

“Social Studies / History Activity”

“Impact of German Immigrants in the Civil War”

Background

"I goes to fight mit Sigel" was the rallying cry of Unionist German immigrants during the Civil War. It was in Missouri that ethnic prejudice and political rivalry between immigrants and native-born citizens of the state led to military action.

In the 1840s and '50s, many German citizens left their homes in Europe seeking freedom and democracy in America. Thousands began their new lives in St. Louis, where they established a strong cultural identity, founding German language newspapers and social organizations. Yet Germans realized that in order to be accepted by their fellow Americans they would have to assimilate to American (or English) traditions and practices.

German Americans also developed strong anti-slavery and pro-Union views, believing that free labor and democracy were in direct conflict with the traditions of the South and the southern desire to expand slavery into the territories. When the Republican Party chose Abraham Lincoln as its candidate in 1860, the politically active St. Louis Germans comprised nearly all of Lincoln's support in Democratic Missouri.

Many of their fellow citizens, immigrants from Tennessee and Kentucky, viewed the German immigrants with suspicion. As the Civil War approached, a rift existed between the state's slaveholders who supported the Democratic Party, and the commercially minded German Republicans of metropolitan St. Louis. Labeled as "Dutchmen" (the English corruption of Deutsche) by the non-Germans of Missouri, they were subject to prejudice that would ultimately have significant effects on the course of the Civil War.

In the spring of 1861, most Missouri residents wanted to remain neutral, but many in St. Louis were more than willing to choose sides. While Southern secessionists formed "Minute Men" organizations in the city, the Germans met for military drills at their own "Turnvereins" or social clubs. They were anxious to prove their loyalty to their adopted homeland. Many turned for leadership to Franz Sigel, District Superintendent of Schools and a former soldier.

By May 1861, Sigel and other German leaders in St. Louis had organized five regiments of volunteer troops in response to President Lincoln's call for troops to crush the Southern rebellion. They recruited enough additional volunteers to form several "reserve corps" or home guard units. On May 10, the Germans participated in the capture of 700 Missouri militiamen at Camp Jackson, an encampment of largely pro-secessionist state soldiers on the western edge of St.

Louis. In the rioting that followed between the Germans and local citizens, the soldiers suffered their first casualties and killed more than two dozen civilians.

The Camp Jackson "massacre" prompted previously moderate Missourians to choose sides. Many saw the actions of the Union men as evidence of an oppressive Federal government's willingness to murder innocent women and children. Building on their pre-war prejudices regarding Missouri Germans, they called Sigel and his comrades "Hessians" (a reference to the German troops that fought for the British against American patriots in the Revolution).

Remaining together in largely ethnic units, Sigel and others from St. Louis went on to fight pro-Southern Missourians at the Battle of Carthage, Missouri on July 5, 1861, and at Wilson's Creek a month later. Following Wilson's Creek, many Missouri Germans continued to support the Union both in the ranks of the army and on the home front.

Franz Sigel remained an important symbol for German Americans in Missouri and the rest of the North, as an immigrant who attained fame leading other Germans in defense of both democratic principles and their adopted country. Without Sigel, the Missouri Germans and their beliefs, the Civil War in the West would have taken an entirely different course and the Union cause in Missouri would not have prevailed.

Task

This task is designed for use at the fourth, eighth and high school grade levels. Questions and activities corresponding with the respective levels are located with each activity. Teachers are encouraged to use or adapt the provided sample questions for their individual classroom. Students are required to watch a 40 second clip from the movie *Rides with the Devil* in which one of the characters is questioned about his German background. They will also read the writings of a German soldier, named William Mengel. Students will reflect on the motivations and hardships facing German-American Soldier's in the Civil War. They will also read the lyrics to the song, "I goes to fight mit Sigel" and reflect on the positive and negative connotations the song portrayed about German-Americans. Students are expected to provide verbal or written feedback regarding the primary source documents.

Show-Me Knowledge Standards Addressed

SS 2 (knowledge of) continuity and change in the history of Missouri, the United States and the world

SS 6 (knowledge of) relationships of the individual and groups to institutions and cultural traditions

SS 7 (knowledge of) the use of tools of social science inquiry (such as surveys, statistics, maps, documents)

Show-Me Performance Standards Addressed

- 1.2 conduct research to answer questions and evaluate information and ideas
- 1.5 comprehend and evaluate written, visual and oral presentations and works
- 2.3 exchange information, questions and ideas while recognizing the perspective of others
- 3.1 identify problems and define their scope and elements
- 4.1 explain reasoning and identify information used to support decisions

Activities

Watch a short clip from *Rides with the Devil*.

- Time clip 5:10 to 5:50
- [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q76AWLiC9w>]

Read an excerpt from William Mengel's Narrative (See Resource Packet)

- Full text of the order is available online
- [<http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/archives/2596>]

Listen to the song "I Goes to Fight Mit Sigel" (See packet for lyrics)

- [<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/presentations/default.asp?ap=gerciv>]

Discussion Questions

(4th Grade)

- *Give some reasons why many German immigrants wanted to fight for the Union in the Civil War.*
- *What does the term Dutch mean? Explain why you think this was either a positive or negative term.*
- *Is the song "I Goes to Fight Mit Sigel" talking about Germans in a positive or negative way?*

(8th Grade)

- *Give some reasons why many German immigrants wanted to fight for the Union in the Civil War.*
- *Describe how immigrant soldiers were treated differently than other Union soldiers.*
- *Why did they question Jake's (Toby McGuire) loyalty to the South in the film clip?*
- *What does the term Dutch mean? Explain why you think this was either a positive or negative term.*
- *What is the tone of the song "I Go To Fight Mit Sigel"? Is it comedic or offensive?*
- *If you were a German immigrant what obstacles might you have had to overcome in order to be accepted into your community?*

