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*Alfred F. Roese, editor of the Osceola Sun, defended the defender of the
Cameron dam, John Deitz.*

A “Square Deal” for a “Primitive Rebel”: Alfred E. Roese and the Battle of Cameron Dam, 1904–1910

By James Kates

AT 8:35 P.M. on Sunday, September 8, 1906, Alfred Eugene Roese boarded the eastbound Soo Line railroad at Osceola, on the St. Croix River in northwestern Wisconsin. As the forty-four-year-old newspaperman settled into his seat, the train pulled out of the station and skirted the south side of the little Polk County village. From there it passed farm fields, pastureland, dairy herds, and rolling stands of oak and maple. As darkness fell and the train chugged eastward into Barron County, the hardwood forest increasingly gave way to towering white pines, intermixed with hemlock and other conifers. When he stepped off the evening limited at Cameron Junction, Roese stood at the edge of the great northern forest, an area he often referred to as “the wilderness.”¹

After meeting his brother at the station, Roese secured a wagon and horse

¹ *Osceola Sun*, October 25, 1906; *Plat Book of Polk County, Wisconsin* (C. M. Foote & Co., Minneapolis, 1887); *Facts About Selected Hardwood Farming Lands in Polk Co., Wisconsin* (Eau Claire, 1902), in the pamphlet collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. The author would like to acknowledge the encouragement and assistance of Professor James L. Baughman of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin—Madison.

team for the five-mile journey north to Rice Lake. The next morning the two men took an Omaha Line train thirty miles northeast to Winter, in Sawyer County. After a hearty noon meal, the Roese brothers walked four miles eastward on a dirt road, then another six miles through a dense hemlock forest “with nothing to guide one’s footsteps . . . but the blazed trees on either side of the trail.” After encountering a swamp, two porcupines and a “large yellow dog,” the travelers reached their destination: the hardscrabble farm of John F. Deitz.²

For two years, Deitz had been vilified by lumber companies as an “outlaw” and “anarchist,” but Alfred Roese found him to be neither. The farmer stood in shirtsleeves, his hands in his pockets, as the visitors approached. “Then we introduced ourselves,” Roese recalled, “and received such a welcome as can only be given by a man who is shut off from his fellow creatures and to whom the sight of

² *Osceola Sun*, October 25, 1906; *Wisconsin Atlas and Gazetteer* (DeLorme Mapping Co., Freeport, Maine, 1992), 72, 84–85. Newspapers and historical articles variously spell the name “Dietz” and “Deitz.” The farmer signed his name “Deitz,” so I have used that spelling throughout.



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Alfred E. Roese and his son Harry standing next to wagon in which Matt Eggstad of Cameron Junction is sitting with his rifle, ready to hunt deer on the Deitz property, 1907.

a friendly face is almost unknown.” Deitz escorted the Roese brothers to his home, a rude two-room log cabin overlooking the Thornapple River. There they made their acquaintance with the rest of the clan: Deitz’s wife Hattie and their children Clarence, Leslie, Myra, Helen, Stanley, and John Junior. Mrs. Deitz fed the visitors an “excellent supper,” and the group carried their chairs outdoors, where they talked and laughed until past midnight.³

For all its levity, the talk had its serious moments. Through the pages of his newspaper, the weekly *Osceola Sun*, Roese had reported on the travails of the Deitz family since 1904. That year, John Deitz had forbidden the Chippewa Lumber & Boom Company from sending logs through a dam on the Thornapple that touched upon his farm. There then ensued a long

period of bickering and posturing on both sides over who held title to the dam. This standoff had erupted into violence only weeks before Roese’s visit. On July 25, 1906, Deitz and his family had been ambushed by a posse led by the Sawyer County sheriff and guided to the Deitz farm by a lumber-company foreman. John and his son Leslie had wounded one attacker with rifle fire. Clarence Deitz had been shot in the head and was still swathed in homemade bandages, a grim reminder of a wound that had exposed his brain and nearly killed him.⁴

³ *Osceola Sun*, October 25, 1906.

⁴ *Ibid.*; Paul H. Hass, “The Suppression of John F. Deitz: An Episode of the Progressive Era in Wisconsin,” in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Summer, 1974), 57:255–309.



WH(X3)4982

The Deitz family. From the left, Leslie, Mrs. Hattie Deitz, Stanley, John Sr., John Jr., Clarence, Helen, and Myra, with E. M. Worden, A. E. Foster, and M. Bronk of Ladysmith.

Roese had believed from the outset that the farmer was justified in his battle. But the editor also believed in seeing things firsthand, so he had undertaken the long journey to the Thornapple with an eye toward publishing what he termed a "full, true and complete account of this trouble." After two nights and a full day with the family, Roese's faith in Deitz was confirmed and his commitment to the farmer's cause sealed. In an eight-page special "Deitz Edition" published a few weeks later, Roese told his readers, "If there is a more peaceable, quiet, law-abiding and liberty-loving citizen of Wisconsin than John F. Deitz, the editor of *The Sun* has yet to make his acquaintance."

Over the next few years, the editor would visit the Deitz homestead several times. Deitz's battle with the lumber com-

panies and the law would culminate in a bloody shootout in 1910; public sentiment for him would grow, wane, then grow again. Roese would support his friend to the last, though Deitz's stubborn manner appears to have badly strained their alliance. But in the autumn of 1906, the Osceola editor saw no gray areas in the epic struggle: "If the true character of John F. Deitz was generally known, if his worth was truly appreciated, his name would be emblazoned in Wisconsin's hall of fame as one of the greatest men this state has ever produced."⁵

STILL, what did John Deitz's plight have to do with the daily cares of Osceola, a

⁵ *Osceola Sun*, October 25, 1906.

farming village whose frontier days were long since behind it? The answer, as Alfred Roesse astutely realized, was that Deitz's story touched upon a whole set of anxieties common to small-town Americans of the early twentieth century. Deitz epitomized the historical actors who have come to be known as "primitive rebels." Usually such persons had a swift, brutal, and unnerving introduction to the realities of corporate power. Face to face with the giant Weyerhaeuser timber syndicate, Deitz rebelled in ways that most people would never consider. But the average Osceolan, though his or her initiation to the twentieth century was much more gentle, also faced economic changes that may have been confusing, even frightening. In the pages of the *Osceola Sun*, Roesse sought to show his readers that Deitz's dilemma was not really so different from their own. In doing so, he invoked a consistent set of values by which he expected Osceolans—and small-town Americans everywhere—to live.⁶

For all its uncertainty, the era immediately preceding World War I may have represented the zenith of small-town editors' influence. In Emporia, Kansas, William Allen White was building the daily *Gazette* into the archetype of the community newspaper. White was an active "booster," an advocate of economic development and unabashed community spirit. As businessman, mediator, politician, and definer of local interests (and often as the local scold as well), White made no distinction between the needs of local business and the goals of the larger community. The booster ethos served as a counterbalance to the brutal imperatives of laissez-faire capitalism. In the words of one historian, it "sought to channel individual competitive energies toward the interests of the community as a whole,

arguing that the fortunes of each were tied to the prosperity of all." In this scheme, growth and social cohesion were entirely compatible.⁷

Roesse's Osceola bore some resemblance to White's Emporia. It was primarily an agricultural village, a provider of goods and services to the farmer and an entrepot through which the farmer's products passed on their way to the great cities. But unlike Emporia, Osceola lay at the edge of an immense economic upheaval, one that threatened the small-town republican values that both White and Roesse espoused. When Roesse founded the *Osceola Sun* in 1897, the pine forests of northern Wisconsin were being mowed down to provide timber for the expanding settlements of the Great Plains. By 1910, when he sold the paper, those forests were virtually gone. Though Osceola was not itself a lumber town, it afforded a close view of the timber business and its potential threats to small-town republicanism—among them, aggregations of capital, political corruption, and the loss of small-town autonomy to outside interests. Roesse, like White, was suspicious of Populist conspiracy theories. But he was quick to sound an alarm when he perceived that John Deitz—and the ideal of small-town, face-to-face democracy—were imperiled by "the grasping greed of a great corporation."⁸

⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (3rd edition, Manchester, England, 1974), 3.

