

Campaign to aid Britain comes to Bloomington

On Dec. 5, 1940, two of Bloomington's favorite sons returned home to call upon Americans to support Great Britain in her greatest hour of need.

These were dark days. The U.S. had yet to enter the Second World War, France had fallen six months earlier to the German blitzkrieg, and now the Nazi war machine had turned its attention towards the British Isles, the last redoubt of liberty in Europe.

The two former Bloomingtonians, Chicago attorney Adlai E. Stevenson II and Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent Edgar Ansel Mowrer, appeared together at the Majestic Theater on behalf of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies.

With some 600 local chapters across the nation, this nonpartisan group maintained that dramatically increasing military aid to the United Kingdom was the best way to keep America out of the widening war. Its members supported the "Destroyers-for-Bases" bilateral agreement of September 1940 involving the transfer of 50 WW I-era destroyers to the British in exchange for naval bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. And they were enthusiastic champions of the proposed "Lend-Lease" program (eventually approved in the spring of 1941), in which the U.S. transferred arms and supplies to allied nations. Even so, they steadfastly argued that the Franklin Roosevelt administration had to become far more proactive when it came to Great Britain's defense.

The group also opposed a negotiated peace with the Nazis, calling such diplomatic outreach not merely appeasement, but "treason to democracy."

In 1940, Adlai Stevenson, who would go on to become Illinois governor, two-time Democratic presidential candidate and United Nations ambassador, served as chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies.

He certainly had his work cut out for him, as Chicago was the center of "America First" isolationist sentiment. The powerful America First Committee was based in the Windy City, with Gen. Robert E. Wood of Sears-Roebuck serving as chairman. And the Chicago Tribune, under the publisher Robert R. McCormick, was the leading voice for the American First movement in the country. "Firsters" believed the American way of life and its democratic institutions and principles could be saved only by steering well clear of foreign entanglements and another European war. As horrible as the Nazis might be, they argued, they posed no threat to the U.S. mainland.

Elizabeth “Buffie” Ives, who shared her brother Adlai Stevenson’s interest in international affairs, played a leading role in establishing a “Defend America” chapter in the Twin Cities. Other local members included Florence Fifer Bohrer, Hazle Buck Ewing, Eugene D. Funk, Clyde Hudelson, G.J. Mecherle, Louis L. Williams and Carl and Julia Scott Vrooman.

The local committee sponsored lectures and “patriotic mass meetings.” For instance, an Oct. 22, 1940 gathering at Chenoa High School featured Carl Vrooman and George M. Palmer, an English professor at Illinois State Normal University.

On Dec. 5, 1940, the committee welcomed celebrated newspaperman Edgar Mowrer as its keynote speaker for a public forum at the Majestic Theater, an old vaudeville house in downtown Bloomington.

Although Adlai Stevenson—given his later rise to national prominence—is the much bigger name today, Mowrer was the main draw back in 1940. Edgar and his older brother Paul Scott Mowrer spent their early years in Bloomington, growing up in a modest residence at 418 E. Grove St. (it’s still there).

Stationed in Rome in the early 1920s, Edgar reported on the ascendancy of Italian fascism and Benito Mussolini. The Daily News then assigned him to the Berlin bureau where he diligently covered the nightmarish rise of Adolph Hitler and the National Socialist (Nazi) Party. In 1933, he earned his Pulitzer (his brother had picked one up four years earlier) and wrote the bestseller, “Germany Puts the Clock Back.”

For his steely-eyed reportage, he was targeted by the Nazis. With his life in serious danger he reluctantly left Germany and relocated to Paris, and from there covered Europe until France’s fall in June 1940. Now, six months later, he was back stateside and in Bloomington, beseeching his countrymen to wake up and squarely face the horrors unfolding overseas.

A 40-year-old Stevenson, who in eight years time would be the governor-elect of Illinois, introduced Mowrer to the overflowing Majestic Theater audience, calling him the “sparkplug of the greatest staff of foreign correspondents of an American newspaper.”

“Germany wants to rule with a gangster mentality” and establish nothing less than a “United Slaves of Europe,” warned Mowrer. As such, he called for placing the U.S. economy on immediate war footing, with the nation’s industrial workforce beating plowshares into swords “seven days a week and three shifts a day,” all in order to aid the British and keep America out of the war.

Mowrer specifically called for the U.S. to dramatically ramp up production of military aircraft, believing, perhaps naively, that it could play a decisive role in ending the war before any American lives were lost. “If we could give Britain mastery of the air so Germany could get what she has been dealing out in the way of devastation from the air,” he said, “the German people might give up their dictator and return to the role of a civilized people.”

In his opening remarks introducing Mowrer, Adlai Stevenson recalled how in 1915, during World War I, he and a few of his teenage friends snuck into the Majestic Theater (“this gilded palace of pleasure” he called it) to catch a vaudeville review, including a trick bicyclist and a “bewitching girl in a short ballet skirt and pink tights.”

“On that epic evening at the Majestic the world was in flames, but somehow the bicycle rider (or the girl in pink tights!) seemed a lot more important to me than the war,” Stevenson said. “Tonight the world is in flames again and I wish I could feel about it now the way I did then. It would be nice to be complacent in the shadow of an awful catastrophe ...to be undisturbed while tyranny engulfs free peoples everywhere; to be light-hearted when we know we can’t escape.”