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The End of the Small-Town Golden Age: A Rural Newspaper's Role in the Urban-Rural Clash of Anti-Catholicism

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Abstract

Anti-Catholicism is an often forgotten feature of our country's past that was extremely widespread, especially across rural America. In this essay, I focus on an anti-Catholic newspaper, titled *The Menace*, which was published out of the small Midwestern town of Aurora, Missouri and enjoyed national success. I argue that anti-Catholic sentiments were largely tied to rural values and fears of urbanization, which were being fueled by a massive influx of Irish and Italian Catholic immigrants into the United States. Rural communities cried out against this "Catholic invasion" because they truly believed that urban immigrant populations were taking away their political and economic powers. By considering the historical context of *The Menace* and the newspaper's content, I am able to trace the fears that were really behind the anti-Catholic cause.

The small farm town of Aurora, sitting among the Ozark highlands of Southwestern Missouri, appears to be an average Midwestern community. Business is slow these days and hardly anyone has even heard of the town, but this was far from the truth less than a century ago. Aurora's "historic downtown," now almost completely empty, used to house one of the nation's leading newspapers: *The Menace*. This oddly-named paper, founded by Wilbur F. Phelps and Thomas E. McClure on April 15, 1911, began in a run-down opera house with a mere 22 subscribers. By 1914, however, the paper had its own printing plant and reached over a million and a half subscribers every issue, making it the third most published newspaper in the country at the time.[1] While this success story may seem like an achievement Aurora would advertise to this day, the town's residents usually fail to mention its existence. The town is not proud of *The Menace* because it was an anti-Catholic newspaper that spread slanderous material about the Catholic Church across the entire nation.

Americans rarely recognize that, for much of the United States' existence, the nation's population was highly prejudiced against the Catholic Church. This hate spread from coast to coast and largely targeted Irish and Southern European immigrants, who mostly resided in the nation's bustling urban centers. During the Progressive Era of the late 1890s and early 20th century, anti-Catholicism made its way into the booming newspaper industry, which was notorious for its "muckraking" tactics and sensationalized stories. While most major newspapers printed out of large cities such as New York and Chicago, anti-Catholic publications, including *The Menace*, sprouted up in small Midwestern towns. This raises a very interesting question; why did the major voices of progressive anti-Catholicism develop in rural communities instead

1 About *The Menace*. (Aurora, Missouri) 1911-1920," Accessed April 26, 2015 http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066178/

of rapidly expanding cities? In his book *Danger on the Doorstep*, Justin Nordstrom argues that this phenomenon occurred from, "anti-Catholic writers acting to preserve America's small-town pastoral values in the face of dramatic social upheaval."[2] These rural newspaper publishers saw rapidly-expanding trends of modernity, which they associated with urban-dwelling Catholics, as a threat to their traditional small-town way of life.

While Nordstrom focuses on the nature of anti-Catholicism within print culture, his theory is applicable on a larger scale. The war waged by anti-Catholic newspapers was not about religious beliefs, but was instead the manifestation of a national resistance to urbanization and a desire to preserve rural Protestant America. This resistance can be seen in the development of anti-Catholicism leading up to *The Menace*, the paper's sensationalized stories, its 1916 court battle over "free-speech," and the national reaction to the paper. *The Menace*'s story demonstrates how some pastoral communities have harbored extreme hate towards foreign ideas as a response to threatening social and economic changes.

These xenophobic sentiments did not arise out of nowhere during the Progressive Era, rather they have their roots in a legacy of anti-Catholicism that started well before the Revolutionary War. Historian Mark Massa believes that anti-Catholicism is the result of a national sense of nativism that has always been present in America. Massa defines nativism as, "a fear and distrust of outsiders by cultural insiders," and, "a reaction to alterity, or 'otherness'."[3] Nativist sentiments led many Protestant Americans to view Catholics as a foreign threat to the American way of life and label them as foreigners in their own country.

