti-German hysteria escalated fiercely during the First and Second World Wars, particularly in communities and towns where majority German populations lived. Civilian led groups, "Patriot Societies," and "Councils of Defense" were organized to carefully monitor their German neighbors for any suspicious activities, which created climates of intimidation and fear in local communities (Wiley, 1998, p. 221). Wiley writes that, in Colorado, "pressures for voluntary rejection of German took the form of character assassinations, releases

from employment and the boycotting of German owned businesses—some 285 of which were boycotted in Colorado alone” (Dorsett, cited by Wiley, 1998, p. 223). While it’s hard to know whether Councils of Defense were at work in the story of Mr. Reinhard, it is clear that the confusion and shame associated with this memory highlights a larger climate of intimidation and suspicion under which local people were living in Jane’s community.

Another story, from Louise, offers a portrait of trouble that stands in sharp contrast to the earlier denials. When asked about whether she remembered experiences that accompanied abrupt changes in German language services following the First World War, she shared this story:

MT: Were there German services still offered at the church after the war?

Louise: Well they didn’t have an English minister so that [German] was the only thing they could have! And see? That was what they loved ‘cause they *spoke* German and that’s what they loved and then it was taken away because of the war between the Kaiser and America. That’s when they started to oust the German ministers because they didn’t like the Germans anymore. So, my dad led a low profile because he could speak German and write German, read German but he never talked, you know Well, that seems so far away and you know and stuff but my dad lived it and knew it! You know, so he just kept his mouth shut.

Louise was born in 1918. Her father immigrated to the U.S. from Germany in his mid-twenties. Because of the scrutiny that German-speaking households experienced during her childhood, her stories were peppered with tales of her parents speaking German only in safe company or other ways of deflecting suspicion and notice. Her family was active in a local Methodist church that held German language services for more than twenty years, services that were sharply curtailed at the onset of the First World War. Language bans were abrupt and wide-sweeping in Illinois, and local church records in the town where Louise, Hazel and Jane grew up changed from German to English virtually overnight (Thompson, 2008; Olson, 1980). Like many churches in these counties, when German language services ceased, ministers were typically transferred or fired.

Louise answered my questions about these changes defensively, stressing the utility and emotional association of German. Her father's bilingualism was regarded as a liability for her family and for the entire congregation. His need to keep "his mouth shut" in order to avoid hostility speaks to a reality much more tense, much more uncertain than previously revealed. Her father's silencing and her congregation's experience with anti-German rancor are memories that are still confusing and painful for Louise.

These narrative examples of trouble from Hazel, Jane, and Louise highlight markedly different responses to my questions about anti-German feeling. While the first set of examples from Hazel and Jane are quick to dismiss any evidence of anti-German sentiment, the second set of stories stands in sharp contrast. Noteworthy too, is the implicit understanding of trouble that runs through the first set of narratives. I was never asked for clarification on what I meant by "difficulty" or "hard times." I was never asked, "What do you mean?" Participants implicitly understood what I meant by this question. While it's hard to know exactly why these narrators initially answered as they did, it can be assumed that the question itself posed a dilemma for narrators. Asking about the experience of being marked, of being positioned as an ethnic and linguistic outsider, treated or regarded differently, is not pleasant for these narrators. The very act of remembering may elicit shame, embarrassment, or even confusion. The notion that this is a chapter of their history best left forgotten was clearly communicated to me over and over again.

Hutton's (1993) conceptualization of recollection as an act of reconstruction is useful here. He notes the way we recall memory narratively is deeply dependent on how we see ourselves, *or want to be seen*, in the present. Linde (1993) argues that a desire to tell a life story rests not with an accurate portrayal of events but in presenting a certain internal consistency or logic. The logic of presenting stories that are chaotic, confusing, discriminatory, and otherwise non-conforming to official narratives of good patriots is deeply troubling for these narrators. The present is continuously penetrating the past.

Stories of Trouble

When narrators did share stories of trouble, they often talked about language trouble, specifically, the impact of German language restriction in their schools, in public, and at home. As discussed in previous studies (Thompson, 2011, 2012), the sanctioning of German was

the *sine qua non* of Americanization efforts during the first and second world wars. These memories illuminate the profound impact of German language restrictions, such as the passing of the Edwards Law in Illinois in 1889, which prohibited the teaching of German at school, at church, during any public meetings, or remarkably, over the telephone (Kloss, 1966, p. 238). Narrators expressed both confusion and defensiveness over the abrupt language changes that their families experienced during this time.