⁷ Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (Baltimore, 1991), 3-5. As Griffith points out, White self-consciously cast himself as a small-town sage even as he was becoming nationally prominent. Indeed, he shared many qualities with the progressive reformers of urban America. That is, he was college-educated, he was well-traveled, and he enjoyed the confidence of national politicians and thinkers. Alfred Roesse's world was far more circumscribed, and in this respect Roesse almost certainly was more typical of small-town editors.

⁸ *Osceola Sun*, February 14, 1907.



WHI (N.S.) 49980

Osceola, about 1895.

Roose's "booster" rhetoric often was strikingly similar to White's, but its fundamental orientation was strikingly different. White viewed small-town virtues as a means of national salvation. His ethos, while not without its anxieties, was infused with Progressive optimism. Roose, on the other hand, viewed the small town as a world apart, a place whose values could not be duplicated in the cities. While he embraced the "trust-busting" rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt, Roose

never accepted its underlying assumption: that concentrations of economic power had to be recognized as a fact of modern life. White's small town was a beacon on a hill. Roose's was a fortress under siege.⁹

IN championing John Deitz's cause, Roose invoked one idea time and again: that the poor farmer was entitled to a "square deal." In the narrowest sense, he meant a fair hearing in court, and just

⁹ One of the many ironies of this story is that, as much as Alfred Roose idolized Theodore Roosevelt, the editor often espoused exactly the sort of "rural torism" that TR despised. Roosevelt sneered at those who refused to accept bigness in both government and business; such persons, he wrote in 1911, were "not progressive at all, but retrogressive." In Roosevelt's view, the solution to economic concentration was not to return to the atomized economy of

1850, but rather to meet the power of business with the countervailing power of government. George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America, 1900-1912* (New York, Harper Torchbook ed., 1962), 55. I can only conclude that Roose embraced TR (as people often do) for reasons that had little to do with specific policies and much to do with generalized notions of manliness, loyalty, and respectability.

compensation for the use of his property. Convinced that fair treatment in Sawyer County was impossible, Roese sanctioned Deitz's repeated acts of civil disobedience. Deitz, it must be said, was not a rational man; he spurned several settlement offers and pressed his case far beyond the point of reason. His legal claims against the lumber interests were shaky, if not downright spurious. But to Roese, this was not the point. By covering the Deitz case, Roese was venting his anxieties that, some day, many Americans—and not just a bull-headed backwoods farmer—might be denied a "square deal."

Roese's "square deal" ethos, enunciated week after week in the *Osceola Sun*, was premised on the supremacy of small-town life and the idea that personal honor was the fundamental value underlying community well-being. Roese constantly voiced his suspicion of corporate power, particularly of "trusts" and other agglomerations of capital that undercut competitiveness and local control. In its place, he espoused a face-to-face brand of capitalism, melding individual enterprise with a village-wide interest in economic growth. Fraternal organizations would facilitate manly camaraderie and provide an outlet for "boosterism." Intense rivalry between neighboring villages lent an air of parochialism to the business community, but it also cemented the idea that business people and their neighbors were bound up in mutual pride of accomplishment. Above all, Roese always encouraged a sense of mutual obligation and uplift. A legal contract, he believed, was a poor substitute for a handshake and a spirit of common endeavor.

Roese believed that the lumber industry was extractive, exploitative, and ephemeral. In short, it had no place in his conception of a "square deal," which was premised on fairness and long-term obligations. From there, it was but a short path to championing John Deitz, the "Defender of Cameron Dam," as the antith-

esis of the "grasping" corporation, and as a symbol of virtue. In the pages of the *Osceola Sun*, the plight of the obstinate settler became an urgent jeremiad on the future of small-town life.

THE son of a Baptist minister, Alfred Roese was born on a farm near Osceola and spent almost all his life in northwestern Wisconsin. As a youth he worked on a railroad survey crew. Beginning in 1892, he edited the *Weekly Press* at Maiden Rock, the home town of his wife, Lizzie Bowers. But the depression of the 1890's hit farmers hard, and with them local merchants. After five years on "the turbulent and annoying sea of Journalism," Roese concluded that the village could not support a newspaper. "We regret very much to leave you, for we have a warm spot down in our heart for you all," he told his readers in the farewell edition. With that, Roese packed up his type, his press and his young family, and moved fifty-odd miles north to Osceola.¹⁰

At least in his eyes, the village of 500 people was brimming with possibilities. Osceola occupied a pretty site on wooded bluffs above the St. Croix River, a tributary of the Mississippi which separates Wisconsin from Minnesota. In earlier days it had been a minor port and a center for shipbuilding. "Every steamboat goes down the river with all the wheat on board she will take, and a couple of wheat-laden barges made fast to her sides," Horace Greeley had written in 1865 after a trip up the St. Croix. The railroad had displaced the river cargo business, but pleasure steamers still carried passengers to and from the Osceola landing, at the foot of Spring Street. By the late 1800's, most

¹⁰ Biographical sketch in the Alfred E. Roese Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Area Research Center, Eau Claire (hereinafter cited as Roese Papers); Maiden Rock, Wisconsin, *Weekly Press*, September 16, 1897.



WHL(X.3)4985

A residential scene in Osceola, about 1905.

Polk County farmers had gotten out of wheat and into corn, oats, and stock-raising. The dairy business was growing, with a ready market at St. Paul, less than fifty miles away via the Soo Line. Proximity to the Twin Cities also spurred great hopes for tourism. Like many another small town possessing mineral springs, Osceola was touted as the "Saratoga of the West."¹¹

Osceola had little direct involvement in the lumber business. But to see this enterprise at work, one merely had to glance down from the bluffs, to the roiling waters of the St. Croix. On many days the river was choked with pine logs, floating toward sawmills at Stillwater, Minnesota, some twenty miles downstream. The St. Croix timber harvest had peaked in

1890, when 452 million board feet of logs were shepherded through the floating boom at Stillwater. Roesse occasionally reported the doings of the lumbermen, as in this brief notice in 1898: "The Boom company sluiced over a million feet of logs last Saturday." For Osceolans, the most tangible evidence of the timber business was the lumberjacks—affectionately known as "red shirts"—who trooped into town with money to spend each spring.¹²

ROESSE launched his newspaper in good "booster" fashion, with a banner headline reading "OSCEOLA, THE BEAUTIFUL." Below it he reprinted a

¹¹ James Taylor Dunn, *The St. Croix: Midwest Border River* (New York, 1965), 58, 204; *Osceola Sun*, March 8, 1956; *Facts About Selected Hardwood Farming Lands*, 5.

¹² Dunn, *The St. Croix*, 113; *Osceola Sun*, April 27, 1898, and March 15, 1956. A board foot is a measure of wood one foot square by one inch thick.

Soo Line publicity piece boasting of Osceola's promise as a resort town, one that "tempts the lounge from the stuffy confines of the city." Local tidbits, usually no more than a sentence or two, dominated the front page. Roese made it clear that local news, no matter how obscure, was his top priority: "We want a good live correspondent from every hamlet in Polk county. Call at this office for stationery." (Within the week, a reader heeded the call for local news by bringing a two-pound potato to the *Sun* office. The new editor gave the spud front-page mention.) Roese printed four pages of his paper locally, stuffing it with another four pages of "patent insides" produced in St. Paul. The latter were heavy with illustrated fiction and ads for patent medicines. In his first editorial, Roese stated his objectives plainly. The *Sun*, he vowed, would be "non-partisan; but we reserve the right to criticize the acts of all public men." Coupled with that watchdog role, Roese promised that the newspaper would work for the "upbuilding of Osceola," and would advertise to the world its "varied natural beauties and attractions, as well as its commercial advantages."¹³

Despite the vow of nonpartisanship, the *Sun* soon emerged as a Republican paper. But its editor did keep his promise to criticize politicians regardless of party. Almost from the start, Roese swore enmity to Robert M. La Follette, whom he considered a dangerous opportunist and grandstander.