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2 Justin Nordstrom, *Danger on the Doorstep: Anti-Catholicism and American Print Culture in the Progressive Era* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006).
3 Mark Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2003) 7-17.

The first anti-Catholic prejudices came from the puritan settlers of colonial New England, who brought with themselves the memory of a long religious conflict between Catholics and Anglicans in England. By the time of the American Revolution, anti-Catholicism was rampant, for patriots associated Catholicism with the old European world from which they were trying to separate. These sentiments continued among the general populous until after the Civil War, when anti-Catholic rhetoric faded from normal political discourse. However, with the newspaper boom of the late 19th Century, anti-Catholic articles and cartoons sprung up in popular newspapers and periodicals across the nation. The popularity of these sentiments was due to a massive influx of Irish-Catholic immigrants to the nation's urban centers during the height of the Industrial Revolution. This huge foreign work-force totally transformed the nature of the United States' economy and appeared to threaten the job-security of those already living in America.[4]

The arrival of these many Catholic immigrants was particularly alarming to rural Americans, who had been the economic backbone of the country up until this point. In 1887, in the small city of Clinton, Iowa, Henry F. Bowers founded a political party known as the American Protection Agency (APA). The APA was an anti-immigrant political party that organized small-town Americans against the immigrant-supported political powers of the cities. For a time, it was immensely popular and played a legitimate role in national politics, but it quickly lost most of its support and fell out of the national attention by the late 1890's.[5] Despite its fall in popularity, the APA left a major imprint on the rural American populous and started a trend of fighting against urban Catholic political powers.

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4 Robert P. Lockwood, *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), 15-53.
5 Ibid, 35-36.

Soon after the beginning of the 20th century, a series of anti-Catholic publications began to appear in small towns across the Midwest and the South. Some of these publications included *The Crusader* of Iola, Kansas, *Watson's Magazine* of Thompson, Georgia, and *The Rail Splitter* of Milan, Illinois, but none of these papers reached the level of popularity achieved by *The Menace* of Aurora, Missouri. After only a few years of publishing, *The Menace* had reached over 1.5 million subscribers weekly and was one of the most popular papers in the country. It is perplexing to think that the town of Aurora, with roughly 4,000 residents at the time, produced a paper that was more popular than most publications out of cities like New York or Chicago.[6] These papers were representative of a massive populist movement across rural America which sought to defend its own place in a changing American society.

The rural character of anti-Catholicism instantly comes to life on the pages of *The Menace*, as many of the paper's articles directly target urban corruption and champion pastoral democracy. Every issue of *The Menace* told a new set of stories about the evil actions committed by the Catholic Church, almost all of which occurred within urban areas. The paper was particularly fond of stories involving political and corporate corruption, which it claimed were the result of Catholic conspiracies. The headline of the August 17, 1918 issue reads, "Detroit Politics, a Mass of Corruption," and claims that, in a campaign, Catholic politicians tried to bribe the leading candidate so he would drop out of a race and give them the position, but the candidate refused.[7] Here, *The Menace* is clearly associating Catholic politicians with campaign corruption and championing the non-Catholic candidate as a virtuous man for refusing this bribe. Urban political corruption was indeed very widespread at this time and would have seemed

6 Nordstrom, 64-65.
7 *The Menace,* August 17, 1918, 1, Chronicling America [Hereafter CA].

threatening to small-town citizens, who believed this sort of corruption limited their political voices. The writers of *The Menace* knew that their audience would have been disgusted by the corruption of city politics, so they adapted this fear to fit their anti-Catholic agenda.

This fear was not limited to political bribery, but also applied to all sorts of corruption. Another issue of *The Menace*, headlined, "The Brotherhood of Romanism and Corporate Interests in Chicago," claims Catholic officials in Chicago made deals with corporations that allowed them to take total control of the city's economy. Part of the news story reads, "Modern materialistic corporations have no God but gold: hence, they place in positions of power those upon whom they can rely for protection of their interests."[8] *The Menace* is very critical of corporate greed and tries to tie this corporate takeover with Catholicism. Since the paper published this story during the middle of the 2nd Industrial Revolution, it would have been very appealing to rural farmers who believed their occupations were being threatened by the rapidly expanding corporations of big cities. Therefore, the readers were most likely more concerned with the problem of corporate greed than with any Catholic involvement in it.

