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Regional

Historian studies World War I-era lynching

Lynching is one of the most abhorrent of all human acts. It is sometimes explained as being the result of a combination of hate, ignorance and mass hysteria. But to really understand it one must recognize the historical context in which it occurred. A historian who has studied one lynching in our area is Jeff Manuel, an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. A native of Fargo, N.D., he obtained his bachelor's degree in history and economics from Northwestern University, and his master's and Ph.D. in history from the University of Minnesota. The case that he has studied is that of Robert Prager, a German who immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century.

"Prager was a German who, like millions at that time, immigrated to the United States," said Manuel. "We know that he worked as a baker and at some point he came to St. Louis, and then in 1917 he came to Collinsville, Ill., and then eventually got a job in one of the coal mines there."

There is some evidence that he tried to enlist in the U.S. Navy when the war broke out. "The story goes that he was rejected because he was apparently blind in one eye," said Manuel.

It was 100 years ago this month that World War I began, and the anti-German sentiment it generated at that time in the United States created the conditions for the lynching of Prager, a case that garnered national attention.

Just as the Japanese—even those born in the United States—were targeted during World War II, the patriotism of Germans was questioned during World War I.

"Once the U.S. entered the war there was a concern about Germans living in the United States," Manuel explained. "Would they be loyal? Would some of them potentially be spies or saboteurs? In Prager's case, he was not a spy or saboteur. There was no evidence of that, but like many German-Americans he was suspect to sort of prove his loyalty. There is evidence that he flew a large American flag outside of his rooming house in Collinsville as a way of asserting his patriotism in public, perhaps to head off claims that he was disloyal or not American enough."

The anti-German sentiment in this area must have been very strong, so much so that at least some people were concerned about his safety and asked the police to put him in custody just to protect him. The