Demand for the first edition exceeded two thousand copies. Roese soon recruited correspondents from much of Polk County; he printed their reports under alliterative headings, such as "Amery Actions," "Farmington Phrases," and the like. Within a month, the demand for advertising forced him to displace some local

correspondence: "It is a safe tip that the *SUN* is to be a sure winner in the race it has entered." By the end of 1897 he could boast that "The *SUN* has the largest circulation in Polk county of any newspaper in the world. This may sound odd, but nevertheless it is true."¹⁴

Roese joined the Odd Fellows and the Masons, where he rubbed elbows with many of the small merchants who advertised in the *Sun*. But his social contacts did not prevent him from criticizing businessmen, at least collectively, for what he considered their short-sightedness and lack of community spirit. In the spring of 1897, Osceola's bridge across the St. Croix River to Minnesota had been badly damaged by ice. On December 22, 1897, just ten weeks after launching his newspaper, Roese mounted his first big public-improvement campaign, urging businessmen to raise \$8,000 to repair the bridge. The project would "advertise the place and leave the impression that Osceola was a live, wide-awake town," he wrote in a front-page article. For citizens who proposed a cheaper alternative of ferry service, Roese had nothing but scorn. Osceola's boosters had to "roll the stone of selfishness off of their heart" and provide the money for the bridge. As for the nay-sayers, they were "nothing but leeches on the back of a community that sap its strength and then throw its carcass [*sic*] to the buzzards."¹⁵

The *Sun*'s badgering paid off, and the bridge was fixed. With no apparent irony, Roese called for a celebration of the community's less-than-spontaneous generosity.¹⁶

¹³ *Ibid.*, October 13, November 3, and December 1, 1897. The *Sun* boasted a circulation of about 1,300 during its early years, a figure that rose to more than 2,000 by 1910, when Roese sold the paper. These figures were of course unaudited.

¹⁴ *Osceola Sun*, December 22, 1897.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 30, 1898.

¹³ *Osceola Sun*, October 6 and 13, 1897, and September 24, 1908.



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A portion of Osceola, as viewed from the bluff, about 1905.

NEVER one to avoid a scrap, Roes soon showed his colors on the lumber business. Economic rivalry had been a fact of life in the St. Croix Valley since the Civil War era. Wisconsinites were intensely jealous of the Stillwater lumbermen, whom they dubbed the "Minnesota marauders." Much of the St. Croix timber came from the Wisconsin side of the river, but the capitalists, managers, and laboring men who profited by it were mostly Minnesotans. Indeed, Osceola seemed almost entirely cut off from the timber industry's benefits. The huge white pines that sustained the industry were cut well to the north of the village; they were sawed into lumber well to the south. Osceola, it seemed, reaped few dollars and plenty of hardship from the business. The comings and goings of an itinerant labor force brought some economic rewards, but also petty crime and occasional

brawls. What was worse, logs from upriver often choked the St. Croix, making navigation by pleasure steamers impossible.¹⁷ On January 18, 1900, Roes and a delegation of valley businessmen took the train to St. Paul to complain of the situation. Some of the editor's most faithful advertisers were included: J. N. Johnson, proprietor of the Osceola Mercantile Company; Frank Nagler, a dealer in agricultural machinery; and C. W. Staples, the druggist. The men implored Major Frederick V. Abbot, of the Army Corps of Engineers, to impose restrictions on the St. Croix River Boom Corporation. Casting aside any pretense of objectivity, Roes paraphrased the complaint of one Polk County man: the timber barons "thought they had royal rights." They had transformed the virgin forests into a "dreary waste." Far from

¹⁷ Dunn, *The St. Croix*, 108.

being benefactors, they were "the hardest of taskmasters and the veriest tyrants." Roese sneered at the arguments of the boom company's lawyer: "Those who heard him last Thursday say his speech was painful in the aggregate or some place else, and his charges were as wild as a 'pipe dream.'"¹⁸

A month later, Abbot ruled that pleasure boats would have first rights to the river on Decoration Day, Independence Day, and during the month of August. Other than that, the timber interests held sway. Roese jeered Abbot's "open decision of preference to the boom company." He also condemned the daily *Stillwater Gazette*, which had complained that the decision was unduly harsh on the lumbermen. The *Stillwater* editors had "mutilated several columns with the soreness they feel," Roese wrote. "If there were less *Stillwater* and fewer dam boom companies there would be a more equitable distribution of enterprise and a greater and more prosperous growth in the upper valley." The interests of the valley as a whole were not helped by the "centralization of capital at *Stillwater*," Roese fumed.¹⁹

In contrast to this "centralization of capital," the landscape of southwestern Polk County presented an almost Jeffersonian aspect. The Town of Osceola, which surrounded the village, was a check-board of small farms. Most were less than a quarter-section; the biggest, at two hundred acres, belonged to the merchant J. N. Johnson. Roese would not condone sniping between village and country. He insisted that they shared mutual interests, and the advertising in the *Sun* bore out this claim. Osceola served the farmer, and the farmer in turn gave life to the village. Livery stables, harness-makers, and purveyors of general merchandise supported the *Sun* week after week. Roese

accepted national advertising—much of it from patent-medicine peddlers—but he relegated it to the back pages of his paper and refused to sell contract space at a discount.²⁰

For Roese, much as for William Allen White, the key to growth was a spirit of economic reciprocity. The *Sun* boosted Osceola; in return it urged Osceolans to spend their money at home and expected the support of local merchants. Roese regarded the mail-order houses with fear and suspicion, and he railed against catalogue shopping almost weekly after 1900. He wanted every Osceolan who sent a dollar beyond the county's boundaries to feel that he or she had "sinned." The *Sun* noted that farmers had no control over commodity prices; their fates were determined by "the grain operators of large cities." Now the "concentration of business in cities" was robbing rural people of the last vestige of local control by "requiring" them to send their money away. That would mean "the ruining of beautiful and home like towns. When you have depleted the home town you have done much towards depreciating the value of the farm lands." Roese "talked up" Osceola, and he expected his advertisers to "talk up" the *Sun*: "Now is it just fair for *The Sun* to be preaching your good qualities, asking and urging people to patronize you, when you never think of saying a good word for *The Sun*?"²¹

To some extent, Osceola retained elements of what one scholar has called the

¹⁸ *Plat Book of Polk County; Osceola Sun*, November 10, 1897. Parts of northern and eastern Polk County showed heavy ownership by timber interests. These lands were largely in hardwoods. Unlike pine, hardwood ordinarily could not be floated to market; it had to be hauled to railroad sidings on enormous horse-drawn sleds. Roese appears to have regarded the heavily wooded townships of Polk County as hard-luck cousins to the more prosperous farming areas.

²¹ *Osceola Sun*, November 30, 1905, and July 12 and December 20, 1906.

¹⁸ *Osceola Sun*, January 25, 1900.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, February 15 and 22, 1900.

"premodern moral economy." Business activities were grounded in social relationships, and the work of individuals was still strongly linked to the work of the community. The rise of catalogue shopping—epitomized by the mammoth Chicago firm of Sears, Roebuck & Company—presaged an impersonal market system that transcended local relationships. Roese's rhetoric, beyond its obvious self-interest, reveals a profound unease over this depersonalization and its consequences for the community. The editor never spoke of bald economic motives, but rather of mutual obligations and the common good. Even when dealing with mundane matters, such as the *Sun's* solicitation of job printing, Roese could impart a tone of moral duty: "A paper such as *The Sun*, costs a 'lot' of money every week to produce, and it can only be kept up to its present standard, by securing such business *as by right belongs to it*."²²

Sounding every bit like the minister's son he was, Roese argued that a businessman who gave to the community would be rewarded many times over. As a small-town schoolboy, Roese probably had not been exposed to the theories of classical economics, but as an adult he would have mistrusted them. Individualistic self-interest, in his view, did not give rise to an "invisible hand" that elevated the community's common interest. Instead, the unbridled quest for profits represented a malign force that inevitably would tear the community apart.²³

Despite Roese's anxieties, his own business evidently flourished. On September 28, 1905, he celebrated the *Sun's* eighth anniversary by printing a special edition on book-quality paper. Engravings of the newspaper's new equipment, including a Babcock cylinder press powered by a six-horsepower gasoline engine, were printed

throughout the edition in bright blue ink. Circulation stood at 1,700. Roese had long since abandoned the "patent insides," and he now printed all eight pages of the paper in his own shop. He announced that he had replaced his old set of type, which had served him faithfully since his days at Maiden Rock. In an editorial, he eulogized the well-worn bits of lead in a manner that imbued them with mystical spirit: "Week by week and day by day the dress that has been discarded chronicled the happenings of the world, and especially the part that is the world to us, our county and state. It told the incidents and events, the hopes and ambitions and pleasures and sorrows that made up the history of the weekly life of our friends, our neighbors and ourselves."²⁴ "Bro. Roese, of *The Osceola Sun*, is evidently prospering," wrote a fellow editor (and apparently a fellow Mason) in one of many bouquets the paper printed two weeks later. Marveled another: "We have often wondered how Roese made things go so blamed fast over his way."²⁵

Roese's prosperity had only tangential connections to the lumbermen who were denuding the great forests of the north. Still, the *Sun* occasionally printed tidbits about the midwestern timber business, which by the early twentieth century was flagging. Late in 1905, Roese reprinted an item from the *Stillwater Journal* that sounded the death knell for the St. Croix logging industry. The boom at Stillwater

²² Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore, 1982), 108–117; *Osceola Sun*, November 30, 1905 (emphasis added).