However, *The Menace* was most concerned with the preservation of rural democratic values, which it believed were being suppressed by the political voice of expanding Catholic populations. As a symbol for its democratic values, the paper uses Abraham Lincoln, bringing him up on multiple occasions. In an issue celebrating Lincoln's anniversary, it describes him as a "commoner born in a log cabin" who cared deeply about the Union and did everything in his power to preserve liberty.[9] Lincoln is made out to be a small-town defender of American

8 Ibid, May 5, 1917, 1.
9 Ibid, February 10, 1912, 1.

freedom and *The Menace* claims to be the new "champion of democracy" that is continuing his work.

This small-town paper claims to be fighting against the Catholic tyrants, who are trying to silence the voice of the American people and put them under the rule of the Roman Pope. In an issue headlined "The Pope Claims the Right to Destroy the American Republic," the paper reproduces a copy of what it claims to be a letter from the Pope at that time, Leo XIII. The letter states that Christopher Columbus, a Catholic, discovered the Americas and so the Pope believes he has the right to depose the United States government and create a Catholic state.[10] While this letter seems totally ridiculous and obviously forged, *The Menace*'s audience probably took this threat very seriously. The preservation of democracy was very importance to patriotic Americans, especially those living in rural areas. Rural citizens were terrified by rapid rates of urbanization because it meant their votes were becoming less significant in national elections. Urban population growth at this time really was staggering at this time. For example, the population of Kansas City, Missouri increased by over 1,100 percent from 1880-1890.[11] Small-town Americans relied on their political participation to keep their voices strong in the face of impeding urban populations, so they would have looked for any chance to defend their rights.

In 1916, *The Menace* found itself in a battle for its own democratic rights when it went to trial in the small city of Joplin, Missouri. The Knights of Columbus, who had been fighting back against *The Menace*'s anti-Catholic claims for quite some time, charged them with libel and disobeying obscenity laws. In the end, the jury acquitted *The Menace* of all charges and allowed them to continue printing anti-Catholic material, but the paper's supporters viewed this trial as a

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10 Ibid, April 13, 1912, 1.
11 United States Census Bureau, "Booming Cities Decade-to-Decade, 1830-2010," *census.gov*, updated October 8, 2012, Web, accessed May 10, 2015.

serious battle over free-speech.[12] For *The Menace*, this trial was the ultimate manifestation of their ideological battle against the Catholic Church because they successfully defended what they considered to be fundamental American liberties.

After this victory, *The Menace* and its supporters tried to label the trial as a historic victory for free speech and the first nail in the coffin for the Catholic Church. Soon after the trial, a writer named Benjamin Orange Flower published a pamphlet entitled *The Story of the Menace Trial* in praise of the victory. B. O. Flower was a prominent progressive journalist out of Boston who had been a major advocate for all sorts of social reform in the past, but now joined the anti-Catholic movement. Flower boasted of the trial's magnitude and tried to makes it seem like a pivotal moment in American history. He states:

> History takes note of crucial events… What makes Marathon forever glorious in the world's annals? What gives enduring interest to Salamis, to Thermopylae, to Runnymede, to Independence Hall, or to The Alamo? … such deeds of daring, marking crucial moments in the annals of nations or the history of civilization, make indelible impress upon the ages. These are dear to history; so Joplin henceforth will live in story.[13]

This illustrious description goes way over the top in describing a minor libel trial in a small Midwestern city. Flowers is attempting to draw attention to Joplin and *The Menace* to make them seem like they were way more important than they actually were to the history of the United States. His over-dramatic description comes across as a pathetic attempt to ascribe significance to a small town quickly fading from relevance. It seems that democratic virtues, such as free-speech, were the only thing that small-town America had going for it in comparison to the nation's growing cities.

