

Where Handmaids Catered To Every Sordid Taste Peoria Journal - April - 14 - 1956

# Old Peoria? As Wide Open As The Gateway To Hell



**BOMBING WAS ONE** of the weapons employed by the underworld to enforce its will. This photograph was taken after a blast set off in an establishment near the city hall.

It is not new for Peoria to be called a city of sin, a modern Sodom. Such it was.

Peoria is a city where once the roar of a bursting bomb was louder than the voice of the judge. Peoria is a city where the crack of the pistol settled many of the "business" arguments.

First  
of a  
Series

Peoria is a city where once the red lights blossomed in three districts devoted to vice. It was a city where every sordid taste of human passion had its willing handmaidens.

Peoria is a city that was as wide open as the gateway to Hell. It was a city where gambling joints were more common than banks, or downtown churches.

Peoria is a city where once the slot machines displayed their oranges and cherries near the outlet of every school. Where even penny machines were displayed to lure the last coppers out of the kids' pockets.

Peoria is a city with a bold tradition, a tough river town where once the gangster ruled with gun and bankroll. For it is no secret in towns where vice and rackets flourish that a well placed bribe can be more effective than a shrewdly aimed bullet.

This empire of vice, violence and corruption now is as dead as the friendly, tolerant community it invaded and absorbed. Because Peoria was a river town it acquired a glamor which neighboring communities never quite could achieve.

**SURE, IN ITS WAY IT WAS A BAWDY TOWN**, but always with a twinkle in its eye. It was a jolly old rascal determined to walk straight and keep its high hat cocked rakishly atop its head. Its bon vivants thought nothing of escorting the reigning madames in their fancy buggies to all except the most exclusive social and sporting events.

And the ladies of the haute monde expected to be addressed as Miss Cora, Miss Belle, or whatever name they chose with which to dignify their establishments.

There was a Continental flair about this city, even though the gaiety was only tinsel. In fact, Miss Fern's Midnight Cotillion, conducted each Saturday night in the grand ballroom of her "home" at Fayette and Washington sts, was known from coast to coast, and as favorably as New Orleans' famous Quadroon Ball.

The hoodlums, the thugs, the gangsters and panders wanted none of this. Crime was crime, gambling was gambling, and vice was vice. Each was a business, and must pay its way.

Even prohibition here had its flavor of the old days. But now the dry era was dying, and ways must be found to continue the flood of illicit funds.

**GAMBLING AND PROSTITUTION AFFORDED** the easiest access to ill-gotten money. If Miss Fern bowed out of this new picture, there was a Diamond Lil to take her place. Or a Big Vic was ready to offer her orgiastic wares.

Lil's place featured the "female impersonator." Her shows, too, became widely known, but could be classed only as infamous. Practically every house near the intersection of North

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Washington and Eaton sts. became a brothel.

Cedar and Walnut sts. in part were taken over by dives. Prairie Alley, sections of what is now South Jefferson ave., and other portions of the city became "districts."

**HUSTLERS ROAMED THE DOWNTOWN BARS**, offering a quick trip to a hotel room or even an affair in the rear seat of a parked automobile. One downtown eating place even provided the parked cars in a lot at the rear. Usually it was patronized by young girls eager to earn half a dollar.

Narcotics were quick to reach the hands of these impassioned and giddy kids. The addict population of Peoria today acquired much of its habit at that time.

Across Fulton st. from the city hall were two buildings dedicated to gambling. One, ornate and tastefully furnished, offered about any sort of action the gambling man could desire. It also was understood that no one need be lonely while losing his money at the old Sportsmen's Club which later became the Clover Club.

**AT THE OTHER, THE ALCAZAR**, baseball pool tickets and similar instruments of chance were on open sale. Slot machines also were available, but the real action was upstairs where a stiff, but honest, poker game was in nightly session.

Also in the 400 block Fulton st. was the Mint. Gambling was carried on in a back room, but only on a small scale. Operators refused to deal with the mob, and well-paid policemen always were poised to close them down.

Around the corner, in the 100 block, S. Jefferson ave. was Peoria's best known establishment, the Empire. At various times, the Empire offered all types of gambling, but always it was the home of the "baseball pool" which frequently paid off jackpots of \$5,000 or more.

**THIS WAS THE MOST LUCRATIVE SPOT** in Peoria. Its proprietor, Bill Urban, was one of the early kidnap victims, obtaining his release only after paying \$80,000.

In the same block, the Saratoga had a short career in big time gambling. For almost a year, before Mayor Carl O. Tjebbel pulled down the lid and kept it down, a casino flourished in the rear. Real he-man poker also was available in an upstairs room.

Also across from the city hall, but this time across Madison ave., was the Shelton gang's headquarters, the Palace club. Gambling of all forms was available here, too. It was unwise to be lucky here. Too large a winning might result in a broken head and a quick frisking after the patron left the club. Eventually this club was sold, and a respectable tavern operation now is conducted nearby.

The old Palace club is not to be confused with the Palace Arcade, in the 100 block N. Madison ave. The partners here ran a gambling and horse betting operation on their second floor. When the hoodlum heat developed, they simply closed their doors. They were gamblers of the old school.

**FURTHER DOWN ON FULTON ST.**, a block and a half away, were the old Lyceum and Windsor. The latter was a major factor in the city's life. Fortunes were won and lost across its roulette and faro tables. Many of its dealers had followed the goddess of chance to the far ends of the earth. True, but almost unbelievable stories were told of Klondike days, and other famous places where fortunes were made and lost swiftly. Nevertheless, it was a gambling house, and one of the city's most widely known.

**THE LYCEUM WAS STRICTLY A GANG OPERATION**, it pushed every operation which might lure the sucker's buck, and except for its horse betting, was held in somewhat low esteem by the city's gangsters. It is now in new hands and is an excellent restaurant.

Yes, a man could get action aplenty in these days. But he was not too well aware of the beatings, the killings, the convoy that went on behind the scenes in order that the kingdom of hoodlumery might survive.

The kidnappings, murders and bombings brought Peoria wide notoriety throughout the Midwest. Outside newspapers sent ace reporters into the city to cover the "Roaring Peoria" story. These events will be covered in tomorrow's article.



**A PEORIA JET PILOT**, 2nd Lt. John H. Larson, 114 Wren ave., donned a pressure suit yesterday on Channel 19's Fun For All show dedicated to the Air Training Command. Shown with Larson, who is stationed at Scott Air Force base, are Wayne West and Nina Dancy, who appear each day on the afternoon show.