

Times Past

A cruise on Adams was a walk on the wild side

By WALT ADAMS

for the Journal Star

J-Star
3-26-01

Having recently returned to Peoria after living a few years elsewhere, I noticed how some things had changed and how other things remained the same.

When you're small and growing up, going back home always seemed to find the town smaller, and yet this time, the "old town" seemed to have grown. New buildings, new subdivisions and, of course, new entertainment.

The 500 block of Adams Street, now had a new bridge over the river to the east. The tractor giant had now occupied its old training center building that had sat there like a ghost for so long. And now, a lively, energetic, array of brick and mortar greeted my eyes. Even the remodeling of South Jefferson Street was under way, with turns and bends in the asphalt now taking place. The longtime cleaners still stood along there, but those last old, still-standing buildings really caught my eye. These I had recently read about in the editorial columns of the local paper. The people with an eye to design, form, function and heri-

tage are on one side of a column, while the ballpark, progress and blacktop companies were hoping for the best from their written opinions.

When I drove by those old structures, a wave of nostalgia went through my mind, and neither the remaining old buildings or the newly planned projects stirred my mind as much as did the ground and street beneath these historical orifices.

I may be wrong, but at my four score and 10 age, I think I do remember the alleyways behind these old buildings as some of the more famous of Peoria's past. It might have been a few blocks off this way or that, and I don't recall if it was cobblestone or bricks laid side by side, but somewhere along that path went many a lad and lass on an adventure of curiosity and entertainment.

I had worked during my youth at the local drug store in Peoria Heights. It featured one-armed bandits in the lobby entrance. Because of this, I thought all towns offered these amusements. Also, the local bowling alley, just down Prospect Road from my house, had tip boards and pull-tab gambling alongside the Nehi orange soda drinks. These local amusements

were just taken for granted and assumed offered in all the Midwest.

Let me tell you of some of the young Woodruff High School scholars who, on a normal weekend, would borrow good old dad's Desoto for a Saturday night prowl. After stopping at Andy's Drive Inn on Spring Street, the usual remark, "What shall we do?" would come up. Going downtown was almost always one of the decisions of choice. We, therefore, would head our car down Adams Street and make for the bright lights and glitter of downtown Peoria. The topless bars, jazz joints and "houses of ill repute" were all waiting. By pooling 50 cents' worth of gas, we were now off and running.

Washington Street was the first site on these teen-age tourist trips. It seems the bawdy houses of intrigue and mystery were driven by all so slowly. Late at night, they had porch lights that signaled their trade and allure. Maybe red has always been the color of emotion and amusement, as a red rag to a bull. The expression of "painting the town red" must also be connected some way. Anyway, if we didn't giggle too much or shout out obscenities, an occasional tapping on a picture window could be heard. This

was the ultimate reward for such brave teen-age behavior and foolery.

Next, the car gas pedal was pressed down, and the laughing and more daring talk began. Soon, the 500 block of Adams Street loomed up in the darkness. The radio was cranked down along with the thick glass windows. Now we were approaching the final block of thrills and chills. Would we dare see anyone we knew? Would that carload of local student nurses we saw the last time be slowly driving by? Would we see anyone going in or coming out of a doorway?

Here now was the alley — Prairie Alley — in all its mystery and glory. Go real slow. Listen for a tap-tap-tap. Look for the red lights. Oh, the thrill of it all. Many a story emerged and was remembered. Who, as a bold, teen-age youngster, would run up and knock on the door? Could you dare look quickly in? A bet lost is still a bet to be kept with honor.

And so the stories go. Supposedly, one of the madams had diamonds in her two front teeth. She was known as "Diamond Lil." Another was a sweet-smelling gal named Baby Doll. She had a snub pistol packed in her bright, red fur coat.

History will also recall there was a local doctor who kept things on the up and up with weekly inspections, shots and fatherly advice. This was the alley or street or whatever that I and many of today's locals recall to this day.

If we're going to preserve this historic block of old, tired buildings, maybe some special plaque or gold paving could be used to recall our once-exciting Peoria historical merry-round.

Anyone want to sell initialed, inscribed paving bricks for the local males with memories?

□ □ □

Walt Adams is a native Peorian and recently retired from the retail furniture business.

■ The "Times Past" column showcases memories and historical research of Peoria-area residents. Send submissions of no more than 750 words on typewritten, double-spaced pages to Lifestyles Editor Lisa Coon, Journal Star, 1 News Plaza, Peoria, IL 61643. Please include your name, address and daytime phone number for verification, as well as two or three sentences about yourself. Authors of published submissions will receive \$25.