At Home

- Lil: And, my grandparents in town here, they talked German, and when I would go there, they'd say, "I don't understand you." Cause my grandma, Strake, talked English, and my other grandparents, Kuhn, talked German. But we didn't talk German at home, so I couldn't do much of that.
- MT: You couldn't talk to your Kuhn grandparents? You didn't speak German in the home as kids?
- Lil: Our dad and mom never spoke German with us.
- MT: Never?
- Lil: Never.
- MT: Did you ever hear them speaking it outside home?
- Lil: No. Only time they'd talk it is if they didn't want us kids to understand ((laughs)) But otherwise, we never did.
- MT: What was that like going to the Kuhn grandparents and not being able to talk to them?
- Lil: Well, we always felt a little closer to our other grandma and grandpa, you know, but Grandma Kuhn would always fix us a nice lunch. We'd like that.

Lilian ("Lil") was born in 1910. She grew up in the town of Avington and her father ran the local butcher shop. Lil was third-generation German American on her mother's side, but second generation on her father's side, a situation typical of many of the narrators I spoke with. This meant that Lil had immigrant, German-dominant speaking grandparents on one side (the Kuhns) and more English-dominant grandparents on the other, (the Strakes). When wartime language restrictions began, many families voluntarily prohibited the speaking of German in their own homes, despite the fact that one parent or the grandparents often knew little English. Participants repeatedly told me

“No German was to be spoken in our home.” Their choice of phrase was reminiscent of official bulletins and public announcements. When I asked how this happened, another participant, Anna, made it very clear for me: “We were not allowed to speak any German in our house because my mother said ‘you’ll learn German and you won’t learn English and you’ll fail in the first grade!’ and that’s what was happening to the kids that came, that had German parents.” Beliefs about subtractive bilingualism (Cummins, 1994) that were common at the time were mixed together with fears about speaking German and making one’s family vulnerable to hostility. Lil’s story highlights how these public beliefs penetrated the private sphere and impacted the intergenerational relationships in her family.

At School

While language restriction at home was common for some families, other families continued to speak German for decades in these communities. Many narrators who grew up speaking German at home were also instructed in German in the early years of elementary school. Their experiences highlighted a long history of German bilingual instruction in many Midwestern states (Kibler, 2008; Kloss, 1977). However, at the onset of World War I, German language instruction was banned in 22 states (Leibowitz, 1971, p. 16). Statistics indicate that German foreign language enrollments of 324,000 secondary students in 1915 dropped to fewer than 14,000 students by 1922 (Wiley, 1998).

Thus, for many narrators, school was the first place in which they encountered an English Only environment. Like Anna, many shared troubling stories of being punished or beaten for speaking German at school, or their parents sternly warned that learning German would retard their learning of English. In this example from Lester, he shares a particular experience with language restriction at school. His wife, Florence, also grew up in Germantown and participated in the interview, adding key input during our conversation:

- MT: Would you say that speaking German was typical of many of the families in Germantown when you were a child?
- Lester: Yes.
- Florence: Oh yeah.
- Lester: In fact we talked more German than English up to—I think I was in the seventh grade maybe in school—when we had

a kid move in and all he knew was German and *we* talked German. At the same time we got a nun who couldn't understand German ((laughs)) and she forbid anyone on the playground to speak German.

Florence: How well did that go over?

Lester: Well, if you got caught you got a penance! And then I got real jaded. I went back to work on a farm.

Lester, born in 1926, grew up speaking German and mentions he “talked more German than English” until the seventh grade of his Catholic school; a year marked both by the arrival of a German immigrant classmate and an English only speaking nun. He contrasts the utility of his bilingualism in speaking with this new student to that of being punished for doing so. His laughter at this indicates how ironic he found this turn of events and ultimately, how frustrating. Lester’s frank admission of his experiences at school is a chilling example of the ways that the larger political climate penetrated school walls and family homes (Crawford, 1992).

In Public

In addition to stories of language sanction at home and school, many people shared stories of negotiating German language sanction in public. The curtailing of spoken German extended from larger public displays, such as changing street names or town names, to everyday items like German-associated food. Some well-known and particularly outrageous examples included changing the name “sauerkraut” to “liberty cabbage” or “German-fried potatoes” to “American fries” (Baron, 1990, p. 109).

