

Once a favorite gangland resort, today Peoria is rank with vile honky-tonks, gambling dives and brothels.

by JACK KERR

**A**S EVERY BAGGY-PANTS comic knows, Peoria (Ill.) is a large, wonderful, folksy town populated entirely by schoolmarms and lovable hicks. You have only to mention its name on TV or stage and you've got yourself a sure laff. Nice, clean Peoria, officially chosen "All American City" of 1953! As typically U.S.A. as hot dogs, Bunker Hill and the Little Red Schoolhouse!

It's a pretty picture, but kindly excuse us if we give a long, loud cheer of the type known as Bronx.

For if one of those fictitious schoolmarms were to stroll down the main drag of the *real* Peoria (Ill.), she'd be so horrified she'd pop right out of her patent whale-bone corset. Back in Prohibition days, Peoria was a well-known hideout for Al Capone, Big Bernie Shelton, and numerous other ferocious thugs whose photographs are hung on postoffice walls. And, while Capone & Co. have departed for health resorts like Alcatraz and Hades, Peoria is still one of the wildest, wooliest, naughtiest towns in these United States.

Peoria after dark, to put it bluntly, is a guzzling, gambling, girly-girly whirl. Anyone who says different simply hasn't been there.

For guys on the prowl, pickups are a dime a dozen along South Adams Street after 10 p.m. Street walkers are fishing in most bars and cafes, poker games are going on in basements and back rooms of half-a-dozen spots, and some cabbies are little more than procurers for the brothels down by the river and in midtown.

These brothels consist of an entire block of un-home-like houses on South Jefferson Street. The only legit establishments in this torrid area are one bakery and one cleaning store, and the proprietor of the cleaning store has been fined many times as a brothel-keeper.

#### One-night Stands And Cheap Hotels

To sample the nightlife of Peoria, as this reporter did recently, just drop into one of the joints around the courthouse square. You might start by picking a small one right in the heart of the city, in a basement under a cut-rate hotel. From the outside it looks pretty crummy, but it's known as The Hole and advertises "entertainment."

You only have to be inside about five seconds to see that "entertainment" is an understatement.

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DATE ?

The joint is jammed and stuffy, featuring a long bar and a tiny, crowded dance floor. There's a room for the dice table — temporarily out of use this season. A guy got gunned during a poker game at Madison and Hamilton, last year, so Peoria's gambling operates undercover.

The waitresses and barmaids, wearing peek-a-boo blouses above sleazy slacks, shuttle back and forth thru the boozy mob, balancing trays of beer and other drinks. Said balancing is really quite a feat, because guys at the bar and tables occasionally paw, slap, pat and pinch the waitresses, who usually aren't too steady on their feet anyway.

There are about 75 customers in the joint, many of them hi-living college guys and airmen from nearby Rantoul Air Force Base or the radar unit at Hanna City, Ill. The women run in age from jailbait up to about 50. Most are on the make. Some are very obviously prostitutes.

Almost everyone is sloppy drunk. You haven't seen such mass intoxication since the night Paddy Murphy died — when they took the ice right off the corpse and chucked it in the beer.

The couples weaving around the floor have their arms completely around one another, and any resemblance to what Grandma would call "dancing" is strictly nonexistent.

#### The Soldier Down The Bar

One waitress, a nicely stacked brunette, is staggering. She leans up against you while waiting for your order. "Gotta stop drinking!" she gasps thickly. "Never last thru at this rate!" A soldier down the bar whistles at her. She waves, belts down another slug and wobbles over to him. Two guys in overalls pinch her, but she doesn't notice. She's already wound around the soldier, necking.

Another waitress, about 20, sees you're alone. "Hey, handsome, how's about buying me a drink?" she gurgles, punctuating the invite by putting her hand on your thigh and dusting you with a breath like paint-remover.

"You already have a drink," you reply, carefully disengaging her creeping hand, pointing to the three gin

rickeys she's backed up against the bar for personal use.

She mutters a few words not heard in Sunday School, and weaves away. Then you notice a good looking dame sitting alone at a cigarette-burned table. She has one of those big, flossy handbags, so you know she's a pro. She gives you the well-known eye. You shake your head, she shrugs her shoulders. A guy drifts over from the bar, talks for a few seconds. They get up and drift out a side door leading to the alley — and to the fleabag hotel entrance above.

Twenty-seven minutes later she's back, alone, and sitting at the same little table.

#### Teen-agers In Blue Jeans

Out on the dance floor, another drunken dame is dancing round and round, holding a little boy of about 4 in her arms. She's getting plenty of pawing, too. Another doll, bottle in hand, lies sprawled in a chair with her feet on the table and her dress pulled up to her waist.

Three or four teen-age girls come in and order drinks and stand at the bar in bluejeans. They begin eyeing the guys, said guys eye back . . .

