

# 'The Good Old Woodruff Days'

By Steve Strahler

Eighty-two brothels along the riverfront. And payoffs.

"In the old days, everybody knew where the red light district was. Now, hell, they're all over town, in the best hotels," recalls Jerry G. Weiss of 927 N. Rebecca Pl.

Punchboards in the back of taverns. And payoffs.

"Think it over, I can remember the good old Woodruff days. Licensing, examinations and a safe city with safe streets for the good Peoria women," laments C. G. Bridgeman, now living in Wallen, Minn.

Slot machines at the Main St. Steak n Shake. And payoffs.

"Whenever people tell you about the good old days — You wanna know about the good old days? — A wife didn't let her husband come to Peoria for a convention. She didn't trust him," contends Max J. Lipkin, former city corporation counsel.

The baseball pool at the Empire. And payoffs.

"Peoria was a wide-open town because of a fellow by the name of Ed Woodruff," says Lipkin.

Roulette tables at the Lyceum. And payoffs.

Thirty years after his death, the legacy of Woodruff's way of conducting business as Peoria's perennial mayor, his credo, "You can make prostitution illegal, but you can't make it unpopular," and his association with a privilege-ridden aldermanic system, loiters around City Hall like a hobo in a freight yard.

For example, one of the leaders of a petition drive to revert to partisan City Council elections in 10 wards says the effort has been hampered by the mistaken impression that "we want to go back to what might be called the good old days."

"It's been a bit distressing to me," says James E. Christopher, former chairman of Peoria County Republicans. He says he has no intention of abolishing council-manager government instituted here in 1953 as a reform measure.

Others — die-hard loyalists of strong mayor-aldermanic government — wouldn't mind going back to the so-called "Good Old Days."

Says South Slider, former alderman and unsuccessful 1965 mayoral candidate Harley Boswell: "The old system of government had a better calibre of people. They did more things for the people. We haven't got anything down on this end of town since this outfit took over."

Contending the city manager system is a "farce," Boswell, 66, claims the taxpayers don't get enough for their tax dollars. He alleges the city payroll is loaded, to use his term, with "deadwood."

But Lipkin, who served under the old and the new, says "variances, everything had a price" in those days and at least half of the 22 aldermen were on the take.

"We used to have state's attorneys that got immensely wealthy. I knew one state's attorney who at the beginning of his term demanded \$200,000 in cold cash (from the rackets). In those days, that was a lot of money."

Woodruff, short, wiry, and by accounts unpretentious and honest, was an early advocate of zoned gambling and prostitution, believing the city could profit from its licensing.

Hidden costs and inherent abuses, however, doomed the concept and, ultimately, ushered in reform.

During Woodruff's 11th and final term (1941-45), slot machine operators paid \$169,491 to the city treasury — \$20 a month for each machine.

Periodically, the Journal Star receives letters and quotes seasoned politicians bemoaning the passing of what they term "the good old Woodruff days." Were those days,

Payments were acknowledged by official receipts and published in local newspapers.

The largest such payment, \$67,762, reportedly followed a conference at the Pere Marquette (now Hilton) Hotel attended by city officials, slot machine kingpins and an agent for the Bureau of Internal Revenue. The agent supposedly advised the gamblers that the "tax" payments were deductible.

On another occasion, Peoria jukebox operators raised \$2,160 — \$6 per machine — to fight a bill proposing an increase in the city tax on jukeboxes. The money found its way to the Board of Aldermen; the tax increase was unanimously defeated.

"I heard old Mayor Woodruff on several different occasions say he got his share from the slot machines downtown, but he also said he left more in the treasury than any other," recalls the 66-year-old Weiss, an advocate of the ward system.

"Everybody knew that the politicians were running our city on profits from gambling and prostitution, that the streets were filthy and the swimming pools polluted and the schools getting worse every year," wrote feminist and native Peorian Betty Friedan in 1955.

