

the near lynching of john schrag

"During the six-month period November 2004-April 2005, the Monthly Features will comprise six personal accounts, mostly by past or present members of the Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, KS, of their experiences as conscientious objectors during times of war. They will include experiences during World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the war in Vietnam. These accounts have been written by the individuals concerned. They are part of a larger collection of stories contained in a book published in 2004 by Jebeko Publishing entitled *The Eden Peace Witness: A Collection of Personal Accounts* and edited by Jeffrey W. Koller. The Eden Mennonite Church and Jeffrey Koller have kindly agreed to the publication of these accounts as Monthly Features of the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association website. Editors of the website are profoundly grateful for this courtesy. -The Editors"

The following account is an excerpt from *Mennonite Life*, September 1975. It is a first person account of the near-lynching of John Schrag of the Eden Mennonite Church over his refusal to support the war effort through the purchase of war bonds.

Charles Gordon was a non-Mennonite dairy farmer near Burrton, Kansas, in 1918. On Armistice Day, Nov. 11, the town of Burrton held a victory celebration. Gordon describes how the crowd went wild and persecuted John Schrag, a Mennonite farmer who had refused to buy war bonds.

Gordon: When we got there, there was a big milling crowd around at Four Corners there in Burrton where the main part of town was. And they had a casket out in the middle of the street in the square there. This casket, they said that anybody who wants to see the Kaiser come right ahead, and of course we milled through the crowd and got up there and there was a skunk in this casket. And that was the Kaiser. And they celebrated around there and burned a lot of old stuff there to make bonfires. So they was gonna round up all these immigrants that had migrated here from Russia, you know, that settled here around Burrton and Halstead and Newton, Moundridge, Hesston. And there was one particular man. He had about fifteen, sixteen quarters of land around Burrton there, and they tried to get him to buy liberty bonds during the war, and he wouldn't buy none. . . . They brought him in and he never said a word, and the questions or anything they'd ask him, he never, never complained or never put up no resistance whatsoever. They give him a little American flag to hold in his hand. And when they give him that, why, they closed his fist on the handle of the flag. Of course, you naturally would relax as you know. . . . So it dropped. Well, they was a shovin' and pushin' and somebody said, "He stepped on the American flag." Well, brother, you just as well throw the gasoline on a fire to put it out. I never saw so much yellin' and a cursing and slapped him. And buffeted him and beat him and kicked him. He never offered any resistance whatsoever. One of the fellows went and got a, a hardware store and got a gallon of yellow paint. And pulled the lid off and poured it over his face. He had a long beard, kind of a short heavyset man, had a nice beard, and that run down all over his eyes, his face, and his beard, and his clothes. Of course that was yellow. . . .

He never offered no resistance whatsoever and they, one man went to the hardware store again and he got a rope and put it around, got there, and put around his neck and marched him down to the, close to the city jail, a little calaboose there. Had a tree there and they was going to hang him to this tree. And Tom Roberts, who is a president to the Anti-Horse Thief Association, quite well-

to-do-man, lives about mile west of Burrton. And he is kind of a deputy sheriff or undersheriff of the county and come and said, "Now boys," he said, "you've gone far enough." He said, "This man is not going to be hung as long as I am alive." . . . And he just shoved him in the thing and shut the door. Now he said too, "Anybody that takes this man out is going to take it over my dead body." He said, "You're all my friends, you're my neighbors," he said. "I love every one of you," but he said, "Law is the law. Let the law take its due course, justice take its due course." And he said, "I'll shoot the first man that comes in. You may shoot and kill me," he said, "I'm protecting this man."

X: Do you think they would have hanged him if it wouldn't have been for. . .

Gordon: Oh yes. Why you mob, and I said then, if ever I got out of that mob alive, I said I'll, whenever I see a mob form, they go crazy. Storekeepers, and the banker, and everybody. . . . I don't know how many people walked right up to him (Schrag) and spit in his face and he never said a word. And he just looked up all the time we was doing that. Possibly praying, I don't know. But there's some kind of a glow come over his face and he just looked like Christ. . . . (inaudible). Enemies smite you on one cheek, turn the other and brother he did it. He just kept doing it. They'd slug him on the one side of the face and he'd turn his cheeks on the other. He exemplified the life of Christ more than any man I ever saw in my life. *-This account is taken from a college research paper written by Don Kaufman while a student at Hutchinson Community College in 1968.*

John Schrag and the Burrton Incident

John Schrag, also known as "old man Kreek-o-hannes," was a young lad of thirteen when he and his parents immigrated from Volhynia, Russia, to America. They settled in the Moundridge community in 1874. The Schrag family settled four miles west and five and one-half miles south of Moundridge. John helped his father build a grain mill, later known as the Alta Mill, on the banks of the Little Arkansas River in Harvey County. John Schrag was a typical example of the Mennonite farmers in the Moundridge community who valued hard work, loved the soil, and held true to their religious faith.

