THE CITIES OF AMERICA

PEORIA

By ELISE MORROW

Long libeled as a rube town, this "whisky-making, earth-moving capital of the universe" is actually a bustling city of violent contrasts. It abounds in both churches and saloons, civic conscience and gambling.

Except for Brooklyn, no community in the United States has been slandered so elaborately as Peoria, Illinois. Generations of comedians have vulgarized Peoria as the symbol of the rube and the boob, and have used the city's name to establish a suitable background for jokes about licentious drummers. Peoria has become a companion word for "hayseed," an all-American common denominator, a municipal equivalent of the man in the street.

This libelous comedy, which identifies Peoria as provincialism reduced to absurdity, has given Peoria a spurious value in American culture which has little to do with the town itself. The mythical civic personality is related to the reality only in so far as Peoria is an average American midland city and the vigorous fulfillment of the average American town. It has no individuality which is not wholly American and no eccentricity or virtue which is not entirely indigenous to the Midwest.

Peoria lies, most fortunately, on the western bank of the Illinois River, on a lovely upland sweep rising out of the rich Central Illinois prairie. The Illinois is a pretty, placid river, and is a major segment of the Lakes-to-Gulf inland waterway. It has given Peoria cheap transportation for its aggressive and diversified industry, and scenery for one of the most spectacularly beautiful residential sections in the country. Peoria's finest homes are built along bluffs which rise 300 feet above a stretch of the river so wide and calm that it is called Lake Peoria. Pres. Theodore Roosevelt is quoted as having described Grandview Drive, the principal residential street, as "The World's Most Beautiful Drive," an accolade which has been commemorated in the call letters of Peoria's largest radio station, WMBD.

The village of Chicago was a precinct of Peoria County from the time the county was organized, in 1825, until 1831. Now Peoria is, next to Chicago, the largest city in Illinois. According to the best available estimates, it has a population of 117,000 within the city limits, and 68,000 more persons live on its perimeter. Its claim to being the oldest continuous settlement in the state, although sometimes challenged, is generally accepted. First charted, fortified and colonized by the French in the late seventeenth century, Peoria has been a civilized settlement since 1691.

Peoria was, successively, under French, Spanish, British and, finally, American control, and the original American settlers were the hardy Anglo-Saxon pioneers who spread through the Illinois country from Virginia, Kentucky and Maryland. The heavy German immigration of the late 1840's, which played such an important role in determining the character of St. Louis, also provided a Teutonic overlay for Peoria, and after them came the Irish.

This is a city of violent contrasts, as tangible as the differences in its air and weather. It can be clear moonlight in the residential districts on the bluffs and yellow with fog in the ugly, frequently foul-smelling industrial valley. Politicians have used this cleavage with considerable success for years, reducing the city's problems to a conflict between the haves on the bluffs and the have-nots in the valley. Its further contrasts include an abundance of churches and an abundance of saloons; a genuine, highly developed and progressive civic consciousness, and a long and odorous history of gambling and sin dens.

Peoria is described by its friendly postmaster, Howard Gorman, as "the whisky-making, earth-
moving capital of the universe." This, although grandiose, is reasonably accurate. Boosters call Peoria "the city of good spirits," Whisky did help to define its original character and has continued, almost more than any other single factor, to influence its history. Brewers were prominent among the industrial founding fathers, and whisky and beer, supplemented always by a variety of smaller manufacturing, were the economic backbone until the earth movers arrived. Hiram Walker operates in Peoria the largest single whisky-distilling unit in the world.

The city's largest industry today is the earth-moving Caterpillar Tractor Company. The "Cat" plant in East Peoria employs 22,000. Caterpillar is the spiritual home of Alexander Botts, the wild and marvelous tractor salesman of Saturday Evening Post fiction. Peoria's other leading manufacturer of earth-moving machinery is Robert G. Le Tourneau, an eccentric genius whose slogan is "God Runs My Business."

With Caterpillar and Le Tourneau, the largest employers in Peoria are the Keystone Steel and Wire Company, Hiram Walker, and Altorfer Brothers—washing machines. Beyond them, there is an astonishing variety of large and small operations—more than 200 industrial firms producing 1500 different products, including everything from commercial solvents to golf-club-head covers.