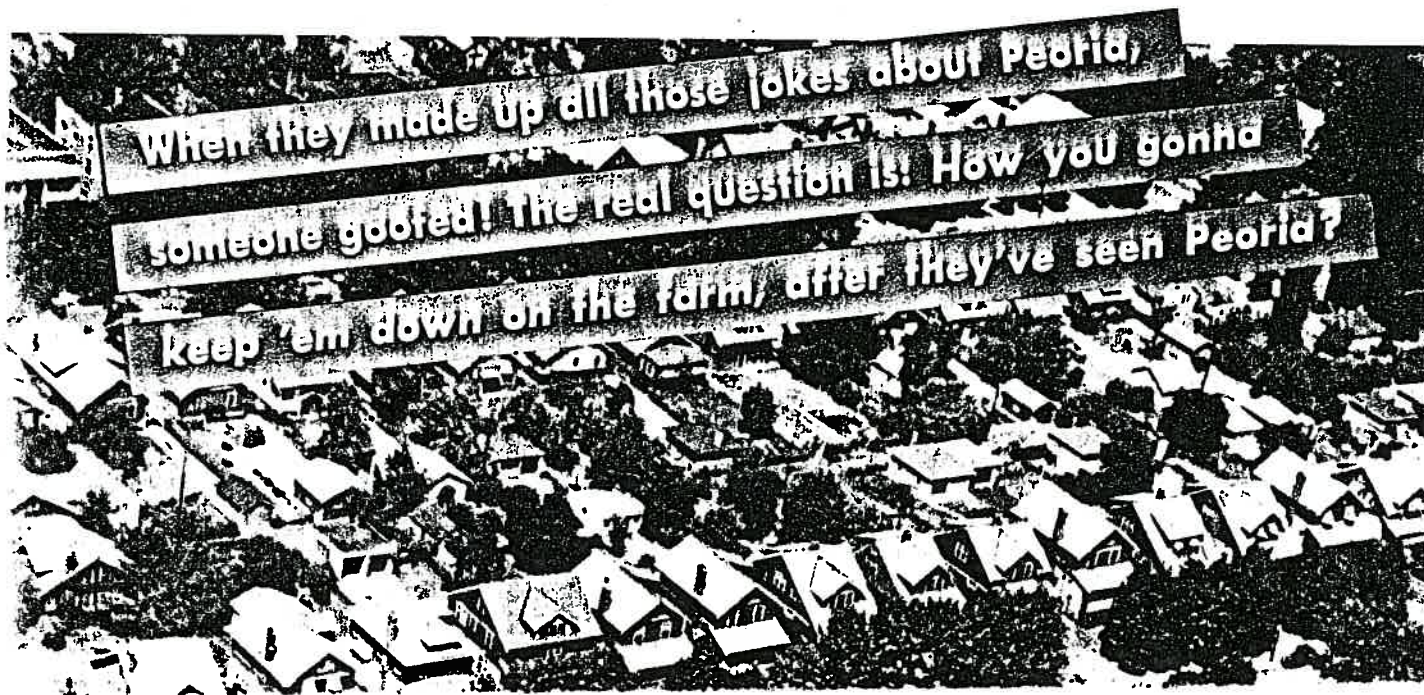
You get up suddenly and go out for air. You drift on down to another scratch-joint on lower Hamilton Boulevard — and there you meet Dennie. That isn't her real name, but Dennie herself is real enough. She's a Korean war widow, gal-about-town. It's Dennie who really lays out the town for you.

You buy her a couple of shots and ask where she lives. "I'm no hustler," she says quickly. Then she smiles. "But I do know a lot of hustlers . . ."

There are hustlers in Peoria, nice-clean-folksy Peoria? "Oh hell, yes, working the bars and joints on South Adams and Fulton Street."

You go along with her to a few joints along South Jefferson. If one's dirtier than another, you'd have to be a cockroach to tell the difference. Finally she takes you to a club where she's going to meet a married businessman, one of the town's leading citizens.

It's a much higher-type (Continued on page 56)





**Peoria** (Continued from page 29)

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joint than The Hole. It has a real good trio pounding out jazz. It has hustlers too.

Dennie points to two elderly men sitting with a pair of quail. "Pros," she says. "The gals are having a good night."

You ask about gambling. Dennie smiles, suggests you have a look thru that door that says "Men's Room." The door opens into a big card room with four or five games going. You look around, pretending to search for the real men's room. Nobody pays any attention. The boys are playing poker and rummy, the stakes are high. An aproned change-maker roams around between the tables.

You go back to Dennie. "There are maybe eight, nine places like this' running downtown," she says. "Also an all-night crap game in one of the hotels. They write a lot of numbers down on South Adams too."

"Any stuff around, Dennie?" you ask after a couple more drinks.

She knows what you're talking about right away. "It's not big here, but there is some." She picks up her bag. "Come on, I'll take you to a place where they're supposed to have some."

The place turns out to be a hi-class cocktail lounge near City Hall. It's quiet, mirrored, dimly lit. There's a damn good piano player and a dark-skinned thrush.

A bunch of young fellows are standing around the bar. When you get close, you find they're spouting junk-talk all right. "Jeez, I need a

blow!" one of the guys is saying to the piano player.

You hear other snatches of junk talk between the piano notes — talk of "main lining," "chicken dinners" and "pop parties," but you don't actually see any stuff.

Dennie nudges your elbow and whispers: "Three of these boys are Bradley U. stars. Bradley's up on Main Street."

You turn and get talking to the kid next to you. He tells you he's home for the weekend from his college. A year or two ago he was a star at Spaulding High.

"See you in the Polo Grounds some day," you say.

"Hope so," he hiccups. You know you won't see him in the Polo Grounds, not if he keeps pounding the bottle that way.

Suddenly Dennie disappears with a Marine sergeant and you're alone in beautiful Peoria.

Peoria, where those schoolmarms and lovable hicks come from. It's getting toward 4 in the yawning, the guys and dolls are hopping into their heaps and heading across McCluggage Bridge into the next county, or out U.S. 88 to those fleabag motels.

You've seen a lot of joints in these United States. Along Eighth Avenue in New York City, 8th Street S.E. in Washington, North Clark and South State Street in Chicago, Main Street in Los Angeles. But you had to come to good old Peoria to see the bottom.

Don't believe everything you hear from those baggy-pants comedians.

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