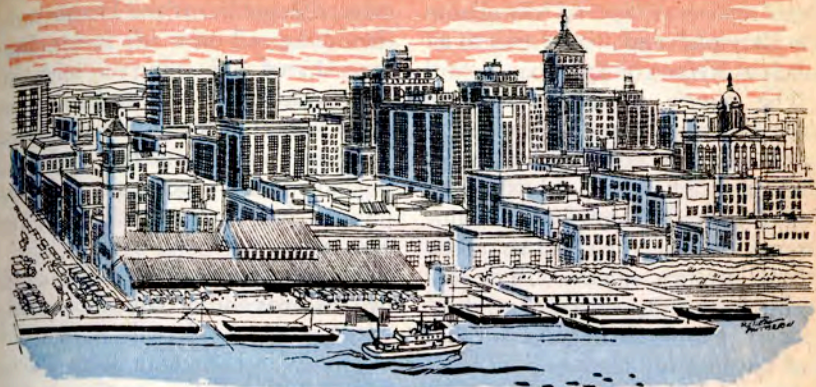


How a bursting new spirit in the younger generation cleaned up a town that was once ashamed of itself



## *Now They're Proud of Peoria*

Condensed from Redbook

Betty Friedan

**W**HEN I was growing up in Peoria, Ill., my home town was a nation-wide corny joke. But Peoria was no joke to us. Everybody in town knew that the politicians were fattening on the proceeds of gambling and prostitution, that the streets were filthy and the schools getting worse every year. But nobody did anything about it. There were few facilities for sports, art or anything to interest young people. I left when I was 21.

No one is apologizing for my home town any more. For its good government, Peoria recently received an "All America City" award from the National Municipal League. The houses of vice are padlocked. The

streets are sparkling clean. It happened because my generation, after taking on a world war, felt strong enough to take on Peoria. When their dreams were too big for Peoria, they didn't leave for faraway cities; they made Peoria fit their dreams.

Before the trouble was that people with dreams wouldn't go within 100 yards of City Hall. Bums cluttered its steps and threw empty whisky bottles into the courthouse yard. A notorious vice syndicate ran Peoria "wide open": a gambling dive operated unmolested one block from City Hall; there were numerous brothels in town.

A messenger from the syndicate would come to City Hall each Mon-

day morning with an envelope containing the protection money. This money was listed in city treasurers' reports as "Special Miscellaneous Receipts" and would run to as much as \$60,000 or \$70,000.

The town's 22 aldermen were elected by a ward system which the machine easily controlled through patronage. There was a box in the Palace Tavern where traffic offenders could leave their tickets to be "fixed" by their aldermen. The few feeble attempts at reform died quickly. People shrugged cynically, and stayed away from politics.

But when my generation came home from war they didn't just shrug. The movement that was to remake Peoria started in lonely decisions, many of them made on battlefields. Robert Lehnhausen, Peoria's ten-times decorated war hero who came back at 24 a lieutenant colonel, recalls: "I was waiting for take-off at a bomber base in England when I read how the vice situation in Peoria was so bad that the military was going to put the city off limits for GI's. I got to thinking about the old guys back home, padding their pockets on this business. But what could one person do about it?"

"Half my men didn't come back from that mission. Then I figured that if we can be responsible for fighting the wars we can be responsible for the future in our home towns. If you say one individual can't do anything, what's going to become of America?"

That's all they were—individuals. In their late 20's, getting a war-postponed start on families, homes, careers. Republicans and Democrats, they disagreed on many issues. But they shared one thing: a faith in American democracy and in their own ability to shape its progress. They had no machine ties, no backing, no political experience, and they jumped feet first into cleaning up Peoria.

Their first success was a campaign by postcards and neighborhood canvassing, which elected 27-year-old World War II veteran John Parkhurst and two others to the county board of supervisors. Parkhurst started asking questions. When he refused to approve a zoning change without knowing where the property was or why it should be changed, zoning amendments—a vital matter in this growing industrial-residential city of 112,000—were more thoroughly explained to the board.

Peoria has always been a Republican town, so Parkhurst and other vigorous young men became Republican precinct committeemen, accepting the lowliest political hackwork as part of their responsibility. The next year Robert McCord, home from Okinawa, was elected to City Council, and James Kellstedt to the post of state's attorney.

These young people saw to it that the dirty facts of Peoria's political life were made public. McCord started a one-man investigation which revealed that the city was paying more for its gas, asphalt and



toilet paper than a private citizen could buy them for. He telephoned the police after visiting several gambling dives one Saturday night, and reported at the next Council meeting that not one officer had shown up to investigate his complaints. John Altorfer, who had come back from the Pacific to start a radio station, broadcast City Council sessions in full.

These were good first steps, but for a thorough housecleaning, the whole structure of ward-elected, patronage-breeding government would have to be rebuilt. Over one weekend, in 1951, 4000 signatures were obtained on a petition for a special election to change to city-manager government. Then, under the direction of 30-year-old Charles Schlink, the town's bright young men dug up facts to answer the old machine politicians' speeches. Young women made 32,000 phone calls in three weeks to get the voters to the polls. Young parents, their kids tagging along, rang doorbells and passed out handbills.

When, by a two-to-one majority, city-manager government won, the young people helped arouse Peoria to elect *good* men to the new streamlined City Council. Now, instead of 22 aldermen running in their own well-heeled wards, there would be only eight councilmen, elected by the whole city. With an awakened, city-wide electorate to face, many of the old machine boys didn't even bother to run.