Schrag was confronted with the proposition of buying Liberty bonds and being harassed by the anti-German patriots of the Burrton area. The issue came to a climax on Nov. 11, 1918, when a group of patriotic citizens from the Burrton area decided it was time for Schrag to agree to buy bonds or pay the penalty. Schrag refused to buy Liberty bonds, because to buy the bonds was to support the war, and he would not support the war. Five carloads of men arrived at the Schrag home and insisted upon talking to John. Some of Schrag's sons were home, but they refused to reveal the whereabouts of their father. The Burrton men would not take no for an answer and proceeded to search the premises. While they were searching, they painted yellow stripes on most of Schrag's farm buildings. After some time of searching, they finally forced their way into the house where Schrag was located. Schrag did not give any resistance, feeling that to resist would only make matters worse. The intruders returned to Burrton with Schrag where he was to join them in Armistice Day festivities. A mob quickly gathered and surrounded their victim, telling him that he must buy the war bonds or face the consequences. Schrag offered to contribute \$200 to the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army, but this contribution fell

short of the mob's expectations. They ordered Schrag to salute the flag and lead them in a parade through downtown Burrton, but he refused to take part. A flag was then shoved into his hand, but it fell to the ground because he refused to grip it. The crowd became extremely violent and accused Schrag of having stomped on the flag. Some yellow paint was brought to the scene and poured and rubbed over his body. Some reports reveal that at this same time he was covered with warm tar and feathers. The Burrton mob justified their actions by claiming that had he not been harassed, he would not have contributed to the Red Cross or Salvation Army. Schrag was then led to the city jail where he was locked up and protected by Tom Roberts, head of the local Anti-Horse Thief Association. When Schrag was in jail, his wife tried to get in through a back window to see her husband and try to help him. Someone in the mob then produced a rope to hang Schrag, but was halted at the jail door by Tom Roberts, who was holding a shotgun. Roberts said, "If you take this man out of jail, you take him over my dead body." The mob dispersed but made plans to return later that night to hang Schrag. Schrag was placed on a chair on a raised platform while in jail so those people passing by could see him through the window in the jail's door. One member of the mob later stated that through the calmness in which Schrag conducted himself during his ordeal, "If ever a man looked like Christ, he did." That evening the Harvey County Sheriff took Schrag to Newton where he could be cleaned up and would be safe. Before Schrag was released, he was informed that he would be tried for violation of the Espionage Act.

Schrag's case was heard in the Federal Court in Wichita on Dec. 9, 1918. Five Burrton citizens presented 50 typewritten pages of evidence to prove Schrag's disloyalty to the flag. A Jewish lawyer named Schulz defended Schrag. His case was heard by United States Commissioner C. Sherman. The final decision, which found Schrag not guilty, was handed down on Dec. 24, 1918. The Espionage Act did not require anyone to salute the flag, and the slanderous remarks against the flag that Schrag was accused of saying were spoken in German, making it impossible to prove Schrag guilty of slandering the flag. Schrag's lawyer tried to convince him to press charges against those who prosecuted him. Schrag refused, stating that it was against the Mennonite principles of non-resistance.

The Burrton Graphic, the Newton Kansan-Republican, and the Hutchinson News carried articles about the Schrag incident saying that he should have been punished. The Hutchinson News said, "A petition was being circulated to have Schrag deported to Germany, his native land. This country is fast becoming an unhealthy place for slackers of any kind." The newspapers circulated by the Mennonites in central Kansas remained silent concerning the incident with the exception of an editorial entitled "Mob Power," which was printed in the Herald (Newton), edited by C.E. Krehbiel. The Mennonite community of Moundridge remained quiet concerning the Schrag incident except for some area Mennonite farmers who boycotted trading in Burrton. After this incident, Schrag was not mistreated further by the patriotic citizens.