²³ As an example of Roese's business ethos, consider his endorsement of the druggist C. W. Staples for a seat in the Wisconsin Assembly in 1906. Staples was a socialist, but Roese saw fit to transcend party loyalty and endorse his friend, who was "temperate in all things." Staples, wrote Roese, put "character above everything . . . will sacrifice private interests to the public good . . . [and] does not have one brand of honesty for business purposes and another for private life." *Osceola Sun*, October 18, 1906.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, September 28, 1905.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, October 12, 1905.

had handled barely 102 million board feet of logs in 1905, and the figure was expected to fall to 90 million in 1906. After that, "the output of the boom will be gradually reduced until all the logs on the St. Croix and its tributaries have been cut."²⁶

IN the pages of the *Sun*, the passing of the lumber business might have remained a footnote had it not been for the intransigence of a farmer named John F. Deitz. In the spring of 1904, about ninety miles from Osceola, in the dense forests of Sawyer County, Deitz had begun to make trouble for the lumber companies. The scene of battle was a small, unimposing dam on the Thornapple River.

The so-called Cameron dam had been built in 1875, under a state charter issued to an Eau Claire lumberman. It was a crude structure of hewn timber and earthen reinforcements, fifteen feet high and just twenty-five feet wide. But by regulating the flow of water, it allowed lumbermen to float millions of dollars' worth of timber down the Thornapple to the Chippewa River, and from there to the "Big Mill" of the Weyerhaeuser lumber conglomerate at Chippewa Falls.²⁷

Deitz's dispute sprang from the fine print of a real-estate deal. In 1900, the Deitz family had bought 160 acres of Sawyer County land from Jennie Cameron, a widow. A corner of the Cameron dam lay on the property. Mrs. Cameron's deed contained an easement that permitted the Chippewa Lumber & Boom Company to use the dam. But for reasons unknown, no such provision was included in the title when the Deitzes acquired the farm. After years of working itinerantly at the site, the Deitz family occupied the land in

February, 1904. John Deitz submitted a claim for \$1,700 to the Chippewa Logging Company for his work as a watchman on a dam on the Brunet River, where the family had previously lived. The claim was denied, and Deitz roughed up two loggers in an ensuing fistfight. Seething with anger, the farmer vowed to get even. "They've got to go through my dam," he noted. "I've wrote the company, and I'm going to get a little money out of it. When they're counting their millions, the few crumbs that fall to the floor ought to be mine." Besides his back wages, Deitz claimed he was owed \$8,000 in royalties for logs that had passed through the dam since 1900. Loggers who arrived at the property in April of 1904 were amazed to find the Cameron dam posted against trespassing. Deitz stood watch, backing up his words with a .30-30 Winchester rifle.²⁸

The lumber company obtained state and federal injunctions against Deitz, but the farmer insisted he had never been properly served with legal papers. (On one occasion, fearing that a package of warrants was an "infernal machine," Deitz hoisted it with a pitchfork and threw it into the river.) Authorities in Hayward, the county seat, bungled several attempts to capture the lawless woodsman. William Irvine, manager of the Chippewa Lumber & Boom Company, proposed that the Masonic Order arbitrate the dispute. (Deitz and Irvine were both Masons, as were many of the lumber company's managers.) Deitz, suspicious that corporate ties were more powerful than fraternal ones, refused the overture.

In April, 1906, water from dams above the Deitz farm was released as if on cue, and the Cameron dam was destroyed by the ensuing torrent. The lumbermen apparently had intended to wash all the timber downstream, but they only partially succeeded. Thousands of logs were

²⁶ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1905. The last log went through the St. Croix boom on June 12, 1914. Dunn, *The St. Croix*, 113.

²⁷ Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 268-269.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 268, 270.



WH(XS)25476

Deitz's buildings on the Thornapple River, March 17, 1905.

stranded above the dam, in a marshy area on and around the Deitz property. Now the issue was truly deadlocked.²⁹

THE *Osceola Sun* took early notice of the case, as did most other newspapers in northern Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota. In the plainest sense, the Deitz drama was an exciting story, and the outlaw farmer's blustering rhetoric made for good copy. Roese culled items from other newspapers and reprinted them, often on the front page. He also reprinted editorials from papers sympathetic to Deitz, such as the *Rice Lake Leader*. One such piece, in 1905, condemned a "low lived sneaking trick" by two men who had called at the Deitz home claiming to be lost and hungry, and then had tried to serve the farmer with legal papers. (Deitz had bodily thrown them from his cabin.) Roese quoted a *Minneapolis Tribune* piece in which Deitz explained why he refused to

take his grievances before the legal system: "I am a poor man and have no money to fight a millionaire corporation in the courts."³⁰

But it was not until July of 1906, when Clarence Deitz was wounded in a "shower of leaden hail" from the Sawyer County posse, that Roese resolved to investigate the situation firsthand. On August 30, the *Sun* announced that it had received a twenty-two-page, handwritten manuscript from Deitz outlining his side of the controversy. "It will be of great interest to everyone who believes in a 'square deal,'" Roese told his readers. "This case has attracted wide attention, and *The Sun* congratulates itself and its thousands of readers on the 'scoop' it has accomplished." A week later, the editor made his first trip to the cabin on the Thornapple.³¹

²⁹ *Osceola Sun*, April 13, 1905. It was common practice at the time for small-town editors to exchange copies of their newspapers free of charge with the understanding that the contents could be reprinted.

³¹ *Ibid.*, August 2 and 30, 1906.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 270-277.

For several weeks thereafter, Roesse trumpeted his forthcoming "Deitz Edition." Until then, most Osceolans probably had viewed the case as a spectacular entertainment. But suddenly they were implored to regard it as a personal challenge and an opportunity to express their solidarity with a downtrodden family in the wilds of Sawyer County. Roesse announced that extra copies of the edition would be sold for 25 cents, with proceeds going to a Deitz benefit fund: "Here is an opportunity for every friend of this persecuted man to help a good cause. In addition to the newspapers, photos of the Deitz family and views of the famous farm will be on sale at 50 cents each."³²

During late October, Roesse's gasoline-powered press worked overtime. Besides the regular *Sun* of October 25, it cranked out 1,700 copies of the "Deitz Edition" for subscribers, and another 4,000 copies of the edition for individual sale.

JOHN F. DEITZ BEFORE ALL MEN read the edition's main headline, suggesting that the farmer was standing before the citizenry and inviting judgment. Deitz's own rambling statement occupied a dozen columns; among other things, he charged that a young woman who was sent to the home to tutor the Deitz children had rifled through the family's belongings looking for incriminating evidence. Roesse urged readers to "exchange places with Mr. Deitz," and to imagine that, after years of toil, they had somehow incurred "the enmity of a powerful corporation, and that corporation, backed by its millions of dollars and its armed gangs of desperadoes and thugs, should attempt to despoil you of your home. . . . [W]ouldn't you do just exactly as John F. Deitz is doing today?"³³

In his top story, Roesse betrayed severe anxiety over the case and its meaning to American democracy. Without "regard to class or political affiliation," all citizens were entitled to a "square deal," he wrote. But the machinery of democracy had been corrupted. Great wealth, instead of conveying benefits to the many, had enabled a privileged few to seize control of the government. Grafters dominated politics; "money-ruled judges" had sullied the justice system. In the "so-called enlightened twentieth century," it appeared that, contrary to the words enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, all men were not equal after all. Money had become "the controlling power," and "the possessor of unlimited quantities of gold" seemed to be above the law. In Roesse's eyes, great wealth necessarily sprang from great wrongdoing. For any Osceolan who viewed the Deitz case as merely a far-off amusement, Roesse had an ominous warning: "No one is safe from these vultures."³⁴

Advance publicity for the "Deitz Edition" had rattled nerves in Sawyer County. Roesse had been warned by F. L. McNamara, that county's district attorney, that "as a man who owns property and relies on the state to protect that property," he should not "defend criminals and crime." McNamara labeled Deitz's resistance as "an attack on our organized form of government which is nothing but anarchy." Roesse assured his readers that the *Sun* was not opposed to settling disputes by "the ordinary course of law." But in this case, Roesse said, he was convinced that a fair trial was impossible, and that the defiant Deitz was "pursuing the one course open to him."³⁵

THUS began an extraordinary alliance that was to last more than three

³² *Ibid.*, September 20 and October 25, 1906.