Such industrial diversification gives Peoria an unusual economic stability. The city also draws upon the fat Illinois farm land which surrounds it. Peoria lies fifty miles from the geographic heart of the great American corn belt, and 150 miles from the center of the nation's cattle-raising industry. The United States Department of Agriculture, after searching the entire Middle West, chose Peoria as the perfect site for a $2,000,000 regional research laboratory to develop new and extended uses for farm commodities and their by-products. One of four such laboratories in the country, it has had a long list of achievements in the past eight years, among them discoveries which made possible the large-scale commercial production of penicillin.

That the name of a city so fortunate and fruitful could have been taken in vain so relentlessly for so long is a source of wonder to most Peorians. Some seriously attribute it to the pure melodiousness of the old Indian word, Peoria, a little exotic, but entirely American, which rolls so nicely on the tongue; more are resentful of the implication that "Peoria" is synonymous with "hick town."

"We don't laugh when someone says 'Peoria,'" one of the city's first citizens remarked not long ago when the subject came up for discussion.

Many Peorians date their city's downfall in the national mythology to two masterpieces of libel visited upon them in the early '20's. The first is a scene in a popular play of the period, called Lightnin', in which an addlepated girl says mournfully that the only reason she and her husband got married was that they happened to be in Peoria and it rained all week.

The second is a gay little madrigal, written in 1925 by Billy Rose, which was still being sung by soldiers and sailors during the second World War. It is called I Wish't I Was in Peoria, and it has eight stanzas, all equally derisive, but in several cases remarkably prescient. The last stanza says that "they trim their nails with guns in Peoria," a statement which would not have seemed, at times in the past few years, much of an exaggeration.

Earlier stanzas allege that:

The present mayor of Peoria Works in a five-and-ten-cent store... 

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK ROSS

They chased the laundry out of Peoria, They legislature passed a launia And bought a bathtub for Peoria.

This whimsey has a peculiar connection with present reality. Mayor Carl O. Triebel, who heads the first remotely successful reform administration in Peoria's history, never worked in a five-and-ten, but he is the owner of the Ideal Troy Laundry, one of the largest laundries in the city. He was elected in 1945. Mayor Triebel is a very plain man, referred to both by himself and by his enemies as "a damned dumb Dutchman." He lacks completely the silver-tongued, keys-to-the-city expansiveness of many Midwestern municipal officials, but he is stubborn, patient, honest and sincere. He is also very philosophical.

Recently, while shepherding a visitor about the city, Mayor Triebel drove past the Ideal Troy and, pointing to it, said, "That's what makes it possible for me to be mayor." He has considerable affection for the laundry, and he went on to explain that running a laundry is good training for running a city.

"It makes you patient and fatalistic," he said. "Things come in dirty and go out clean, and every week they lose a little something. You can't be a perfectionist and run a laundry any more than you can be a perfectionist and run a city."

In his campaign Triebel was backed by an anonymous business group, with the help of Peoria's vigorous and progressive Association of Commerce. This group is called, interchangeably, "the better element" and, by those hostile to it, "the secret sixteen." Triebel certainly undertook one of the most difficult jobs in municipal administration when he undertook to clean up Peoria. Probably only a man of his patient, forbearing personality could have weathered the difficulties of the job; even Triebel doesn't speak (Continued on Page 119)
the old saw that business and pleasure won't mix. In fact, many a sound business relationship has turned into an equally solid and romantic liaison.

Gordon Gibbs set an example by marrying his attractive secretary, Blanche Lorraine, of New Bedford, Massachusetts—a Gibbs graduate, of course.

The files of the placement bureau are crammed with employer records marked "KGF," meaning "Katherine Gibbs husband." On long winter afternoons when the girls grow weary from pounding typewriters, scribbling shorthand and cranking adding machines, the teachers revive spirits by telling their favorite story of the Wall Street banker who requested two secretaries in as many months.

In his first request the executive carefully specified that the girl must possess charm as well as solid business training.

When he called up the second time and repeated the order, the placement office asked what had happened to the first girl.

"She married my son," replied the banker, making no effort to conceal his eagerness. "This one is for me."

To understand Peoria, it is necessary to understand this usage of the word "liberal." In Peoria, as in Springfield and south to East St. Louis, "liberal" does not mean what it means to the rest of the country.

