

Peoria Journal Star

SUNDAY
CONTINUING

THE PEORIA TRANSCRIPT
ESTABLISHED 1855

THE PEORIA JOURNAL
ESTABLISHED 1877

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This Was Peoria

If a resident of this city 20 years ago had been magically projected into the Peoria of 1956, he would have found the improvement unbelievable. But we, having seen it, tend to forget the lawlessness and moral squalor from which we have emerged.

To appreciate what we now have, we need to look backward once in a while. Some of us still remember vividly the Peoria of the "liberal" days when "Live and let live" meant, "Don't bother my racket and I won't bother yours."

One of the symbols of what was called "liberalism" in Peoria in the late nineteen-thirties (and for that matter in the early nineteen-fifties) was protected prostitution. This racket was so big that we had, not one red light district, but several.

There was the North Washington and Eaton Street district. There was another that sprawled over South Jefferson and Walnut and State streets. And Prairie Alley was a nest of disorderly houses.

In this racket, the city government was a silent partner. Under the pretense of keeping prostitution "clean" (a concept which required vast rationalization) the city government, through the police department, required prostitutes to regi-

ster and report to a doctor, named by the city, for periodic examinations for venereal disease.

Police provided protection for the houses. Patrons were as safe from arrest as if they had been in a movie theater.

Houses of prostitution in Peoria became key points for transportation and distribution of heroin and marijuana. They were centers of gravitation for hoodlums and criminals.

Another aspect of community life 20 years ago was the "sanctioned" gambling, which helped pay the cost of running the city government, and was the source of most corruption in the City Council and police department.

You could walk across the street from the police department and into one of the city's most elaborate gambling casinos where you could play for any stakes at any game you liked. Cross the street in another direction from the City Hall, and you entered another gambling joint.

Upstairs, less than a block from the City Hall was a protected dice game, a big one. Toward the river one block and around the corner was the headquarters of the fabulous lottery known as "the baseball pool." City and county police, mayors and state's attorneys winked at this for many years until a state's attorney closed it in 1953.

Within a block of the baseball pool were two other thriving gambling dens. A horse book operated almost next door to the City Hall. Bookies were everywhere. Slot machines were so common that they were found in newsstands and neighborhood drug stores. Saloonkeepers said slot machine revenue paid their rent. The "take" ran to millions every year.

Lest we forget, this was Peoria not so long ago.

Bring Back The Good Old Harmonica

Herb Shriner, the Hoosier comedian, believes harmonica playing has become a lost art. He would like to see it brought back as a way of teaching children music. And he would also like to see the harmonica accepted as a serious instrument. He says it could eventually be used as a solo instrument in a concerto.