³³ *Ibid.*, October 25, 1906.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*



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Sons of John Deitz to the left on the top of the ruins of the Cameron dam and visitors to the site about 1907. Deitz is probably the man at the far right.

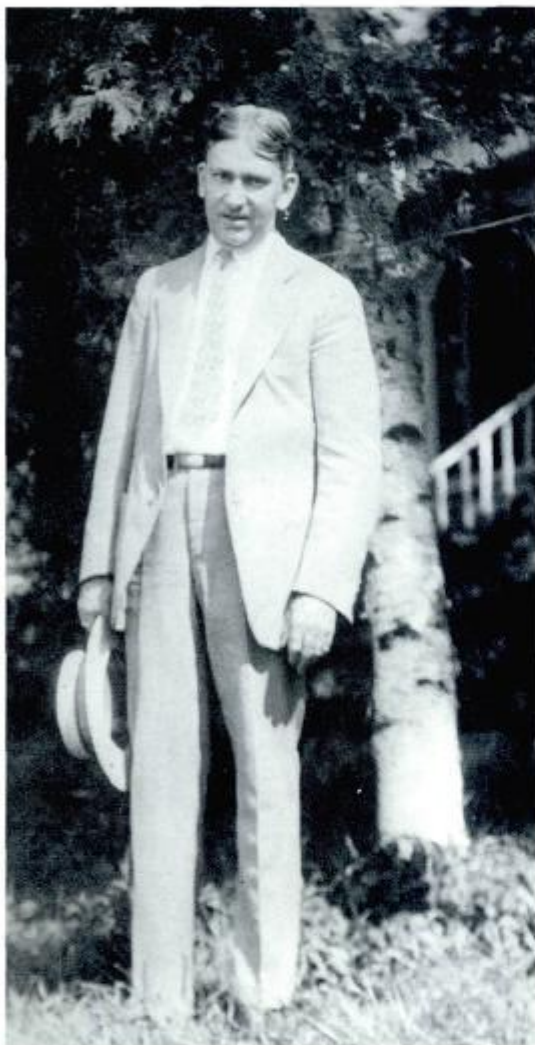
years. Roese visited the Deitz home again in late November. By then the family was under siege; they dared not venture into town for fear of ambush or arrest. With the long northern winter approaching, they had nothing to eat but venison and a cellar full of root crops. "Hold the fort, for we (your friends) are coming to the front to help you out, all that we can," Roese wrote to the family on Christmas Day. He enlisted the help of several Deitz supporters, including Charles Broughton, editor of the *Fond du Lac Bulletin*. Another comrade, a man named Jacobson, invoked fraternal ties in his pledge to join the battle. He wrote to Roese:

I see you think that I am a Bro. Mason, but am sorry I am not, but that does not matter. I am for what I think is right. I am an Odd Fellow,

also an Elk, and I think their teachings are very much the same as the Masons. The first qualification for either, *is to be a man*. When it comes to starving women and little children, in order to satisfy *greed, I want to fight, if I get killed in the first fire.*⁵⁶

Early in 1907, Roese put the *Sun's* columns to work for a cause far distant from Main Street: the relief of the Deitz family. The lumber company had tried "to cut off

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, December 6, 1906; Alfred E. Roese to Deitz family, December 25, 1906, in the Roese Papers (emphasis in original). Roese, aware that the Deitz family was desperate for kind words, often quoted other people's letters in his correspondence. He also sent press clippings, which the Deitzes assembled in a scrapbook. Broughton, as editor of the *Sheboygan Press*, went on to become one of Wisconsin's most prominent journalists.



WHI(X3)4981

Charles E. Broughton, editor of the Fond du Lac Bulletin, joined Roesse in supporting Deitz. Broughton later became one of the state's foremost journalists as editor of the Sheboygan Press.

Mr. Deitz from his base of supplies, and, with hunger gnawing at the vitals of himself, wife and little ones, force him to give up," Roesse told his readers on January 17. Osceolans already had donated "400 pounds of clothing, etc.," which were delivered to the Thornapple on Christmas Eve. Editor Broughton of Fond du

Lac raised half a ton of various "provisions," which he took to the cabin in January along with four barrels of flour from Osceola. Meanwhile, John Deitz declared glumly that the lumber company was certain to kill the entire family that summer: "I am satisfied that I will be the last one to be murdered, as there would be no excuse for murdering the rest if I were dead."³⁷

The rhetoric intensified in February, when Roesse launched a massive resupply campaign. Deitz was "a prisoner in his own home," never knowing when corporate thugs might shoot him "like a beast." The farmer had invoked the wrath of the lumber barons by refusing to "humbly bow" to their demands. By supporting Deitz, the *Sun* suggested, Osceolans could take a stand for justice and individualism; they could reaffirm not just Deitz's right to liberty but also their own. Roesse presented a bold challenge to his readers, inviting them to think of the Deitz case not in terms of particular circumstances, but as a referendum on inalienable rights: "Do you recognize the right of a citizen of Wisconsin to live and support himself and family in the manner he sees fit, so long as he does nothing to conflict with the laws of the state?"³⁸

IN this manner, the Deitz case was imbued with a key element of "boosterism": the good of one was tied to the good of all. Alfred Roesse asked readers to bring donations of food or money to his newspaper's office. "The liberty-loving, oppression-hating citizens of Wisconsin have never been asked to contribute to a more worthy cause than this."³⁹

The campaign succeeded. Early in March, Roesse and several other men took the supplies to Winter by train, then loaded them on a horse-drawn sleigh for

³⁷ *Osceola Sun*, January 17 and 31, 1907.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, February 14, 1907.

the journey through the forest. The goods would last through the fall. In a front-page letter in the *Sun*, the Deitzes thanked "the hundreds who have so quickly come to our assistance." Roese, meanwhile, paid the family's property taxes for 1906 to prevent the Weyerhaeuser interests from obtaining a tax deed on the dam site. To foot the bill, Hattie Deitz stitched mittens from deer hides, which were shipped to Roese for sale at Osceola at one dollar a pair. In addition to the editor's everyday duties, the burden on his time must have been tremendous, but Roese seems never to have complained. "It certainly gives me pleasure to know that you have so much faith in me," he wrote to Deitz in January.⁴⁰

Roese's anger over the treatment of John Deitz coincided with Progressive indignation over the destruction of the northern forests. To that extent, the "enemy" in the Deitz case was clearly defined. The Chippewa Lumber & Boom Company and the Mississippi River Logging Company, Deitz's prime adversaries, were subsidiaries of the nation's biggest lumber empire: the vast syndicate controlled by Frederick Weyerhaeuser. Though not entirely secretive, Weyerhaeuser and his colleagues made a practice of silence. Thus they escaped—at least for a while—the scrutiny accorded John D. Rockefeller and other high-flying capitalists of the early twentieth century. But by 1905, the systematic clear-cutting of the woods, and its social costs, were becoming apparent.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, February 21, 1907.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, March 14, 1907; Roese to Deitz family, January 27, 1907, in the Roese Papers. Roese seems to have enjoyed the cloak-and-dagger aspects of the Deitz affair. Often he sealed his letters to Deitz in multiple envelopes to guard against tampering. On another occasion, he referred Deitz to the "3d Epistle of St. John, the 13th and 14th verses," adding: "There were several things I had to tell you but I would rather not trust them to pen and ink. However, I hope to see you soon and talk to you personally." Roese to Deitz, February 19, 1907, *ibid.*