Plenty of good candidates made

themselves available. Civic leaders who formerly had protested, "I can't afford the risk," reconsidered when young men like war-hero Bob Lehnhausen were willing to take time out from their struggling new businesses to run for Council.

When the returns were in, leading the whole field for City Council was young Myrna Harms, a florist's wife with three children. There had never been a woman on Peoria's Council before. The new mayor was Robert Morgan, president of the YMCA—quite a change from the mayors who, for almost half a century, had run Peoria on the philosophy that "Sin is here to stay." Of the eight Council members elected, four—including Lehnhausen—had never held political office before.

I saw the new Peoria a year after that election. The bums and the hangers-on were gone from City Hall. In their place were trained young men—from a 25-year-old M.S. who is traffic manager, to a 30-year-old CPA who is comptroller. The new Council hired a fighting city manager, George Bean, fresh from a clean-up job in Grand Rapids. For the first time, jobs are not handed out as patronage plums.

At City Hall I saw 27-year-old Personnel Director William Sommers interview a job-seeker. The applicant had brought a letter from his ward committeeman, and apologized because he didn't have his precinct committeeman's endorsement too. "This sort of thing is out," said Sommers, tossing the letter in the

wastebasket, and handing the man a brand-new application blank. (They never had such blanks in the old days.) The man got the job—that of sewer-maintenance man—because he was qualified.

Gone is the box at the Palace Tavern for “fixing” traffic tickets. Traffic fines are being paid, streets have been re-engineered for safety, speeders stopped by radar, motor-vehicle laws enforced. Deaths from auto accidents dropped from an average of 13 a year to three, the lowest toll in Peoria history, in the second year of the new government. City bills are carefully checked, and the money saved on graft and patronage has bought a fleet of radio squad-cars and sewer-cleaners.

The syndicate didn't take it lying down. Mayor Morgan's home was bombed after the big vice crack-down by police. But the city police went right on raiding, and the state's attorney continued to prosecute suits to close the red-light houses and gambling dives. New cases of venereal disease dropped 56 percent in Peoria last year.

When the Council made Myrna Harms a one-woman committee to houseclean City Hall it was meant as a joke. She went ahead and did the job anyway. Now the years-old grime has disappeared, and so have the spittoons—relics of another era in local government. Councilman McCord auctioned off the old cuspidors at a public sale and took the last one home, where it's now growing philodendron by his fireside.

In the city where local government was considered none of the public's business, annual eight-page reports are now published in the newspapers, and there is a weekly television report from city officials. Private citizens talk about “going down to look at the records myself” when the new Council doesn't satisfy their curiosity. For they realize today that the government is their property: they have the right to question anything, and the power to change what they discover isn't good.

But it isn't just in politics that young dreams have changed Peoria's old shames.

No art museum? Joan Hunter, who once dreamed of painting in Paris, got together with other Peoria housewives, businessmen and architects, and persuaded the park board to give them the old pavilion in Glen Oak Park for an Art Center. Last summer 10,000 Peorians went through that pavilion to see an exhibit of contemporary artists.

The school situation? Peorians had become so disgusted with it that they wouldn't pay higher school taxes, and the school board had balanced the budget by reducing the teaching staff and by curtailing music, art, home economics, vocational courses, library and minor sports. But Peoria's mothers organized several citizens' groups to work for school improvement. An 18-woman committee of the American Association of University Women spent several thousand hours study-



ing the school system, holding panel discussions and presenting its findings to the public. The board of education, influenced by the committee's presentation of the facts, decided to go into deficit financing to secure additional teachers and restore curtailed services.

Peoria's public swimming pools had been closed ten years because they couldn't meet health standards. Then Robert Leu, a young insurance man, got on the park board—with others like him. They reopened the pools and started a program of free swimming lessons, teen-age dances and baseball leagues for Peoria youth. Kids who once apologized for their home town are now proud of it.

The Peoria story is not ended.

There are still slums and men out of work. But as our old chemistry teacher, J. Huber Sammis, said: "More people are willing to admit there are evils, and more are trying to improve things, than ever before."

When there's confidence in the air, and a belief that nothing is impossible, people can do anything. There's a newer generation in Peoria now, the post-Korea veterans, starting things even my generation never dreamed could be done. Like 26-year-old Richard Chandler, who once thought he had to go to Broadway to write plays but is now writing for an "in-the-round" theater he helped start.

"Peoria," he told me, "is now a town you can grow up to. You can make it whatever you want."

### *Comedies of Error*

OUR APPLIANCE store in Minneapolis serves a fast-growing suburban development in which whole blocks of houses are almost identical. One morning a customer phoned and said excitedly: "You'll have to send someone out to move our range. It was installed at the wrong address."

"But you were there yourself," protested the manager, "and your family was there."

"Yes, yes, I know," replied the customer. "We moved into the wrong house."

—Contributed by Florence Eng

A HOUSTON matron was seated next to a middle-aged man, a stranger, in a large church one Sunday. It was an extremely warm morning and the church was not air-conditioned. Suddenly the man seemed to slump to the floor. The matron instantly knelt beside him. "Put your head between your knees," she whispered urgently. "You'll feel better if the blood can get to your head."

Putting her hand on the back of his head, she pushed down and was surprised to hear the man sputter in vigorous protest.

"Lady," he snapped when he had finally eluded her grasp, "I'm *trying* to retrieve my hat."

—George Fuermann in *Houston Post*