In the narratives from southern Illinois, the changing of street and town names figured prominently. Negotiating public censorship was a skill that involved knowing where and when it was safe to speak German. Participants referred to a kind of spatial mapping where they indicated zones of language safety, what Kloss (1966) refers to as “language islands” (p. 207). For the participants I interviewed, these were often backyard picnics, Sunday gatherings and occasionally, town parades. In the following narrative from Hannah, she and her son, Joe, discuss the changing of her town’s name from “Germanville” to a shortened “G-town” during the Second World War:

- MT: You were saying after World War Two a lot of things changed ...
- Hannah: Yeah, you couldn't talk German! When you went out further then Germanville we couldn't. Germanville wasn't even called Germanville then.
- MT: What'd they call it?
- Joe: G-town.
- Hannah: G-town, uh huh.
- MT: G-town?
- Hannah: Uh huh.
- MT: And why did they call it G-town?
- Hannah: Because they weren't supposed to say [Germanville], cause we were Germans, you know. The mail'd come to the right place, but the people wouldn't speak [German]. If you went somewhere you, you didn't say, well not around *this* area cause these were all Germans here, but like if you went to Belletown or something like that then you would—
- Joe: You'd just say G-town.
- Hannah: Yeah, you would say G-town, yeah. And those guys, those soldiers from Jones, they uh, they went they wanted us to, you know, if you said Germanville oh they'd really rip you!

Hannah tells the story of G-town, a temporary name for Germanville during the Second World War. She employs spatial markers to underscore well-known German-speaking safe zones in her community, such as “around *this* area” and distinguishes these from places where it wasn't safe, like Belletown. Her use of these markers is reminiscent of Haviland's (2000) “mental maps” which combine lexical choices with gestures to indicate where narrators know how “knowledge, land, and territory can be (re) constructed and (re) calculated” (p. 19). A significant node in her mental map includes the town of Belletown and neighboring Jones Air Force Base (AFB), which Hannah refers to as “Jones.” Tales of drunken servicemen from Jones AFB were common in these communities and their behavior was regarded with an understandable amount of caution during this time. Hannah's story reveals the careful recalculation of public space necessary for German speakers living in her town and the consequences they faced when outsiders were present.

Narratives of language loss and anti-German sentiment represent *troubled stories* for members of these German American communities from Illinois. And they continue to be more than a half-century later. When initially asked about memories of difficulty associated with anti-German feeling or language restriction, many narrators were quick to deny there was any. Yet vivid stories existed just below the surface of the initial narrative denials. Indeed, the uncertainty or contested nature of these initial narrative responses is an important component of the narrative landscape of these towns. As noted, Linde (2009) claims stories not told are often as important for narrative analysis as those that are told more freely. These troubled stories involve themes that do not easily align with more dominant portrayals of European American assimilation. These “noisy silences” interrupt the collective desire to be “just like everyone else”; or adhere to master narratives of seamless generational assimilation. These stories of trouble serve to remind these communities of a tenuous time in their immigration and family history. Despite the fact that prior to World War I, German Americans and the German language held a privileged status in relation to other non-white or southern and eastern European immigrant groups (Kibler, 2008), these stories highlight a time when their status as loyal Americans was seriously questioned. The narratives of trouble both those said and “saliently unsaid” (Linde, 2009, p. 220), reveal the enduring nature of these memories of anti-German feeling and the ways in which these experiences are made meaningful over time.

These narrative testimonies highlight the ways that German Americans often adopted complicated stances toward their own ethnic history and language. Their narrative testimonies afford an opportunity to better understand what it was like to live under wartime public monitoring and increasing degrees of suspicion and tell us something about the enduring nature of trying to make sense of this experience over time. Despite the persistent nature of these memories, these stories are not freely passed down to younger generations. At community celebrations and family reunions, some that even featured celebrations of German heritage, painful chapters of anti-German feeling were blatantly omitted. When I asked whether these stories were shared in the private sphere with younger generations of the family, narrators told me that some stories were “too ugly” to bring up. When I asked the youngest generations what they knew about the experiences of their grandparents and great grandparents in negotiating these “troubled times” they knew

little about the details of this history. These narrative omissions for younger generations have powerful implications for rural Midwestern communities of the United States, which are now experiencing new and rapid immigration. Immigrants from Central America and México are migrating to these historically German American regions for jobs in meat and poultry processing (Fennelly, 2008). New immigrants are regarded suspiciously and often negatively, particularly in relation to their perceived citizenship status and/or advocacy for language rights in schools. These present day reactions are deeply troubling in light of narrative testimony that evidences periods of anti-German feeling a little over a half-century ago. If younger generations of Americans are more informed about their immigration histories and particular periods of anti-immigrant sentiment in their own families, there is the potential for empathy, understanding, and social change beyond hateful national rhetoric.

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