



Doug Moe: Wisconsin author explores WWI anti-German bigotry in 'Jingo Fever'

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Death steals everything except our stories. Jim Harrison once used that line to end a poem.

I thought of it last week when Stephanie Golightly Lowden told me how she got her mom on audio tape late in her life and at one point her mom said, "I remember when they burned all the German language books."

There was a story there, and though the mother has died, the daughter has written it.

It's fictionalized, because that's what Lowden does. She has now written three novels for young readers and each had its genesis in real world events.

Lowden's latest, just published, is "Jingo Fever," the story of a young German-American girl who moves with her mother from Milwaukee to Ashland in the summer of 1918. World War I is ongoing, and abundant anti-German sentiment is in the air.

Dorothy Golightly, Stephanie's mom, lived a bit of the story as a young girl in Milwaukee, when German books in her school were burned.

While her mother's memories inspired "Jingo Fever," Lowden first learned about anti-German bigotry in Wisconsin when she came to Madison in 1970 with a work-study opportunity under E. David Cronon, a noted professor of history at UW-Madison and later dean of the College of Letters and Science.

Cronon asked Lowden, who grew up in Menomonee Falls and attended UW-Milwaukee before transferring to Madison, to read old issues of the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper on microfiche at the Wisconsin Historical Society with an eye toward stories about German-Americans in Wisconsin during World War I.

"It was a crazy time," Lowden, 62, said last week.

She found stories of two German-American professors in Ashland being tarred and feathered. In Monroe, a German-American had a small explosive set off near his home because he declined to buy a war bond. A machine gun was set up in front of Milwaukee's Pabst Theatre, to discourage the German-Americans who used it as a gathering spot.

Lowden turned the research over to Cronon, but she didn't write about it, not then.

It was later, after she and her husband began raising a family in Madison, that Lowden decided to try to write.

Her first serious attempt at fiction came right from the heart. Lowden's father died when she was 9 years old — a sudden Father's Day heart attack — and Lowden crafted a story, for young readers, about a girl whose father dies suddenly. She wrote about grief and the impact on the rest of the family.

She called it "Emily's Sadhappy Season" and she sent it off to a publisher. And then something happened that rarely happens to beginning authors. The publisher called and said, "We want to do your book." It was published in 1993.

Lowden's mother Dorothy had battled anxiety and depression after her husband's unexpected death. But once Lowden had married and settled in Madison, her mother relocated here as well, and in Stephanie's word, "blossomed."

Dorothy was active in progressive politics — Stephanie has a photo of her mom getting an award from a young state senator named Russ Feingold — and some years before her death in 2001 Dorothy shared her memories on tape, including the story about the book burning in Milwaukee.

On hearing it, Lowden recalled her research years earlier for Cronon. She began the manuscript which would eventually be "Jingo Fever," although she was not satisfied with her early drafts.

She set it aside and in 2004 published "Time of the Eagle," an historical novel for young readers about an Ojibwe girl who loses her family to small pox. The book — based on a real smallpox epidemic — was well-reviewed, and Lowden again set her sights on the German-American tale set in Wisconsin in 1918.

"Jingo Fever" is now out. Acknowledgments to Cronon and Dorothy Golightly appear at the front of the book. It is available at Amazon and the University Book Store-Hilldale, and on Jan. 12 Lowden will have a signing at The Prairie Bookshop in Mount Horeb.

The book begins, "Why don't you go back to Germany where you came from!" Death steals everything except our stories, and Lowden has written a good one.

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