Having logged off the Midwest, Weyerhaeuser was turning his sights to the Pacific Northwest. Instead of being replanted, most of northern Wisconsin (what came to be called "The Cutover") was sold to speculators or simply abandoned. Speaking to the American Forest Congress in 1905, Theodore Roosevelt epitomized the growing resentment over lumbermen who "skin the country and go somewhere else . . . whose idea of developing the country is to cut every stick of timber off of it, and leave a barren desert."⁴¹

Alfred Roese was deeply troubled by the rise of the "trusts," and clearly ambivalent over the meaning of wealth. The specter of corporate power frightened him. Thus he could reprint, in the guise of the *Sun's* lead story, a 1905 press release from *Everybody's Magazine* advertising a forthcoming article called "Frenzied Finance": "It will only be a few years [the author asserted], when ten men will be absolute legal owners of the entire United States and the rest of the people will be legally their slaves." When aroused, as he had been in writing the "Deitz Edition," Roese declared flatly that bigness meant corruption and chicanery. At another juncture, he stated, "The corporation is a business necessity and if it lives up to the laws is no more a menace than an individual." Corporations were a threat only when they became "powerful enough to control the machinery of government," he wrote.⁴²

Roese's own politics fueled his indecision. He applauded the rhetoric of his hero, Theodore Roosevelt, and abhorred what he considered the unreasoning populism of Robert La Follette and William Jennings Bryan. In 1904, Roese

⁴¹ Ralph W. Hidy, Frank Ernest Hill, and Allan Nevins, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story* (New York, 1963), 290, 297.

⁴² *Osceola Sun*, January 26, 1905, and February 6, 1908.

quoted approvingly a speech given by Roosevelt a year before in Milwaukee, calling it "prophetic" on La Follettism. In it, Roosevelt had said there was no place in society for wealthy men who used their riches to "oppress and wrong" their neighbors. But neither was there a place for the "demagogic agitator" who attacked capitalists or corporations without regard to "whether they do well or ill." Such "ignorant rancor," Roosevelt had warned, could "overthrow the very foundations upon which rest our national well being."⁴³

Roese gained some ammunition late in 1906 with the publication in *Cosmopolitan* of an article asserting that Weyerhaeuser's fortune "overshadows that of John D. Rockefeller." The piece claimed the lumber baron controlled "everything in the Mississippi River lumber district," which certainly was a gross exaggeration. Roese reprinted the article in the *Sun*. Weyerhaeuser broke his accustomed silence just long enough to sputter that the story was the product of the "diseased Hearst mind."⁴⁴

If Roese's worst fears often took the form of abstractions—"greed," the "trusts," "corruption" of the courts and the "ruining" of small towns—it is because his anxieties often were more general than specific. His vision served a psychological function for himself and his readers, for it allowed them to contrast Osceola's well-ordered existence with the menacing potential of the world beyond Polk County. For Roese, this con-

trast was unambiguous and deeply disturbing. In the person of Frederick Weyerhaeuser, he seems to have found a villain whose wicked ways would excuse almost any transgression by the hotheaded John Deitz.⁴⁵

AT the turn of the twentieth century, the small-town editor might be forgiven for thinking that he was master of his world. His was a richly organic life, tied to community ritual and to neighborly bonds. Its orderly rhythms culminated one evening each week in the rumbling start-up of a sheet-fed printing press. Unlike the big-city dailies, whose news content was shaped by hierarchical organizations dedicated to a prescribed institutional style, the small weekly newspaper bore the unmistakable mark of one person: its editor and proprietor. Thus, the small paper might be alternately cheerful or cranky, congratulatory or scolding. Always, the gray columns of type represented "the lengthened shadow of the editor himself."⁴⁶

Yet the small-town editor's illusion of control was precisely that. He spoke to a citizenry whose existence was defined by ties of kinship, neighborhood, and community; his purview rarely extended beyond the county line. But the "island communities" of rural America increasingly came under attack after 1900. State commissions and licensing boards deter-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, June 30, 1904. At least once a month, Roese had something nasty to say about John D. Rockefeller. One front-page article noted that the oil titan was not as rich as was commonly supposed; in fact, he was making just \$59,523 a day. As Roese declared in a headline, "By Exercising Frugality He Manages to Keep the Wolf from the Door." *Ibid.*, February 28, 1907.

⁴⁴ "Weyerhaeuser: Richer Than John D. Rockefeller," in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (holiday edition, 1906-1907), 42:252-259; *Osceola Sun*, February 7, 1907; Hidy, Hill, and Nevins, *Timber and Men*, 302.

⁴⁵ For a succinct and elegant summary of American thought during this era, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967), 164-166.

⁴⁶ Loren Reid, *Hurry Home Wednesday: Growing Up in a Small Missouri Town, 1905-1921* (Columbia, 1978), 50. Reid's is one of a very few book-length works on small-town journalism during this period. See also Thomas D. Clark, *The Southern Country Editor* (Indianapolis, 1948). Although Sally Griffith's *Home Town News* (cited elsewhere) tells the story of a small-town daily, its reflections on the editor's role as "booster" are applicable to weekly papers as well.



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Logs backed up on the Deitz property, 1907. From the left, Leslie and Clarence Deitz, Harry and Alfred Roese, and Matt Eggstad.

mined and oversaw many aspects of public policy and commerce. Mail-order houses—particularly Sears, Roebuck—threatened the merchants of Main Street. Talk of “the trusts” reflected vague yet widespread fears that the small town was losing its autonomy. The rural editor’s response to this onslaught was usually defensive: outside forces and influences were seen not as part of a changing economic order, but as intrusions on a way of life that was inherently superior to that of the cities.⁴⁷

Alfred Roese clung to the illusion of control, quite sincerely, to the end of

his life. As editor, his role was to marshal citizens to take control of their destiny, for he believed deeply that this destiny was theirs. Thus he echoed the characteristically Republican belief that “temperament” or “character” mattered more than anything else. As editor of the *Sun*, Roese constantly reminded readers that success was theirs for the asking—if only they would believe in themselves and work in concert toward a (to him) clearly visible community interest. Politics was not so much about policy as it was about civic decency. At the core of this lay Roese’s belief that affairs outside Polk County should not matter much, except as big-time exemplars of what was “respectable” in public life.

⁴⁷ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 27.

Under Roese's editorship, the *Sun* was an unusually good small-town weekly. It was typographically appealing, with clean lines and a consistent visual style. Roese wrote with verve and no small amount of ironic humor. He seems to have obeyed the weekly editor's paramount commandment: *Thou shalt try to print the name of every subscriber at least once a year.* Roese's wife, son, and daughter helped out in the shop, and one or two hired men aided in setting type and maintaining the equipment. About 1907, as the *Sun* grew more successful, Roese brought in partners who eventually would buy the operation and take over its editorship. But Roese himself always put in long hours, sometimes working past midnight on press days, making sure that every aspect of the operation bore his personal imprint.

It is clear that Roese invested even the grubbiest details of his job—running the press, soliciting ads, hawking subscriptions—with a larger purpose. Like most of what he wrote, his coverage of the Deitz case was a lesson in deportment, a treatise on how citizens ought to behave if they were to thrive in a society of mutual interdependence. When outside affairs intruded on Osceola, they were always reinterpreted in the language of local propriety. Every story was an object lesson. Roese's role was not unlike that of the small-town clergyman: to interpret for his flock a vast, sometimes overwhelming cosmos while reminding them that the path to salvation could be found only within their own hearts.