"... Most decent people wouldn't go within 100 yards of City Hall and its smelly spittoons. Bums cluttered its steps and threw their empty whisky bottles into the courthouse yard... There was a box in the Palace Tavern

defined loosely as the first half of the 20th century when E. N. Woodruff was running for mayor of Peoria with frequent success, really that good? What are we missing?

where traffic offenders could leave their tickets to be 'fixed' by their aldermen...

"There were 82 brothels — and a gambling dive operated unmolested a block from City Hall. In high school our dates used to drive us on a dare through the redlight district. I can still remember those women standing in the doorways."

According to former Mayor Robert D. Morgan, over 200 prostitutes were licensed. "Fines" totaling \$1,500 were brought to City Hall each Monday morning by vice operators, and the money was used to clean streets, recalls C. Walter Anderson, 79, former mayor of Averyville.

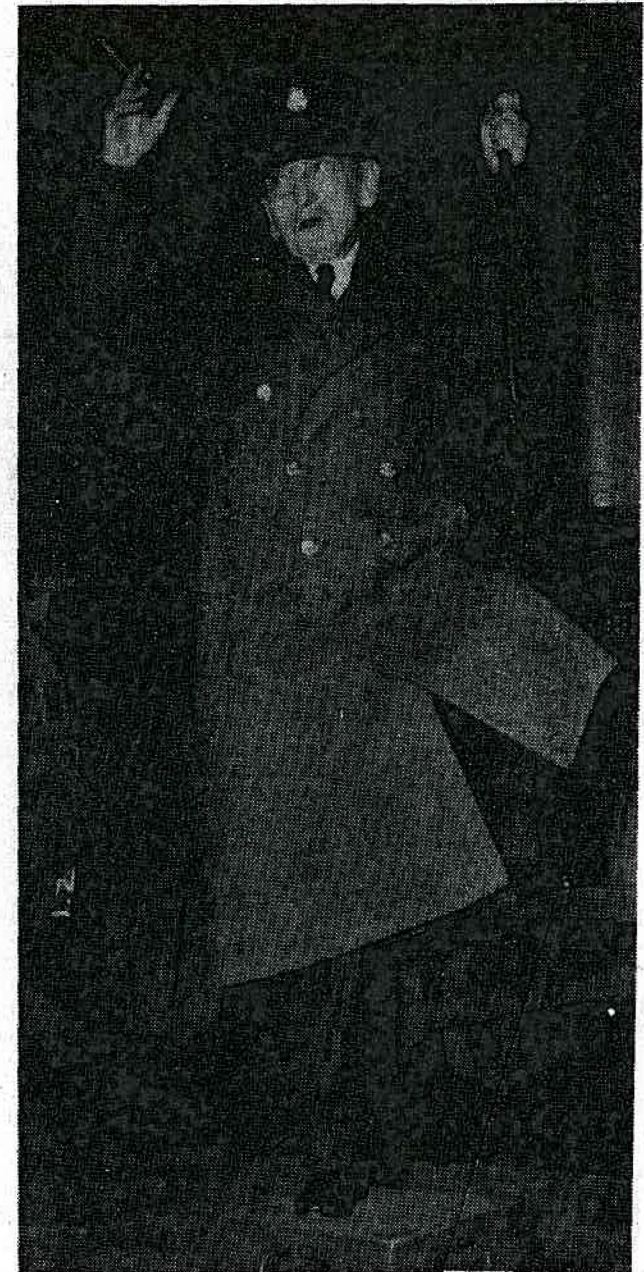
"And the people thought that was just fine," says Lipkin. "But I can tell you they paid on the side, a hell of a lot more than they paid in court."

Morgan, now a federal judge, says "there were not convictions of people doing wrongful things... but it was generally assumed because gambling and prostitution were unchecked that public officials were profiting from it."

Judging from some of the statements made following a reform effort in 1945, they must have been.

Sheriff Charles Swords: "I am a liberal (then a Peoria term signifying an advocate of open gambling). If we have gambling, let the overflow go to

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CIGAR ALOFT, his coat collar turned up against the wind, "soldier" Woodruff boards a train during World War II.