Theme of city's 1920 diversity expo is still apropos

April of 1920 was not a time of tolerance. Recession had brought higher prices, unemployment and labor unrest, and in the context of world events, there was a great fear that Bolshevists, Marxists and Communists were out to make the most of it.

Banner headlines in the Democrat and Chronicle screamed that "Reds seek to make outlaw strike part of world uprising," and "Russian Reds' courier caught here with plans of class war."

German troops had just occupied the Ruhr valley in violation of the Versailles Treaty, in order to suppress Bolshevik uprisings there; in New York, the state Assembly had just expelled five of its members because they were socialists and was about to pass a measure aimed at keeping the Socialist Party off the ballot altogether.

And yet, amid all this seething fear and uncertainty, pupils in the Rochester School District put their paintbrushes to work and produced 1,500 colorful posters that 70 Boy Scouts then distributed in 300 public buildings and workplaces — all to promote an event that sought to affirm something quite reassuring in such troubled times.

And it did, apparently beyond a great many people's expectations.

It was called the Homelands Exhibition. A previous column discussed how one of Rochester's unsung heroes, Melissa E. Bingeman, suggested the idea after reading about a similar event in Chicago.
Homelands

The purpose was simple: to foster a greater appreciation and acceptance of Rochester's foreign-born, ethnic minorities by showcasing their native cultures — from dance and song to linens and furniture.

Organizing this was anything but simple, however. "Some are devoting almost all their time to rehearsals, plans for exhibits and other preliminaries," the D&C reported the week before the exhibition opened. "More than a thousand will take part in the entertainments. Each group has drawn on all available talent among men, women and children of its nationality. The list of performers include many professionals, all of whom are giving their services without charge."

The exhibition was a hit from the very first night. So many people showed up at the hall at Exposition Park that all the seats were taken, and even the standing-room-only sections were full. The police had to close the doors.

What happened next, the newspaper noted, was a "startling surprise" — a colorful, well organized extravaganza that, during the next 10 days, held more than 150,000 visitors in thrall.

Indeed, those who went "in a resigned spirit of toleration for the theatrical outburst of a few amateurs," the D&C observed, were pleasantly surprised to find that "in all the program there was no element of actual acting; the participants merely asserted and lived that which was born with them... an aptitude for all that is connected with the history and folk lore" of their native countries.

The dances were especially well received, the newspaper reported.

"A wild, invigorating breath from the steppes seemed to accompany the Russian Cossack dance given by an uncommonly agile couple." And when Polish folk dancers took the stage, "the noisy... stamping of the booted men accompanied by the graceful twinkling of the girls' nimble feet was in itself a sight to beguile the watcher."

Belgian women demonstrated lace making; the Dutch showed how to create pottery. In the Swedish booth could be found an interesting pair of nutcrackers. They had been carved by a Swedish farmer who, while sitting at his fireside in winter, "studies the faces of friends who come in to chat. Whenever he sees a face he wants to copy, he carves the likeness into the wood of his latest Nutcracker."

Just about every group performed music, including a violin solo by Edward Figgia, age 5.

Rochester's total Armenian population was only 35 or 40, and yet just about all of them seemed to be involved in assembling a display of rugs, furniture, needlework and jewelry, or performing an exciting rendition of a traditional wedding dance. This dance conveyed an "exotic oriental atmosphere," thanks to the quaint costumes and the "evident joy" that the Armenians took in presenting it.

By the end of the 10 days, the point had been made. "A citizen who fails to look seriously upon the value to the community of the foreign-born... does not show intelligence worthy of his citizenship," the D&C observed. "It is more than evident to the exhibition visitor that not without an unusual amount of talent, cleverness and real genius could the various nations represented have given to the world the gifts depicted."

Bishop Thomas Hickey seemed to capture the spirit of this special event on the very first night, with words that, if anything, carry even more urgency today, when our tolerance for many foreign-born groups is tested by terrorism and divisive debates over illegal aliens.

"Our city is fortunate in many things," the bishop declared at the opening ceremonies, "but beyond its wealth and industry and capital and labor it has something that is even more important, a true community spirit, a true spirit of sympathy. We need the help and sympathy of one another, and the better that spirit is propagated, the better is the city for it. In this day of unrest, of profiteering, of high prices and strikes and lockouts, it is refreshing to see these groups of men and women of the nations of the world who have come here to make Rochester a better city in which to live."