The Deitz saga no doubt sold newspapers, but if Alfred Roese had been after money he could have made it more easily, and with far less grief, in one of his two sidelines: job printing and the selling of insurance policies. His support for Deitz invited scorn from other newspapermen, at least one of whom derided the "sickly exhibition of sentiment" by pro-Deitz editors. But Roese was unswerving. "If standing firmly and unequivocally on the

side of right . . . and presenting facts without fear or favor constitutes the 'yellow press,'" he wrote in 1907, "the *Sun* is proud to be classed as one of that color."⁴⁸

THERE is no evidence that the *Sun* suffered economically for its advocacy of Deitz. The paper's advertising volume appears to have grown after 1906. In May of 1907, a dozen angry subscribers canceled the paper—not because of the Deitz coverage, but because Roese had belittled the talents of the winners of a high school declamatory contest. "If anybody thinks that by threatening to stop his paper or withdraw his patronage he can dictate what or what shall not appear in its columns, he will do well to disengage himself from that fallacy at once," Roese thundered in reply. Despite such petty skirmishes, which appear to have greatly vexed him, Roese expanded the *Sun* to a six-column format in June of 1907. A handsome new masthead featured the state seal and motto ("Forward") at its center. The editor thanked readers and advertisers for their "able support." To Deitz, who feared that he would sell out, Roese expressed constant reassurance. "I am still possessor of *The Sun* and I guess I will be for some time to come," he wrote in February of 1908. "It's paid for and that's more than most of the country prints can say." Even if he sold, he vowed, he would try to "go nearer to the seat of war"—by which, presumably, he meant buying a newspaper in Sawyer County.⁴⁹

In the meantime, the terms of the dispute had shifted markedly. On June 10, 1907, W. E. Moses, an independent logger acting as an agent for Frederick Weyerhaeuser, called at the Deitz cabin

⁴⁸ *Hudson Star-Times*, January 17 and 31, and February 7, 1908; *Osceola Sun*, March 21, 1907.

⁴⁹ *Osceola Sun*, May 2 and June 6, 1907; Roese to Deitz, February 18 and 27, 1908, in the Roese Papers.



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Deer hunting on the Deitz property, 1907. From the left, Alfred Roese, Matt Eggstad, Harry Roese, W. E. Moses, the independent logger who negotiated the Weyerhaeuser agreement with Deitz the previous summer, and Harvey Erickson, editor of the Cameron Junction newspaper.

and offered a settlement. Weyerhaeuser would pay Deitz his back wages for his work on the Brunet River dam. Deitz would allow the lumbermen to remove 4 million board feet of logs from the flowage above the ruins of Cameron dam and haul them overland to the Flambeau River. In exchange, Deitz would get to keep 300,000 feet of logs lying on his own property. Moses explained that Weyerhaeuser wanted no violence.

Deitz agreed to the settlement. On September 16, Moses returned to the Thornapple and paid the family \$1,717 in cash—without a doubt, the largest sum of money they had ever seen.⁵⁰

Roese learned of the accord from a newspaper article, and wrote to Deitz:

I could not sleep after reading the story, and then all night long I could see you and your family clustered around the fire place talking over the all important matter. . . .

If God ever had anyone on his footstool that are more deserving than the family who have been holding the fort at Cameron dam, I've never heard of them. "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" is my humble prayer to each and every member of your family. . . .

Mrs. R. and myself send to you our heartfelt blessings and hope that we will be able to soon grasp the hand of the one man who has been able to

⁵⁰ Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 290.

hold his own with the lumber thieves
of Wisconsin. . . .

From a true friend even unto death

Alfred.⁵¹

Other newspapers heralded the announcement as a Deitz victory. JOHN DEITZ WINS HIS GREAT FIGHT, said one headline. But for three months, the *Sun* was strangely silent on the matter. Roese visited the farm twice more in November, taking along his son, Harry. On December 26, 1907, the *Sun* published a photo of a deer-hunting group taken at the Deitz homestead. Besides Roese and his son, the hunters included W. E. Moses, the Weyerhaeuser agent, who was supervising removal of the logs from above the dam that winter.⁵²

The editor apparently was waiting for a cue from Deitz; it was not long before he got it. In a letter published in the *Sun* on January 2, 1908, Deitz reported that "hirelings" of Moses "have been sneaking around our field looking for a sure shot at us." The farmer claimed that Weyerhaeuser still owed him \$8,000. The lumber baron, he blustered, "has millions for conspiracy to murder, but hasn't money to pay his honest debts." Deitz seemed to grow ever bolder in his demands and more paranoid in his behavior, as if he was feeding off his own notoriety.⁵³

Thus Roese was placed in a tough position. For years, the editor had campaigned for a "square deal" for Deitz. But now that a settlement had been worked out, who

was to say whether it was fair? Beginning in 1908, Deitz cast himself in the role of revolutionary martyr. Toward the end of the battle, he abandoned his Republican leanings and embraced socialism. This seemed to make no difference to Roese, who believed that socialists, like everyone else, were entitled to a fair hearing.⁵⁴ In the Cameron dam dispute, Roese gave Deitz the benefit of the doubt, allowing the farmer to define what "fairness" meant. Even after it became clear that Deitz probably never would be satisfied, Roese still allowed him regular access to the columns of the *Sun*. The Weyerhaeuser interests were troubled by Deitz's continued noisemaking; and when, through Roese, they tried to effect a financial settlement that would remove Deitz from the land altogether, Deitz taunted his friend, suggesting that Roese was an "easy mark" for the lumber companies and that they would co-opt him. Even then, Roese remained steadfast in his support: "*I gave you my word once and that is all that is necessary.*"⁵⁵

After that, Roese only infrequently editorialized on the case; but Deitz continued to rail in print against the "lumber trust." In 1909, the *Sun* published a poem Deitz wrote, blasting the German-born Frederick Weyerhaeuser:

And now this man of foreign birth
Owns this part of the earth
That is called the land of liberty,
Where the people are so E.Z.;

He owns the law-making bodies too,
He owns everything but me and you,

⁵¹ Roese to Deitz, September 19, 1907, in the Roese Papers.

⁵² Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 290; Roese to Deitz, October 10 and November 21, in the Roese Papers; *Oscola Sun*, December 26, 1907. According to the first source cited, Moses regarded Deitz as "a misguided but honest and hospitable man, almost insidiously suspicious and extremely violent in speech." In 1909, Moses circulated a petition in Sawyer County asking that criminal charges against Deitz be dropped.

⁵³ *Oscola Sun*, January 2, 1908.

⁵⁴ For example, in 1910 Roese stated that the new socialist government of Milwaukee should be given a chance, and he doubted that businesses would actually flee the city. Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 271-272, 292; *Oscola Sun*, April 14, 1910.

⁵⁵ Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 290-292; Roese to Deitz, January 17, February 6, and March 6, 1908, in the Roese Papers.

He owns the courts as you own your
dog,
What he doesn't own he'd slaughter like
a hog.⁵⁶

Alfred Roese, meanwhile, had problems of his own. In letters to Deitz, he complained about his heavy workload, dissatisfaction with employees, and bouts of sickness. In the autumn of 1909 he spent ten days on the road soliciting subscriptions throughout Polk County. The pressures of the newspaper business—what he liked to call the “editor’s burden”—apparently were wearing him down. Roese was frustrated by the dormancy of the local Business Men’s Association, and on February 24, 1910, he made one last plea for “boosterism”: “Boom your town. If you don’t, who will? Make all the newcomers and prospective residents think it is going to be the metropolis of this part of the country, and soon it will be.” At the time, Osceola had a population of about 600.⁵⁷

On May 5, 1910, Roese announced that he had sold the *Osceola Sun* to two business partners, Robert Truax and Fred Barrett. He attributed the sale to poor health. Disposal of the newspaper had caused him “a bitter pang,” he said, adding: “The knowledge that if I was to prolong my life to anywhere near man’s allotted three score years and ten I must sever my connection with the paper, did not make the task any easier.” With that, Roese packed up and left the little town whose

⁵⁶ *Osceola Sun*, July 29, 1909. Deitz was a prolific backwoods poet. Some of his early verse, lampooning political conditions in Sawyer County, is quite clever. It is probably indicative of Deitz’s state of mind that, in later years, his wit gave way to rambling doggerel.