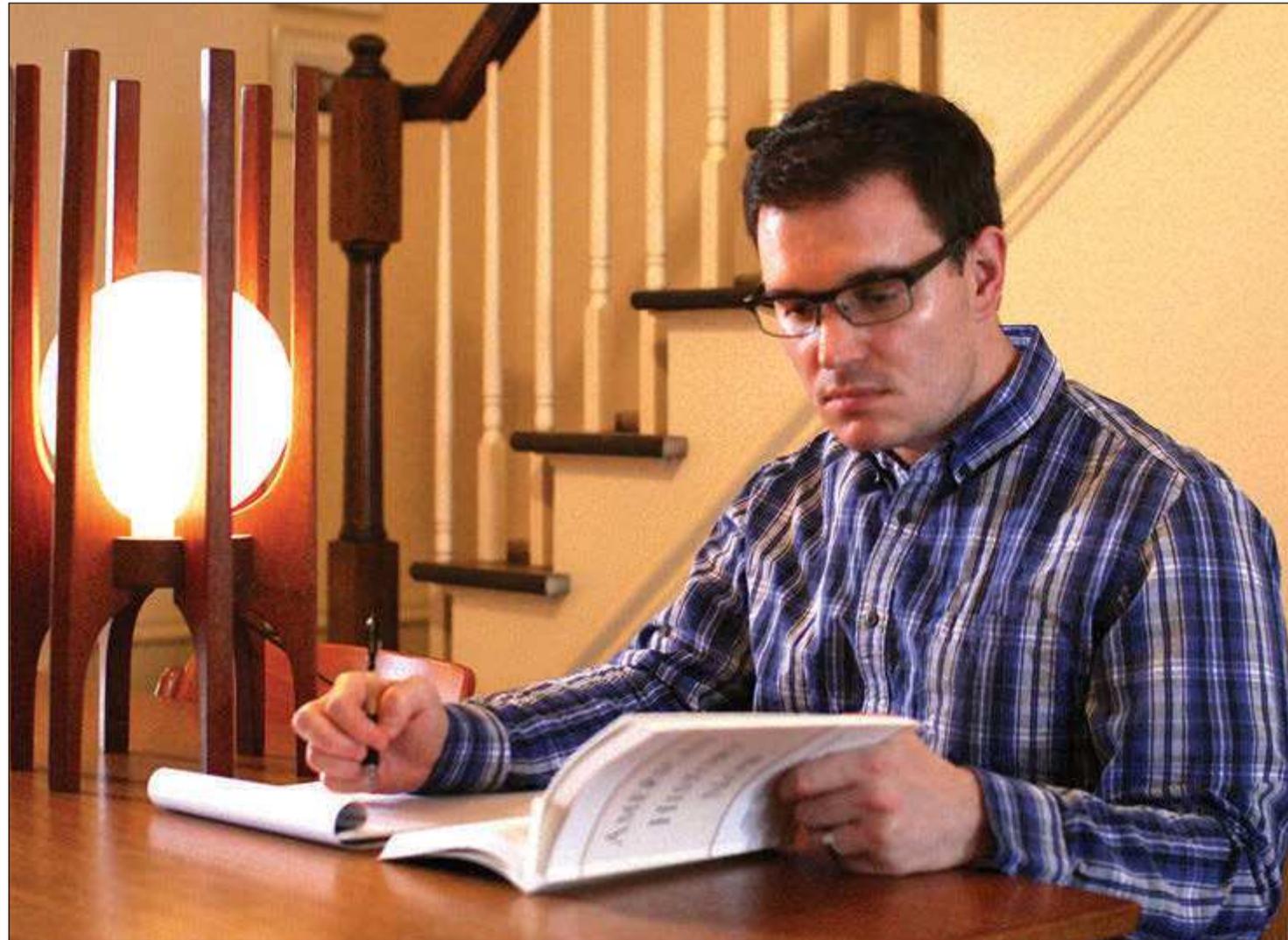


Photo courtesy of Susanne Leblanc

Dr. Jeff Manuel, above, and an archive photo Robert P. Prager, at right.

police declined.

"This concept of putting someone in protective custody to save them from potential mob or vigilante violence was pretty common," explained Manuel. "But I should say it was also pretty common for that protective custody to fail. A very common and tragic story all throughout this era was vigilante justice and lynch mobs. In most cases they were aimed at African Americans in the South and the border states."

"On Wednesday, April 3, a series of events played out that led to Prager's murder on the morning of April 5," said Manuel. "After his shift ended at the mine, a group

of miners singled him out and accosted him in the neighboring town of Maryville. They forced him to kiss the American flag. This was a common practice at the time, to force people to show their allegiance. He was also paraded around and told he had to leave town.

"Later that evening two leaders of the local United Mine Workers met with Prager and they told him that they feared for his safety and they escorted him back to his home in Collinsville. They told him he should go into protective custody. He declined to do that, and instead he wrote up a manifesto of sorts, accusing specific workers in the mineworkers' union of failing

to give him a just hearing under the rules of the union. He made copies and posted them throughout downtown Maryville." He knew that this would upset some of the miners because he named names.

"He then went back to his home, and on April 4 a group of miners had then read the proclamation and were very upset about it," said Manuel. "They most likely nursed their grievances in one of the many saloons that catered to miners at the time. They showed up at his house in Collinsville and they demanded that he leave town. This was about 9:30 p.m." At that point Prager came out of his house and again reasserted

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his loyalty. "He said, 'Brother, I am a loyal U.S. working man,' but did agree to leave town." He was then taken out of his house and out of his shoes and clothing and was draped in an American flag and paraded up and down the main street in Collinsville.

"It's at that point that the group became a lynch mob," said Manuel. "A Collinsville police officer saw the crowd, stepped in, and took Prager into custody in the Collinsville jail. At that point the crowd outside city hall grew. The rumors spread fast that there was a German spy being held in the Collinsville jail. So people flooded out of the saloons and bars that lined the Collinsville main street to see what was happening and be part of this crowd."

Prager was then taken out his cell and marched down Main Street.

After dragging and forcing him to sing patriotic songs, he was hanged.

Despite a trial, nobody was ever convicted for his murder.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.