

John Schrag

John Schrag was a prosperous Mennonite farmer who lived Harvey County, Kansas. He was a member of the Hoffnungsfeld (Hopefield) Mennonite Church. In 1917 when the United States went to war against Germany, Schrag refused to buy bonds to help pay for the war. Many Mennonites reasoned that war bonds were like taxes. Payment could be seen as "rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." Local American patriots put great pressure on German-speaking people who refused military service to make some kind of contribution to the war. Schrag repeatedly refused the appeals of the local volunteer war bond committee.

On November 11, 1918, the day the First World War ended, people in the town of Burrton called a holiday and held a big victory celebration. Some fellows set up a casket with a sign that the Kaiser, the leader of the defeated German nation, was inside. There was a dead skunk in the casket.

The Burrton war bond committee decided this would be a good time to get John Schrag to finally buy some war bonds. They took five carloads of men eleven miles out to the Schrag farm and forced John Schrag to come with them. In town they told him he now had one last chance to buy bonds. He refused. They tried to get him to carry an American flag and lead a parade through town. Someone put a flag to his hand. He did not take hold of it. It fell to the ground. Someone in the milling crowd shouted, "He stepped on the American flag!" The crowd turned into an uncontrollable mob.

Someone got a bucket of yellow paint. They poured it over him and rubbed it into his scalp and beard. They took Schrag to the small city jail on Main Street. Someone brought a rope and said that instead of putting Schrag in jail, they should hang him to a tree. They would have lynched him except for Tom Roberts, the head of the Burrton Anti-Horse-Thief Association. Roberts pulled out his gun, got Schrag into the jail, and said, "We are Americans. This man is going to get a fair trial. If he is guilty, he will be punished. You won't take him out of this jail except over my dead body." Roberts did allow people to file past the jail door where they could shout insults and hurl spit at the humiliated Mennonite.

Some mob members made plans to come back that night, to break into the jail, and to hang Schrag after all. But Tom Roberts called the Harvey County sheriff in Newton. The sheriff drove out and took Schrag to the county jail in Newton. By the next day Schrag was cleaned up and released.

The Burrton citizens decided to bring Schrag to court on charges of violating the Espionage Act. That national law, which was later declared unconstitutional, made it a crime to show disrespect to the American flag. After a hearing in Wichita, a federal judge ruled that there was not enough evidence to bring Schrag to trial. The evidence that Schrag had slandered the flag was not convincing. Schrag had been calmly nonresistant during the entire ordeal. Everything he had said that day was in the German language. None of his accusers could speak or understand German.

John Schrag had hired a Jewish lawyer to defend him in court. The lawyer advised him to take his persecutors to court with a counter-suit. There was no doubt that they had violated his rights as a citizen. But Schrag declined to sue his tormentors. That would have gone against Mennonite nonresistant principles.

One member of the mob on November 11 had been Charles Gordon. He was a young dairy farmer who had come into town for the celebration. He couldn't get out of his mind what he had seen and done. Fifty years later, in 1968, Gordon recorded on tape an oral history interview about the event. He remembered how nonresistant Schrag had been:

"I don't know how many people walked right up to him 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 was some kind of a glow come over his face and he just looked like Christ. . . . 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 cheek on the other. He exemplified the life of Christ more than any man I ever saw in my life."

Charles Gordon said that because of the witness of John Schrag, he became a nonresistant Christian. "You mean you became a Mennonite?" asked the interviewer. "No," said Gordon. "I'm a member of the Nazarene Church. You can be a Nazarene and also be a conscientious objector."

Sources: James C. Juhnke, "John Schrag Espionage Case," *Mennonite Life* (July 1967), 121-122. Cornelia Lehn, "To Pay or Not to Pay," *Peace Be With You* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1980), 83. Transcript of tape-recorded interview with Charles Gordon, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College. Published in part in *Mennonite Life* (September 1975), 20-21.

Submitted by James Juhnke

Retrieved from "https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=John_Schrag&oldid=16148
(https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=John_Schrag&oldid=16148)"

Category (/mediawiki/index.php?title=Special:Categories):

United States Stories (/mediawiki/index.php?title=Category:United_States_Stories)

This page was last modified on 21 March 2016, at 14:07.