

No One Dast Blame The Music Man

As the leaves begin their graceful fall from the trees in anticipation of the first chill winds of autumn, the melancholy we feel at the passing of that golden summer of 1912 compels us to pay homage to the legacies of those good and true Citizens of River City:

The Great War impacted that bucolic hamlet in ways unexpected. In 1917 the Boys' Band enlisted en masse with the AEF as a "Friends Unit" and went Over There to make the world safe for democracy; only to have their youthful illusions shattered in the fierce fighting near Belleau Wood. Corporal Thomas Djilas was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry, but at the price of his right leg. He was never the same after that. Upon returning home, he found it difficult to find work as a day laborer and drifted from town to town, searching for his lost love Zaneeta Shinn who, despite promising to wait for him, ran off with a nameless, bearded Rock Island salesman in early 1918. She was never heard from again. In 1921, Tommy was found unconscious in a deserted Keokuk alley and died shortly afterwards in the charity hospital. He briefly awoke from his final delirium to scream "Jeely Kly"; a cryptic reference to the life he once knew when he was young and whole.

Johnny Fred Davey survived the Great War and returned to River City, taking up residence in a ramshackle house at the edge of town. On infrequent occasions, he could be seen out back sharpening a cross cut saw. He seldom came to town, which the citizenry didn't mind as he shook uncontrollably and shouted "fire it up Mr. Washburn" at inopportune moments. He did meet the Wells Fargo Wagon on occasion to collect a 55 gallon drum of carbolic acid. Apparently no one made the connection between those deliveries and the periodic disappearance of local livestock and some wild kids from the wrong side of town.

Barney was a Maxim Gunner in the Great War and won a Bronze Star when he saved Linus' life during the savage hand to hand fighting at Chateau Thierry. After his return to River City, his skills with a machine gun stood him in good stead in the years following Olin's defeat of Mayor Shinn in the hotly contested election of 1920. Barney became "Boss" Olin's chief enforcer, insuring folks voted the "right way" and collecting the vig the Boss demanded for the privilege of doing business in the R.C. as he built an empire founded on bootleg whiskey, the profits from which propelled fellow Hawkeye Herbert Hoover to the White House in 1928.

Jacey Squires' interest in stereopticonal photography served him well as he opened the first movie theater in River City. Unfortunately, he was indicted on morals charges resulting from a midnight raid led by Constable Locke, who burst in on several of the Del Sarte and Pick a Little Ladies making an amateur film depicting certain Grecian themes. Jacey served 20 years in the penitentiary and died a broken man in 1942.

Upon discovering early feminist literature, Eulalie Mackecknie Shinn acknowledged a latent feeling she had long suppressed and found the courage to leave Mayor Shinn and River City forever. She relocated to New York City and became the long time office manager for the Martha Graham Dance Company, sharing a Greenwich Village studio apartment with her "friend" Maria Ouspenskaya.

Amaryllis and Winthrop eventually wed and were very happy together . . . although Winthrop never talked much. They became successful business people, taking over the local Ice Cream Parlor– Bathkinth and Robbinth. – and sold the franchise rights for a small fortune in 1936. For years thereafter, the gentle strains of the Minuet in G for cornet and piano could be heard from an open window of their tasteful mansion (the renovated Pest House – Winthrop always loved that old house) overlooking the far meadow of Madison Picnic Park. Winthrop lovingly cared for Amaryllis for more than 50 years of wedded life until she passed away from complications of a stroke in 1977. Winthrop died peacefully in his sleep on Christmas morning a few months later.

Mrs. Paroo died of the Spanish Flu in 1919 and took with her to her grave the secret that Gracie Shinn was her love child with Mayor Shinn.

And what of Gracie Shinn? “Miss Gracie”, as she came to be known, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Iowa in 1924 and went on to become the first female attorney in the state; eventually becoming an Associate Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court after serving as Undersecretary of Agriculture in the Roosevelt Administration. During her long and distinguished career, Miss Gracie championed a myriad of liberal social causes. In 1973, the Madison Gymnasium was rechristened the Gracie Shinn Gymnasium. Miss Gracie died in 1991 at the age of 89. Shortly thereafter, the Iowa Legislature proclaimed July 4th “Miss Gracie Day”.