(High School)

- *Why did many German immigrants fight for the Union in the Civil War?(More specific question) Explain the reasons many German immigrants in Missouri were pro-Union.*
- *What impact did German culture and community have on a man's decision to fight in the war?*
- *What was so unusual about William Mengel joining the Missouri State Guards? Do you think others joined the Missouri State Guard because of the same reason?*
- *Describe how immigrant soldiers were treated differently than other Union soldiers.*
- *What advantage did some German soldiers have over native born American soldiers?*
- *Why did they question Jake's (Toby McGuire) loyalty to the South in the film clip? Why was it odd that a German was fighting with the Bushwhackers?*
- *What does the term Dutch mean? Explain why you think this was either a positive or negative term.*
- *Why were some Americans suspicious of Germans and other immigrants fighting in the war? How had the German Hessians from the American Revolution affected the perception individuals had of German soldiers?*
- *What is the tone of the song "I Go To Fight Mit Sigel"? Is it comedic or offensive?*
- *If you were a German immigrant what obstacles might you have to overcome in order to be accepted into your community?*

Resource Packet

William H. Mengel Diary

[<http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/archives/2596>]

Background

William H. Mengel was born in Hessen, Germany on Feb. 13, 1838. In 1850, Mengel, like most other Missouri German immigrants, lived in St. Louis with his mother and two sisters. By 1860, Mengel had moved to California, Missouri and worked as a clerk in H.C. Finke's store. When the Civil War began, Mengel felt pressure to join the Missouri State Guard. California was located in the Little Dixie region of Missouri, which strongly supported the Confederacy and Missouri's Pro-Secession Governor, Claiborne Fox Jackson. No doubt, Mengel felt immense social pressure to join the Missouri State Guard, which supported Jackson, but his decision to enlist in the MSG is surprising. The majority of Missouri German immigrants supported the Union. They had seen Germany suffer lawlessness and depredations for centuries because of the lack of a strong centralized government, and had no wish to endure the same in their newly adopted country.

Mengel was taken prisoner and released on a parole of honor. His parole allowed him to return home, after vowing not to take up arms again. Mengel returned to California, but eventually enlisted in John Holman's Battalion of Sharpshooters, the 26th Missouri Infantry.

Quotes

Life and travals of Wm [William] H. Mengel since the rebelion War since 1861 May 17th was imprest in the M.S.G. [Missouri State Guard] and went to Boonville MO was there [May] 18 & 19th wen a stanpeed took place in Camp and all kam near getting sceard to death a 2 P.M. Jackson [Governor Claiborne F. Jackson] and others made a speach on [May] 20 fight comenced and we hat to run like turkis. reached home on the [May] 25th remaind there untill June 14th inlisted in the U.S. sirvice [1st Regiment, US Reserve Corps, Missouri Home Guard] [June] 20th went to Jefferson City [Missouri] reained there som time then the Co went to Otterville [Missouri], to take a reble camp and when disbandet returnt back to Jefferson City

-Diary of William Mengel,

http://cdm.sos.mo.gov/cdm4/page_text.php?CISOROOT=/mack&CISOPTR=4070&CISOBOX=0&OBJ=4134&ITEM=2

remaind there under parol of honor until the 27th wen I was aloud to go home to California [Missouri]. sept 29th wint to St. Louis & got Ex changed for som of the Camp Jackson Prisoners. after I was exchanged I again joind what was then cald [John H.] Holmans sharp shooters

Community & Conflict: The Impact of the Civil War in the Ozarks

<http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org>

[Holman's Battalion of Sharpshooters] said Batalion was X Consoladatet with a other Batalions & Cald the 26th Regt Mo inft Vols January 2st 1862 X I belong to Co "G" Janry 5th wint to Medora Mo, -Diary of William Mengel

http://cdm.sos.mo.gov/cdm4/page_text.php?CISOROOT=/mack&CISOPTR=4073&CISOBOX=0&OBJ=4134&ITEM=5

I GOES TO FIGHT MIT SIGEL

I've come shust now to tells you how,

I goes mit regimentals,
To schlauch dem voes of Liberty,
Like dem old Continentals,
Vot fights mit England long ago,
To save der Yankee Eagle;
Und now I gets my sojer clothes;
I'm going to fight mit Sigel.

Ven I comes from der Deutsche Countree,
I vorks somedimes at baking;
Den I keeps a lager beer saloon,
Und den I goes shoe-making;
But now I was a sojer been
To save der Yankee Eagle,
To schlauch dem tam secession volks,
I goes to fight mit Sigel.

I gets ein tam big rifle guns,
Und puts him to mine shoulder,
Den march so bold like a big jackhorse,
Und may been someding bolder;
I goes off mit de volunteers
To save der Yankee Eagle;
To give dem Rebel vellers fits.
I goes to fight mit Sigel.

Dem Deutschen mens mit Sigel's band
At fighting have no rival;
Und ven Cheff Davis mens ve meet,
Ve schlauch em like de tuyvil.
Dere's only von ting vot I fear,
Ven pattling for der Eagle,
I vont get not no lager beer,
Ven I goes to fight mit Sigel.

For rations dey gives salty pork,
I dinks dat was a great sell;
I petter likes de saurkraut,
Der Schvitzer-kase und bretzel.
If Fighting Joe will give us dem,
Ve'll save der Yankee Eagle,

Und I'll put mine frau in breech-a-loons,
To go and fight mit Sigel.