

# Offbeat Oregon History: A librarian's crime of money

By Finn JD John  
For The Sentinel

On April 12, 1918, Oregonians opened their newspapers to learn that there was a traitor in their midst.

"PORTLAND LIBRARIAN RADICAL IN DECLARING LOYALTY TO KAISER!" shrieked the Salem Statesman. "Declaring that she would rather be ravished by a Hun than support the United States in this war, M. Louise Hunt, assistant librarian at Central Library here, brought down a storm of indignation from Portland citizens today."

"Miss Hunt's attitude is an insult to the motherhood of our Nation and to their boys who are knee-deep in the muddy trenches of France fighting for liberty," fulminated Portland Mayor George Baker.

"Not only should she be dismissed (from her position), but if she continues her anti-war propaganda she should be interned during the course of the war, like any other disloyal citizen or enemy alien," proclaimed Oregon Governor James Withycombe.

So, what was the great sin against the American people perpetrated by this quiet assistant librarian? What was this despicable act of treason that had brought upon her the censure of

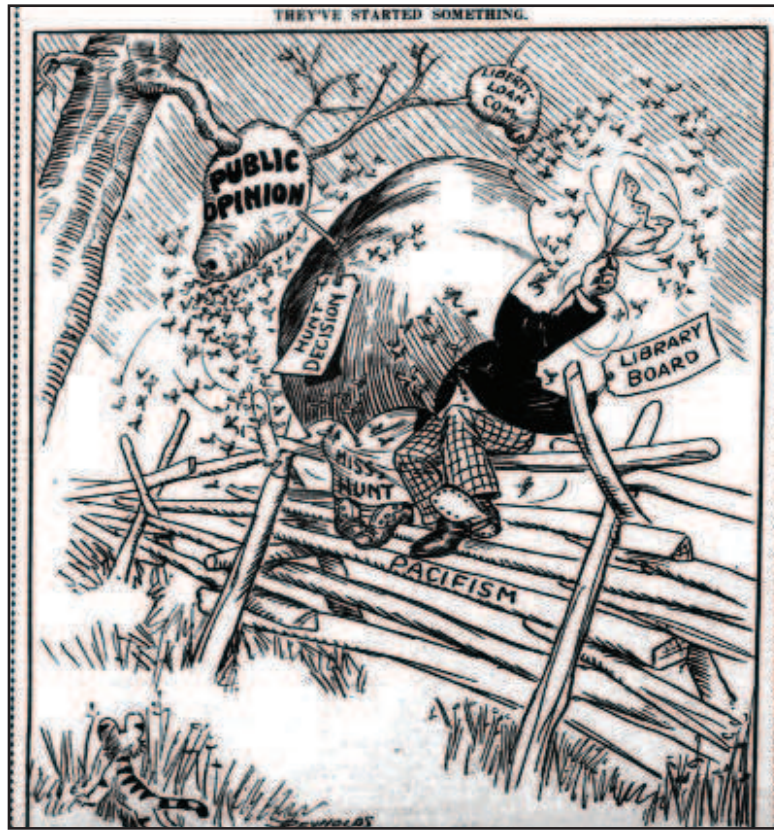
the most powerful men in the state?

Simply this: When offered the opportunity to lend the government money to finance the war, she said "no thanks."

Oregon was in the grip of war fever as the late winter of 1918 ripened into spring. The First World War was being sold to the public, very successfully, using all the techniques of propaganda and mass persuasion known to President Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information. And they were passing the hat to literally get buy-in from members of the public, and to help finance the war, through the Liberty Loans war bonds program.

There had been two drives for Liberty Loans, in which the government had asked citizens to dig as deep as they could to help finance the war. Besides being an expression of patriotism, Liberty Loans were actually a pretty good investment; the government was paying 4.5 percent interest on them, and there was almost no risk of default. Plus, failing to participate was tantamount to failing to "do one's bit," in the slang of the day. So the drives had been very successful.

Now, as April came, a third Liberty Loan drive had gotten under way, and Portland's civic leaders had a goal: they wanted



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A political cartoon by the legendary Tige Reynolds on the front page of the Portland Morning Oregonian.

their state to be the first in the nation to make its quota of sales.

To achieve that goal, they planned very carefully in advance. There was much advance publicity, urging Oregonians to get the cash ready so that all the drive's volunteers had to do was collect the money. The kickoff day — Saturday, April 6 — was declared Liberty Day. There were parades, and open-air band concerts playing patriotic tunes, and prominent appeals

published in the newspapers to all Portlanders to get their wallets out. "Over the Top in a Week" was the slogan.

It didn't take even that long. Six days later, the newspapers were able to report a resounding success. Oregon had been the first state in the union to reach its quota of \$18.5 million, of which Portland alone had kicked in just over \$10 million.

But right next to the celebratory headline on the front page of the Portland Evening Bulletin announcing that success there appeared another: "LIBRARIAN WITH BIG PAY CHECK WILL NOT PURCHASE BONDS."

In this other article, the Bulletin reported that it had come to the attention of the Liberty Loan executives that assistant librarian M. Louise Hunt had not purchased any Liberty Loan bonds, so the organizers had sent two representatives to the library to find out why, and to arrange for Hunt's apparent oversight to be promptly and generously remedied.

"Miss Hunt" proved a much tougher nut to crack than the representatives apparently expected. She quietly informed them that she was not buying bonds because she did not believe in war, and did not wish to financially support it.