The Teen Ensemble went on to enjoy a successful vaudeville career as the “Epworth Warblers” and toured the United States celebrating their particular brand of family values entertainment. After the demise of vaudeville, they found work with Lawrence Welk, first in radio, then on television, celebrating their wholesomeness with an always slightly out of date fashion sense. They became quite successful as a self-perpetuating ensemble by intermarrying. As the decades passed however, this strategy proved problematic as their descendants developed a pronounced tendency toward wide foreheads and narrow eyes. They relocated their headquarters to the mountains of Georgia in the mid 1970s and re-tooled their act to prominently feature banjo music.

Oliver and Ewart tried to continue their singing career but discovered there wasn’t much of a market for barbershop duos. With the advent of radio, they developed a wildly popular two minute comedy routine called “Iowa Humor.” In 1934, they were recording their show at radio station KIOA in Mason City when they heard a “ruckus” at the bank across the street and went outside to investigate what was causing “all that by God noise!” As they stepped onto the sidewalk, they were gunned down by the Dillinger gang. They were buried side by side in the River City Cemetery with the epitaph “That’ll learn us.”

After weathering a spate of anti-German sentiment in 1917 and, again, in 1939, Ethel and Marcellus lived a long and happy life together – although Ethel did change her name to Windsor and steadfastly maintained she was Swiss. Marcellus opened the first Ford dealership in the state of Iowa and became wealthy beyond his wildest imagining, eventually opening 27 dealerships throughout the Midwest. His slogan “Our prices are so low we won’t give Hawkeyes a black eye” became ubiquitous in the collective consciousness of generations of Iowans. At one time during the 1950s Marcellus calculated that 63% of all Iowa households were “Washburn Ford

Households.” After the Justice Department failed to indict him for anti-trust violations, Marcellus proclaimed himself “THE Marcellus”, eventually becoming President of the River City Rotarians, Grand Master of the Knights of Pythias, a 33rd degree Mason, and a Shriner. Ethel routinely won the Iowa State Fair Jello mold competition with her imaginative recipes; most of which featuring corn in some way. Despite sponsoring the Iowa leg of Col. Lindbergh’s “America First” Tour, Marcellus always maintained that no one ever came up with any actual proof the Washburn-Windsors had anything at all to do with the Ku Klux Klan.

Mayor Shinn lived until the ripe old age of 97, finally dying in 1969. The good people of River City came to love his eccentricities and always referred to his mayoral tenure with “he wasn’t THAT bad.” Through the years, he could be seen wandering the streets of River City, quoting swaths of the Congressional Record. His final words were reportedly “well, this is a kettle of fish fine.”

Marian Paroo gave her heart to the man she knew as Harold Hill. They planned to wed in the spring of 1913. However, a nagging suspicion tugged at her heart strings. Utilizing her superior research skills, Marian discovered Mr. “Hill” was already married and had two sons. Heartbroken, Marian called off the potentially bigamous union. After living for a time with Winthrop and Amaryllis, she was asked to leave their mansion because of her persistent correction of Amaryllis’s grammar. With nothing left for her in River City, Marian drifted across the Midwest; eventually taking up residence in Bedford Falls, New York where she secured a position as assistant librarian to one Mary Hatch. Upon Ms. Hatch’s wedding the scion of a local Building and Loan Association, Marian became Head Librarian, pleasantly passing her days with her beloved reference books. In 1961, Marian collapsed in the stacks (M through P) and died shortly thereafter.

In actuality, William Loman, aka “Greg”, aka “Harold Hill”, lived in a small house on the outskirts of New York City. His wife Linda’s only dreams were of the days when “Willy” would return from the road, full of stories of all the sights he had seen and sounds he had heard. His sons were not worth much (probably because of their peculiar names) and constantly deluded themselves they would one day hit the big score. As the years passed, Willy began driving a car instead of taking trains. As he got older, his feet began to hurt. He began talking to himself. He hallucinated. Curiously, Willy didn’t remember River City or Marian at all. On the eve of his retirement in 1949, he came to the conclusion that his life had amounted to nothing. Then he remembered the life insurance policy..... A single car “accident” insured Linda would be taken care of. As Willy lay dying on the side of the road, he imagined he heard the sound of a marching band somewhere in that distant landscape beyond memory. He was eulogized by Charlie Cowell as follows:

“Nobody dast blame this music man. You don’t understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there’s no rock bottom to the life. He don’t put a bolt to a nut, he don’t tell you the law or give you medicine. He’s a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they don’t buy 76 trombones at a go—that’s an earthquake. And then the plumes on your hat start to discolor and you’re finished. Nobody dast blame this music man. A music man has got to dream. It comes with the territory.”