Editorial Cartoon, Mixing the Devil's Broth

By Bob B.

This political cartoon appeared on the front page of the Portland Telegram days before Oregon’s voters passed the compulsory public school attendance bill in the 1922 general election. It utilized the imagery of the melting pot, a device proponents used in their campaign literature to suggest that public schools would be an easy mechanism for the assimilation of immigrants. This cartoon, however, offers a more sinister view of what happens when groups are robbed of their liberty—resentments brew.

The bill, known commonly as the compulsory education bill, would have required parents to send their children to public school. Many proponents, Ku Klux Klan members in particular, targeted private Catholic schools by encouraging the public to be suspicious of the allegedly un-American ideas taught there. Advocates also decried the “elitism” of private schools. Supporters used the melting pot metaphor to describe their position in an essay published in the voter’s pamphlet. “Mix the children of the foreign born with the native born,” it read, “and the rich with the poor. Mix those with prejudices in the public school melting pot for a few years while their minds are plastic, and finally bring out the finished product—a true American.”

Those against the bill spoke out on many accounts. A negative argument in the voter’s pamphlet noted the similarity between the bill and the Prussian system, which gave the state dictatorial powers and undermined freedom of thought, and the methods of Bolshevist Russia, which treated children like wards of the state. Many agreed with Portland lawyer A.F. Flegel, for instance, who, while speaking at a mass meeting at Jefferson High School in Portland, described the bill as having been “conceived in hate and intolerance.”

Still others argued that the bill fostered class hatred by wrongly accusing private schools of elitism. Further, opponents maintained that the “melting pot” argument would not hold up in practice. With public schools organized by district, the bill would only place together those who lived in the same neighborhoods, which were segregated largely by class and ethnicity.

The finished product depicted in this political cartoon was not “a true American,” but instead something far more negative. Leading up to the election, editors filled their newspapers with articles on this controversial issue. Few newspapers editorialized in favor of the opposition as consistently as the Portland Telegram, however.