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12 Nordstrom, 1-2.
13 B. O. Flowers, *The Story of the Menace Trial: A Brief Sketch of this Historic Case, with Reports of the Masterly Addresses by Hon. J.L. McNatt and Hon. J.I. Sheppard* (Aurora, MO: United States Publishing, 1916), 7-8, Google Books.

Soon after the trial, *The Menace* celebrated its victory in an issue headlined "Free-Press Lives; Menace acquitted." This issue reads, "The victory was not only glorious but significant… It was a fight between the American People, standing for democracy and freedom, against the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, standing for despotism and human slavery, and the people won."[14] In their eyes, *The Menace* was fighting not just for their own preservation, but to save democracy for all Americans. They desperately wanted the American public to consider their court-case a significant moment in U.S. history because they were afraid of their achievements fading away with time. Despite the actual irrelevance of this case to the rest of the nation, this small-town newspaper seems to have truly believed that it was making a lasting impact on the entire future of American democracy.

While *The Menace* saw itself as a glorious savior of democracy, the rest of the country had their own views on the newspaper. It made quite a stir across the whole nation, as several newspapers and books from the 1910's mention the prolific publication. The strongest reaction to the paper came from within the Catholic community itself, which did not sit idly by as it was being criticized. Nordstrom mentions that a number of Catholic publications quickly sprouted up to defend their faith against anti-Catholic attacks. Some of these Catholic publications included *The Antidote, Our Sunday Visitor*, which is still a very popular Catholic magazine, and the Catholic Print Association (CPA), which printed several pro-Catholic books and pamphlets. One of these pamphlets, entitled *The Slime of the Serpent*, directly attacked one of *The Menace's* publishers by stating, "He finds a market for his wares chiefly in parts of the country where Catholics are few. Naturally, the Catholics being little known, are misunderstood."[15] This

14 *The Menace*, January 22, 1916, 1. CA.
15 Nordstrom, 149-151.

pamphlet is arguing that *The Menace* targets Catholics because they are scarce in the countryside and the paper's readers misunderstand them. This testimony from the Catholic community points out that anti-Catholic publications sourced from rural areas and preyed on the ignorance of their populations. These Catholics seem to have truly believed in a rural-urban divide between Catholics and anti-Catholics, for it was a defining factor of this journalistic war.

While *The Menace* was primarily a concern for Catholics, it also caught the attention of other Progressive Era papers that were relatively "neutral" on the topic of anti-Catholicism. A daily newspaper out of Chicago called *The Day Book,* which primarily wrote on behalf of laborers' rights, commented on the raging battle happening between *The Menace* and Catholic newspapers. One *Day Book* writer believed that the reason for this intense journalistic battle, "could be found in one word: Prejudice." He continues by stating, "I have read *Our Sunday Visitor* and have no use for its bitter denunciations," and, "I have read *The Menace,* too, and… I would not consider its attacks very seriously."[16] This writer recognizes that both of these papers, one Catholic and one anti-Catholic, are both extremely prejudiced and slanderous. He chooses not to take a side, but instead highlights the intense journalistic battle raging between them and believes both are problematic. If the rivalry between these two sides was indeed as serious as *The Day Book* makes it out to be, then this debate was actually receiving as much national attention as *The Menace* hoped it would.

With *The Menace* being so successful, it had major effects on the town of Aurora and greatly accelerated its economic productivity. In 1915, the writer Walter B. Stevens published an encyclopedia of the state of Missouri entitled *Missouri the Center State,* within which he discusses *The Menace*. Stevens writes,

16 *The Day Book,* (Chicago, IL) July 12, 1916, 24. CA.

