

Greg Wahl and Charles Bobbitt, *It Didn't Play in Peoria: Missed Chances of a Middle American Town*, with Illustrations by Hugh McGowan. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2009.

Peoria residents Dr. Greg Wahl, a dentist, and his patient, Charles Bobbitt, a history enthusiast, teamed up to examine various facets of their city mainly through biographical sketches of individuals associated some way with that river site. While Hugh McGowan provided illustrations, the authors enhanced their volume with almost 20 pages of photographs.

Wahl and Bobbitt latched onto the old phrase "Will it play in Peoria?" to examine personalities and developments that explain why Peoria excelled at times, missed opportunities on other occasions, and became misunderstood in some instances. They opted not to cover already well-studied topics such as the Caterpillar Corporation and the noted local whiskey production which allegedly once made the town "the Whiskey Capital of the World." Nor did they concentrate on National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research which, among other things helped produce penicillin in large quantities after 1941.

Wahl and Bobbitt introduced a chapter or topic with a tease to pique a reader's interest. Then they develop their ideas. They often resort to alliteration as in a disclaimer of Peoria being a "bland and boring backwater." They closely inspect and examine the multiple facets of their subjects with great perception of their context.

After briefly sketching Peoria's earliest physical environment, Wahl and Bobbitt chronicle the career of the 19th century Dr. Elias Samuel Cooper. His ambition and rash challenging of medical conventions generated envy and opposition from fellow physicians locally and distantly. In that atmosphere some citizens even accused him of robbing graves for research or other purposes. Such interests eventually caused him to relocate in California where he encountered additional opposition. Sure Cooper surgically prepped in Peoria, and his energetic drive on the west coast helped prepare the way for the Stanford Medical School.

Likewise, the writers also show Peoria was outmaneuvered by lesser communities for the location of the Illinois State Normal University. Similarly Peoria did not receive the Corrington Institute and University when Washington Corrington's heirs convinced a court that their father was not mentally competent to leave \$750,000 for a new school that would not have a football team.

Understandably some persons were only "Passin' Through" Peoria. Actually Charles Lindbergh mostly passed over it. Supposedly during a flight from there he conceived his idea of a transatlantic solo hop. Wahl and Bobbitt speculate that the aviator pitched a sponsorship push with Peoria contacts without ability to document such. Likewise, the former rail-splitter Abraham Lincoln went through the confines, too, as a soldier, lawyer, and politician. In fact, in 1854 he talked for three hours there to counter Stephen Douglas over slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Interestingly Lincoln

did not campaign there in 1860. Famous pop singer 1970s Jimmy Buffett made a quicker stop toward Peoria than intended when the sleeping driver hit a telephone. He shared his experience in his song, "Life is Just a Tire Swing." During the 1930s Vernon Rudolph learned a river cook's very light doughnut recipe contained a specific amount of potatoes and then created his own business Krispy Kreme Doughnut Company. Should he stay in Nashville or Peoria? Instead of flipping a coin, he happened to read Winston-Salem on his Camel cigarette pack and "Pontiaced" to North Carolina.

During the first half of the 20th century Peoria was a tough town. For much of that span Mayor Ed "Dearie" Woodruff was in charge of graft, honest and otherwise. Somewhat business-like he had set fees with baseball pools interestingly costing the most. During the 1930s the notorious Shelton gang "protected" Peoria from the Chicago mob. In the end, Woodruff bemoaned, "The crusaders got me," evidently aided by the emerging Adlai Stevenson. Other bad guys, like pimp Wyatt Earp in the 1870s and juvenile offender Charles Manson in 1940s, learned, as the authors say, "Crime Didn't Play in Peoria."

For contrasts see Chapter 8 "They Didn't Stay in Peoria...." Just look at the lives of white feminist Betty Friedan and black comic Richard Pryor and their privileged-challenged backgrounds and eventual impacts. In many ways they are two of the best-known people that Wahl and Bobbitt profiled. They evaluated, "If Friedan was ashamed of Peoria, Pryor embraced it, using his time there to create fiery sketches about its street life that kicked in the

world's stage door." Naturally don't overlook the very different orientations of the noted 19th century agnostic Colonel Robert C. Ingersoll and the ultimately television famous 20th century Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Wahl and Bobbitt stated Peoria "provided Robert Ingersoll and Fulton Sheen with fertile ground to explore the diversity of American thought and culture..." and "Both men learned the art of debate in Peoria, along with tolerance for other views, strong work ethics, and a sense of humor that would disarm the nation." Some attention should be given to Peoria native Harry Herbert Frazee who dabbled in baseball and theater. A cash need for the latter and a colossal ego resulted in his trading of George Hermann Ruth from the then highly successful Boston Red Sox to the lowly New York Yankees. For Red Sox fans that was the "Birth of the Curse" as Babe Ruth proceeded to lead the pinstripes to unsurpassed baseball glory!

Wahl and Bobbitt patriotically conclude "Terrorism Doesn't Play in Peoria." They profile "'The Duke' Without the Swagger," namely Peoria native Wayne A. Downing. President George W. Bush selected that general against counterterrorism, "the man who actually wrote the book on it." The military leader reminded many of John "The Duke" Wayne minus some of the presence. The authors also highlighted Peoria Police Officer Greg Metz for his alertness in an otherwise some minor traffic stop on September 13, 2001, for helping in the early arrest of Ali Saleh Kahliah al-Marri. He was the alleged al-Queda bagman whom almost two years later President Bush declared an "enemy combatant."

Thereafter, concerning troops active in Iraq and Afghanistan, Wahl and Bobbitt cover "just a few of the reserve units that call Peoria home. In truth, they all deserve to have their stories told."

The writers end their account, "Given the universality of the uber-phrase 'Will It Play in Peoria?' (which most cities would die for), Peoria has had unlimited opportunities to put a glowing spin on its soiled self-image. It still does."

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