Attempting a sort of Socratic-dialogue closing technique, the representatives asked if she

was an American citizen, and, upon getting her "yes," pounced: Did she not agree that it was the duty of every American citizen to help defend their country? She said she did not consider participation in the European war to be a defense of country.

The representatives then tried an appeal to pecuniary interest (it was, after all, a very safe investment with a guaranteed rate of return) and, when that didn't work, made an appeal to pity: Didn't she realize that the Huns were running around all over France and Belgium raping women, they asked her? The boys in France were fighting to protect her from the same fate. How could she deny them her financial assistance in their quest to save Belgian and Northern French women from the same fate? Wouldn't she want the same consideration if she were in their position?

Hunt parried that thrust by assuring them that she was prepared for any suffering (this exchange was the source of the "would rather be ravished by the Huns" line in the newspapers) and then riposted that if the government wanted her money, it could come and take it; but she would not give it voluntarily.

The representatives hurried back to make their report, and to leak it to the press; and when it appeared, in the Bulletin, it sparked a popular furor. The district attorney called for Hunt to be fired from her job; the mayor and the governor soon weighed in as well; and angry letters started pouring into the newspapers and to the library board. So the library board called an emergency meeting to discuss the matter.

Aware of the mounting hostility, Hunt carefully prepared her statement for the board, in writing, and forwarded it to them before the meeting. "I am an American, and no one can more earnestly desire to see America leading in the world's progress to a higher civilization," it read. "It is increasingly a source of pride to me that in this conflict our President now stands head and shoulders above the statesmen of the other warring nations. His aims and ideals and those of other earnest people with whom I disagree

are my aims and ideals. The disagreement is purely an honest difference of opinion about the methods which will best achieve those ends. At no time have I desired to be an 'obstructionist.' I merely wish to claim the Constitutional American right privately to hold a minority opinion."

The board was convinced — all but board member W.F. Woodward; and the board voted to support her right to abstain from buying bonds, although every member disagreed with her stand.

Woodward was soon being quoted in the newspapers as calling the decision a disgrace. Nobody, he said, who was getting a \$175-a-month salary in a publicly funded position should be allowed to keep her job if she refused to support her country.

The public furore now worked itself up to such a pitch that the library board was more or less forced to meet again three days later. Woodward clearly came to this meeting armed for bear, and was apparently surprised when it was announced that Hunt had resigned her position.

"Because I do not wish in any degree to hamper the usefulness of the Library, and because I am unwilling to place upon the Library Board the burden of a conflict to maintain its brave stand for freedom of conscience, I hereby tender my resignation," she wrote.

This was not good enough for Woodward, who promptly moved that action be deferred on the resignation until after the board had voted to dismiss her outright — in other words, a "you can't quit, you're fired" move. This failed, and the resignation was accepted. Woodward, cheated of his prey, then started pounding on the table and shouting accusations that the head librarian, Mary Frances Isom, was "disloyal" as well. Isom, enraged, leaped to her feet and shouted back at him that he was "no gentleman." Board member Jonah B. Wise jumped up as well and, addressing Woodward, said, "I am ashamed of you, sir."

All the other board members joined in the general condemnation, and Woodward, in high dudgeon, got up and walked out of the room without another word.

"I want to be quoted as saying that Mr. Woodward's conduct is yellow and he is yellow clear through," Board president W.B. Ayer told reporters after the meeting.

"Yellow," of course, was 1910s slang for "cowardly"; so Ayer's statement was, in effect, an ever-so-slightly more civil version of "Put up your dukes." The newspapers don't give any indication of whether this challenge was accepted, though.

In short order, the whole affair was forgotten — especially after dead soldiers started coming back from France and the whole jingoistic glow of propaganda-driven excitement started to drain away. Within a few months of the end of the war, most of the people who had so bitterly opposed Louise Hunt were now firmly in her camp; but by then she was gone. After resigning her job, she moved immediately back to Maine, and later finished her career as head librarian at the public library in Racine, Wis.

## FOUR COUNCIL POSITIONS AND MAYOR POSITION TO BE ON NOVEMBER 6<sup>TH</sup> BALLOT

Four seats on the Cottage Grove City Council and the office of Mayor will be filled by voters in the November 6<sup>th</sup> General Election.

The Mayor's position is a two-year term and the Councilor positions are four-year terms, with the exception of the Ward 4 position. The Ward 4 position will serve the remainder of the current four-year term until December 31, 2020. The Mayor position is currently held by Jeff Gowing; the Councilor at Large position is currently held by Mike Fleck; Ward 1 is held by Jake Boone; Ward 3 is held by Garland Burback and Ward 4 is held by Greg Ervin. To qualify as a candidate a person must be a resident of Cottage Grove during the 12 months immediately preceding the election and a qualified elector within the meaning of the Constitution. Candidates filing for Ward positions must be a resident of that Ward at the time of nomination and election and must live in the Ward during their term of office. Persons interested in filing for one of these positions should contact Trudy Borrevik, City Elections Official at 541-942-5501 to schedule an appointment to go over the Candidate Information Packet. The earliest date to file is May 30, 2018 and the deadline to file is August 21, 2018.

**What:** Mayor and Council positions for November 6, 2018 General Election.

**When:** May 30, 2018 earliest day to file.

**Where:** Candidate Information Packets are available at City Hall in the City Manager's Office or by calling Trudy Borrevik at (541) 942-5501.

**Additional Information:** Contact Trudy Borrevik, City Elections Official at (541) 942-5501.



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