> *The Menace*, although established but three and a half years ago, may today be called a national institution… Without considering the opinions which people hold in regard to the policy of the paper, the fact remains that *The Menace* is of great industrial and financial importance to the city in which it is located… it is indeed a valuable asset to Aurora and Lawrence County and it's with considerable pride that the businessmen point to *The Menace* as the leading institution of their town and county.[17]

Stevens describes *The Menace* as an extremely successful and well-known business that is the "pride" of Aurora and the rest of the county, making it the perfect example of a successful small-town business. The paper's anti-Catholic opinions are irrelevant here because the business is an asset to Aurora and evidence that financial success is possible outside of big cities. *The Menace* mattered to Aurora because it made the previously unknown town standout and brought it prosperity, not because it was anti-Catholic.

Despite the obvious economic success that it brought Aurora, some may argue that the main driving force behind *The Menace* was indeed a pure form of anti-Catholicism. From this viewpoint it would seem that the editors of the paper really were prejudiced against Catholics and cared little about the threat urban areas posed to small-town America. This assumes that the people of Aurora would have had little contact with Catholics, but this was not really the case. In his article "Catholics in the Ozarks: A Brief History of the Springfield-Cape Girardeau Diocese," religious historian Robert G. Lee describes the long and detailed history of Catholic involvement in southern Missouri. Lee discusses several Catholic parishes that existed in Lawrence County (the same county Aurora is in), most notably in the town of Pierce City, Missouri. By 1892, Pierce City had 3 separate Catholic parishes and even a Catholic school, attracting several new

17 Walter B. Stevens, *Missouri the Center State, 1821-1915* (Chicago-St. Louis: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1915) 536, Archive.org.

Catholic immigrants each year.[18] Despite the fact that it was less than 20 miles away from Aurora by rail, it is hardly ever mentioned in *The Menace* and does not seem to have been a concern for the paper. With several Catholics living around the surrounding countryside, the editors of *The Menace* would surely have known about them and most likely had some contact with them too. Because it does not seem to have cared about attacking the Catholics that were living near Aurora, the paper was probably targeting urban-dwelling Catholics in particular. *The Menace* would have been economically beneficial for all of Lawrence County, including its Catholic population, making its success as a rural business much more important than its anti-Catholic views.

By 1920, anti-Catholic periodicals had lost much of their steam and more radical groups, such as the Klu Klux Klan, became the new sound-piece for anti-Catholicism. While Anti-Catholicism continued to be prevalent for quite some time, the Catholic community had come out of the 1910s much stronger and more organized than ever before. Catholics now had major publications, such as *Our Sunday Visitor*, to fight for their respect and so, slowly, Catholicism became reconciled as an acceptable American religion. *The Menace* of Aurora, Missouri was not as fortunate. After the paper closed in 1920, it had a short revival in the form of *The New Menace* of Kansas City, Missouri, but even this paper lost all of its support by 1931. Soon after *The Menace* disappeared, its memory faded away and the town of Aurora lost its national fame as a bastion of Catholic xenophobia.

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18 Robert G. Lee, "Catholics in the Ozarks: A Brief History of the Springfield-Cape Girardeau Diocese," *Ozarks Watch*, Vol. XII No. 3&4 (Springfield, MO: Missouri State University, 1999) 57-64.

Today, the country sees anti-Catholicism as a shameful feature of its past, so it is no wonder that the town of Aurora has allowed *The Menace* to be almost completely forgotten. Yet, despite this community embarrassment, it is more important for Aurora to remember its past prejudices than to cover them up. Most of the Midwest seems to have lost its anti-Catholic prejudice, but the region's rural areas have not let go of the pastoral American values that have always defined them.[19] This perseverance is true for all small Midwestern towns, as they still hold onto a vision of a pre-Modern America where they were the heart of the nation. Behind the layers of hate and misconception that cover *The Menace* lies the spirit of a pastoral America fighting for its survival in an ever-changing nation.

[19] Douglas Hurt, "Midwestern Distinctiveness," *The Identity of the American Midwest*, by Andrew R. L. Clayton and Susan E. Gray, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007).

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