⁵⁷ Roese to Deitz, December 10 and 14, 1908, and January 29 and October 23, 1909, in the Roese Papers; *Osceola Sun*, February 24, 1910. The extant Roese-Deitz correspondence stops at the end of 1909. The two men apparently did not see each other after 1908.

fortunes had been linked to his own for thirteen years. With his family he took an extended trip through the western United States, where he investigated business prospects and, apparently, regained his health.⁵⁸

He returned to Wisconsin just in time to catch the climax of the Deitz drama. In September of 1910, Roese bought the *Star-Observer*, in the Wisconsin village of Hudson, just east of St. Paul. Early that same month, John Deitz went to the village of Winter to vote. He became involved in an argument with the president of the local school board, and a logger named Bert Horel intervened. Deitz pulled a pistol and shot Horel in the neck, badly wounding him, and then retreated to his cabin on the Thornapple. The *Sawyer County Record* called him a “crazy anarchist outlaw terror,” and many people in the county apparently agreed. Public opinion, which previously had been favorable to Deitz, now turned sharply against him. Then, on October 1, the Sawyer County sheriff and two posse members, lying in ambush along the road to Winter, shot Myra and Clarence Deitz. Myra, a young woman of about twenty, was hit in the back. After two days of intense suffering under arrest at Winter, she was loaded on the baggage car of a train and shipped to an Ashland hospital. People were indignant over the shooting of the Deitz children anyway, and such callous treatment of the girl further inflamed public opinion against the authorities. Once more John Deitz the outlaw became John Deitz the rebel and martyr.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Osceola Sun*, May 5, 1910; *Hudson Star-Observer*, September 15, 1910. The *Sun* continued to print letters from Deitz after the change in ownership. It printed news stories on the case as well, though the new editors did not show the zeal for the battle that Roese had. Editorially, they shared the rather widespread suspicion that Deitz was a crackpot.

⁵⁹ Hass, “Suppression of John F. Deitz,” 292–294; *Hudson Star-Observer*, September 15, 1910. Clarence



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Three members of the Deitz posse in 1910. Photo by J. Robert Taylor.

The sheriff's bungled ambush seemed to re-energize Alfred Roese, who had always been fond of the Deitz children. He railed against the "savagery" of the attack: "Handcuffing the delicate girl, faint with the loss of blood, helpless and in an agony of pain is cruelty unparalleled in this present century. . . . [C]an any sane person, outside of Sawyer county, deny the widest sympathy with John F. Deitz and every individual member of his family from the baby up?"⁶⁰

Deitz refused a last-minute peace offer, including a personal pledge from Gover-

nor James O. Davidson that he would receive a fair trial and free legal counsel. Likening himself to John Brown, he vowed to fight to the end. On Saturday morning, October 8, about three dozen deputies, a score of newspapermen, and a horde of townspeople trooped through the woods to the Thornapple for the final showdown. Just before 10 o'clock, the deputies opened fire. At least a thousand shots were fired in a gun battle lasting more than five hours. John Deitz took refuge in the loft of his barn, where he held the posse at bay with his deer rifle. A deputy, Oscar Harp, was killed in the exchange of gunfire; Deitz was wounded in the hand and, at the begging of his family, he gave himself up. John, Hattie, and Leslie Deitz were taken into custody, eventually to be charged with murder. The next day, the story of "the battle of Cameron Dam" made the front page of the *New York Times*.⁶¹

Deitz was shot in the hand. Myra recovered from her back wound. She went on to marry, then divorce, a Chicago film director who made a movie about the Deitz affair in which Myra played herself.

⁶⁰ *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 1910.

Freed on bail, Deitz and his family took to the vaudeville circuit. Early in 1911 they spoke at the Shubert Theater in Minneapolis, where an orchestra played "patriotic airs" as John, Myra, and Leslie took the stage. John Deitz, facing a battle for his freedom, was full of his usual bluster. "They used plenty of funds to get the whole Deitz family and they couldn't even get the dog," he bellowed, to the crowd's great approval and shouts such as "You're all right, John!" But Deitz's bravado did him no good in court. On May 13, 1911, Hattie and Leslie Deitz were acquitted. John Deitz was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. In Hudson, Alfred Roese gave the story front-page play, but the unidentified copy seems not to have come from his own pen. It referred to Deitz's "uncontrollable madness" and "sinister grin," terms that Roese never would have used in reference to his friend. Deitz served ten years in prison before being pardoned amid a wave of public sympathy in 1921; he died in 1924. He was sixty-three. The *Milwaukee Journal* eulogized him in heroic terms: "Beside Cameron dam, on the Thornapple river, Sawyer county, he staked it all."⁶²

Alfred Roese left Hudson in 1912. He had an itinerant and apparently only

marginally successful career, editing small newspapers in Minnesota and Wisconsin until 1919. He was working as a representative for the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Duluth Herald* when he died in 1920. He was fifty-eight.⁶³

AMERICANS of the Progressive era reacted in strikingly different ways to the rise of corporate power. The larger cities witnessed the rise of a new middle class and of a legion of highly trained specialists who possessed deep faith that they could rationalize American society by means of "efficiency" and sound management. Alfred Roese was thirty-seven years old when the century turned; to an extent he was a prisoner of his rural upbringing and his modest education. Unlike the new professional class, which sought to mediate industrial strife and remake the nation, Roese clung tenaciously to the traditional values that had served him well in Osceola. His Jeffersonian ethos was essentially backward-looking, but it also was admirable for its integrity and its commitment to simple justice.⁶⁴

It is worth noting that Roese did not view the Deitz case in terms of forest conservation, which in the early 1900's was the province mostly of college-educated professionals. Roese, like most other people in northern Wisconsin, assumed that the cutover lands could be turned into farms. Indeed, he believed

⁶² Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 296-298; *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 13, 1910; *New York Times*, October 9, 1910; undated, unidentified clipping (Minneapolis, February, 1911) in scrapbook of John F. Deitz Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

⁶³ Hass, "Suppression of John F. Deitz," 300-302, 307; *Hudson Star-Observer*, May 18, 1911; *Milwaukee Journal*, May 9, 1924. The available evidence suggests that Deitz and Roese had a falling-out, perhaps involving a monetary dispute, around the end of 1908. One historian goes so far as to say that the bond between them "snapped." While on trial for the murder of Oscar Harp, Deitz asked that Roese be subpoenaed for the defense, but for reasons that cannot be determined, Roese did not testify. See Malcolm Rosholt, *The Battle of Cameron Dam* (Rosholt, Wisconsin, 1974), 77.

⁶⁴ Biographical sketch in the Roese Papers; *Osceola Sun*, May 27, 1920.

⁶⁵ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 166. Looking beyond his own concern with the rise of the professional middle class, Wiebe suggests that Progressivism might best be viewed in terms of broader responses to modernization. Such a framework is applicable to Alfred Roese, for the Osceola editor—despite all his talk of local development—was in many respects an anti-modernist. See also David M. Kennedy, "Overview: The Progressive Era," in *The Historian* (May, 1975), 37:453-468.



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Guns confiscated from John Deitz after his capture on October 8, 1910. Shown are two single-barreled shotguns, a double-barreled shotgun with a broken stock that was wired as a "set gun" in a lumber pile, three .30-calibre rifles, and a .40/.82-calibre rifle which Deitz had captured from a deputy during the fight on July 25, 1906.

that the stench of wrongdoing in Sawyer County had retarded agricultural development. His chief quarrel with the lumber companies was not that they cut down trees, but that they corrupted politics and treated people badly.⁶⁵

If he saw it, Roese must have scoffed at the epilogue to the Deitz case published in the *New York Times* a week after the shootout of 1910. The *Times* devoted the front page of its Sunday magazine section to the battle at Cameron dam. The story portrayed the case as a backwoods anomaly, an object lesson in the perils of socialism and the "blood lust among primitive men." The dispute, said the *Times* portentously, was "symbolized by the solitary figure of Deitz, brooding over an idea in the loneliness of his forest home."⁶⁶

In the pages of the *Osceola Sun*, the Cameron dam affair was not an anomaly but an important test case on the future of the United States. Roese was an unusu-

ally skillful small-town journalist. By combining a familiar booster rhetoric with a vivid sense of drama, he sought to invest the story with a sense of urgency that all Osceolans could feel. The community's response to his appeals for aid suggests that, to a great extent, he succeeded. As portrayed by Roese, John Deitz was not a "solitary figure" at all, but a vital symbol for small-town citizens, a man whose struggle epitomized their own. The structure of power in the northern woods—not to mention Deitz's own penchant for self-destruction—severely tested the editor's "square deal" ethos, perhaps even crushed it. But Alfred Roese's crusade was a worthy one, and it remains a prime example of how an editor could cast an out-of-town story as a local fable with an enduring moral.

⁶⁵ *Osceola Sun*, October 25, 1906.

⁶⁶ *New York Times*, October 16, 1910.