When a Peoria official says that he assembled a group of liberal elements in the community, he does not mean that he called a meeting of presumably forward-thinking folk from church, labor and business. He means that he rounded up the free-and-easy boys from the back room. This localized conception of the word was demonstrated by a remark made by a businessman who rejected the offer of one of the gamblers to set up slot machines in his store.

"I'm as liberal as the next man," said the businessman, "but I told him slots don't belong in here."

This is what one of the toughest old aldermen in town meant when he got up during a council meeting and shook his fist at Mayor Triebel, shouting, "You're a lying, cheating skunk! ... You got elected saying you were a liberal, and look what you turned out to be!"

For practical purposes, Peoria is divided into these two factions, the so-called better element and the liberal element. The latter group is strong, and it includes not only numerous sinners and shady types but some business- and labor people who feel that Peoria was meant to be what they call a friendly, wide-open convention town, and that it is good for business for it to remain so.

As one liberal put it, "Peoria was always a nice, sociable town. That was the old Spanish custom, and frankly it isn't possible to clean it up; there aren't enough police in the state of Illinois to do it."

Triebel had to move slowly and compromise considerably because of the power of his opposition. He was advised to carry a gun. He did for a while, but finally discarded it.

"It was too bulky," he explained. "Besides, I wouldn't have known what to do with it."

Civic consciousness of its own sort is not restricted to the better element in

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ABOUT YOUR TRUNKS: Check the trunks you're wearing against these Munsingwear Knit-Trunks. Only Munsingwear has: "Stretchy-Seat" that g-i-v-e-s...
gap-proof fly...shaped, supporter-like pouch for chafeless groin-to-groin coverage. For he-man comfort, try a pair. And a Munsingwear T-Shirt.

A WORD TO THE WIFE: No need to iron Munsingwear Knit-Trunks. No buttons to break or get lost. The seams are stronger than the material itself. And Knit-Trunks and T-Shirts fit budgets as neatly as husbands!
Peoria. Several big and dubious operators have always been proud that they "contributed lavishly" to charities, and several exhibited, at least superficially, a sportmanlike approach when Triebel was elected. "If we never turn another wheel," one of them said cavalierly, "we're happy you're elected." Another, Carl Shelton, sent one of his emissaries, Ferdie (Fishmouth) McGrane, to Triebel's office sometime after the election to consult with the mayor on readjusting the slots to the change in administration.

Triebel said something about not having any more slots, and Fishmouth unhappily reported this back to the boss. Shelton himself then came down to the mayor's office. Triebel repeated that the slots were down.

"Well," said Shelton, "I guess that'll give me more time to spend down on my farm."

"I guess it will," said Triebel.

Shelton did spend more time down on his farm in Southern Illinois, living a pleasant pastoral life until he was ambushed and assassinated near there about two years later. He had left his Peoria interests in charge of his brother Bernie, who stayed on, living just outside Peoria on a farm known somewhat hilariously as Golden Rule Acres. Bernie kept his hand in what rackets were left and hoped eventually to take over again full scale. He was murdered last July at a dismal roadside beer-and-juke joint he maintained near his farm. One of the surviving Shelton brothers, Carl, assured the reporters after Bernie's death that he was just a dirt farmer, boys, just a 100-per-cent dirt farmer.

The late Bernie, not surprisingly, knew that his future was uncertain. During the last several months of his life I tried in numerous ways to see him, and was unable to get to him. He was, his acquaintances said, "easily disturbed these days" and "likely to hit you over the head with the butt of a pistol if he didn't like your attitude. It wouldn't matter to him you're a woman. Bernie's got no sense of gallantry."

Bernie left, with instructions to his wife, a remarkable document. It was a recording, laboriously made in the Shelton sunshine, of a conversation between himself and an alleged representative of a Peoria County public official. The conversation involved an alleged bribery attempt, and the instructions with the recording were as remarkable as the recording itself. Shelton directed that, in the event anything happened to him, the recording be turned over to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

"Well," said Shelton, "I guess it will," said Triebel. "I guess it will," said one official. "You couldn't spit around here without you asked Carl."

Carl was a murderous, intelligent, amiable tough baby with a powerful ego and a Robin Hood complex. He was not unpopular in Peoria. One of the local papers ran a column when he was killed which would have been more appropriate to the death of the president of Harvard. He never swore or drank, people will tell you — "only soft drinks" — and to hear many sentimental posthumous discussions of him, you would think he had been a pillar of the community and a gentleman and scholar.

This viewpoint was, however, restricted. Shelton's adversaries on his own level were less respectful. "No decent, high-class hoodlum would have anything to do with him," one of them said.

Carl and Bernie, along with a lot of other hoods, moved in and out of Peoria during prohibition, when the town became a hotbed of bootleggers from all over the country, trying to move in on the large supply of leftover whisky. They returned with repeal, and, after a few years, took over the gambling racket.

Carl and Bernie were not the only prominent Peorians to die by violence. Their murders remain unsolved, and so does the ambush slaying in March, 1947, of George P. McNear, Jr., the large, handsome, austere president of the Toledo, Peoria and Western Railroad. McNear, a man of no erudite drive but a firm one of preventive drive must enough to hold together. Roll on floured board or pastry cloth to about 12-inch thickness. Pat bottom crust firmly into pan. Fold to form standing rim; flute edge. Prick pastry with fork. Bake in very hot oven (450 degrees F.) 20 to 25 minutes. Makes one 9-inch pie shell.

California canned cling peaches have a true peach flavor. They are firm, freestone; instantly ready to use! Best peaches for pies, cakes, salads, desserts! Fresh right! Every grocer has them!
and ambition, had trouble for years with everyone with whom he dealt—the railroad unions, his bankers, lawyers and bodyguards. He was shot in the chest on a rainy night as he walked to his home from a basketball game.

Most of Peoria’s leading citizens, having a high life expectancy, lead comfortable and prosperous, if somewhat tenuous, lives. They live in beautiful homes, either on Moss Avenue, the oldest residential street, on a lower bluff, or farther out, in the Trivelpiece Drive section of the city. Their social life revolves around two clubs, the Peoria Country Club and the Mt. Hope Yacht Club. The women’s Civic Federation, which used to be served at one of the gambli houses; now the men go to the old Crève Coeur Club or the smaller University Club. The Crève Coeur looks like a dingy fortress, a small-town Union League, from the outside. The inside, which was recently redecorated, is spacious and comfortable.

Although the bluff-and-valley division is sharp, Peoria as a whole is neither a snob nor a narrow town. It has a high percentage of racial minorities and of the foreign-born, but it is also due to the quality most Peorians, first when they try to analyze their town—its warm friendliness and pleasantness.

The most prominent Peorian, in a sense, is the most likely to be Peoria’s “prominence, the Father of Peoria.” He is a nameless old gentleman, rather cherubic-looking man who feels so young about everything, including overeating. In the executives’ dining room at the Cat plant, he snatches desserts from the hands of sputtering vice-presidents whom he regards as too corpulent, and he has organized the Cat-Terpillar Fat Men’s Club, the purpose of which is to shame members into keeping their figures.

The father of seven children, Doctor Vonachen is a member of one of Peoria’s most notable self-made families. His brother, County Judge Francis Vonachen, is a native of Peoria, and he was president of the University of Chicago. Small but expanding, the university is much like Peoria itself in its vigor and variety—it teaches everything from the humanities to watchmaking.

Peoria harbors something called the I Too Reform Progress Society and the Liederkranz Singing Society, which, with the help of the city’s several psychiatrists, maintains a mental-health clinic. There is a well-used teen-age recreation center, one of the most successful Junior Achievement branches in the country, and the Peoria Plan Veterans Service Center, at which committees of industrial and professional leaders of the city have helped to provide veterans with everything from job placement to medical help.

The Peoria Plan for veterans was developed originally by Dr. Harold A. Vonachen, director of medicine at Caterpillar, who is president of the American Society of Industrial Physicians and Surgeons and commodore of the Illinois Valley Yacht Club. Doctor Vonachen is an impulsive, energetic, rather cherubic-looking man who feels very strongly about everything, including overeating. In the executives’ dining room at the Cat plant, he snatches desserts from the hands of sputtering vice-presidents whom he regards as too corpulent, and he has organized the Caterpillar Fat Men’s Club, the purpose of which is to shame members into keeping their figures.

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