

OVERVIEW OF JOHN MCELHINEY'S BOOK, "WOBURN: A PAST OBSERVED"

By Marie Coady

How can we know who we are, unless we know who we were?

The history of a city is its underpinnings. It is the substance that generates its present and molds its future. But as compelling as that history is in setting the course of future events, that course is never set in stone. It's more a clay whose shape we, the interpreters of that history, can determine.

Therein lies the conundrum. The interpreters of history do not always concur on what lessons are to be learned and, as a result, are sometimes doomed to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. But for good or ill, we must be made aware of the events that shaped us, because without historical perspective there is no compass by which to set our course.

Woburn's last ambitious venture in compiling its history was done by Rev. Samuel Sewell in 1868, with a less comprehensive record of Woburn's history compiled by William Cutter in 1890. Since then Woburn has been deprived of a single source history book from which it could get a more than a chronological sense of its history between the years 1850 and 2000.

Until now, a full 150 years of Woburn's history has been scattered among various sources and bereft of an ambitious soul to bring them together and give the city a compiled history of the latter half of the 19th century and all of the 20th. But this Sunday, February 6, 2000, after 9 years of exhaustive research endless hours of writing and rewriting, John D. McElhiney will unveil his tome entitled: "Woburn: A Past Observed, A civic, social, and political history of Woburn, Massachusetts" at the Woburn Public Library between 2 and 4 P.M.

John McElhiney is himself very much a part of the city's history. An attorney with his offices on Main Street here in Woburn, he also served as alderman in the city from 1978-1985. McElhiney's grandparents emigrated to Woburn from Ireland during the 1880 migration and settled here where John's father, Leo McElhiney, was born. John's father went on to raise his children here, making John a third generation Woburnite.

McElhiney's "Woburn: A Past Observed" relates not only the events that occurred in Woburn from 1850-1975, it puts them in focus by providing perspective along with the facts. He accomplishes this feat using a contemporary and conversational voice that makes his nearly 600 page tome extremely readable, separating the events of each time period by structuring them into manageable ten year time frames and choosing three or four notable events or people to tell the history of each decade, and as he explains, "It was a simple pattern to follow that kept things in sequence as well as lending itself

to the perspective of the time period.”

Tom Smith, Woburn’s noted historian, weighed in by commenting, “I found the whole book to be something that will certainly stand the test of time and is from this moment on THE reference book on Woburn History to which all people will refer. That’s an awful burden to place on an author, but the quality and scope of this book and John’s attention to detail doesn’t detract from its readability.”

The framework for the bulk of events recorded in his book are shaped by the political discourse of the time period. McElhiney chose that method of narration because he feels politics is the engine that drives not only public discourse but the actual events of history.

“There’s a lot of politics in the book,” McElhiney said, “but the politics is my way of tying everything together. The issues people were grappling with definitely involved politics, and those issues set the public discourse.”

McElhiney claims to have had fun putting together his nearly 600 page manuscript, but one only has to feel its weight in your hand to know the amount of work it took to complete. He is also pleased at the way it came together and how the final product was presented. For that he gives credit to Susan Hartmere of Hartmere Associates for the set-up and design as well as guiding him through the publishing process, a new experience for the Attorney at Law, whose legalese was sometimes a hindrance.

When McElhiney first entrusted his manuscript to his good friend Bob Maguire for a critical reading, he was grateful for the input and feels that input made the book better.

“I asked Bob Maguire to read the first draft,” McElhiney said, “because I value his opinion. He commented very favorably on the style and made some suggestions on where to cut back or expand, and that was helpful.”

Maguire’s most forceful advice was to tone down the lawyer’s voice and use a more natural voice in his narration. McElhiney followed that advice, and that’s what makes his history so readable.

Although McElhiney didn’t want his book to be merely “a bunch of nice little stories” he did manage to include a few vignettes which will cause you to pass certain locations in Woburn with new insight.

For example, after reading his tale of the Mishawum Manor house in Chapter 18 you will never again pass the Woburn Mall without thinking about silent film comedian Fatty Arbuckle and the “hyjinks” at the Mishawum Manor House.

It seems in 1913, there was a rambling old mansion just across the street from where the Woburn Mall is now belonging to the Winwell Estate. But when it changed hands that year, its new owners had plans for the property that didn't include afternoon teas and genteel lawn parties.

In fact, Mishawum Manor became known as a house of ill repute necessitating police response on many occasions. It wasn't until a connection was made between the Fatty Arbuckle scandal, that dominated the headlines of the day, and Mishawum House that action was finally taken to rid Woburn of the illegal activity that took place there nightly.

But like most historians, who are haunted by the things they didn't have the room to include, McElhiney feels he did the best he could. "I don't feel guilty about leaving out things," McElhiney explained, "but I wish there was room to put it all in. There were a few things that nag at me. I left out some sports history and missed telling the history of the Jewish Church and its founding. Unfortunately, it didn't fit into the time frame when I was discussing the various churches, and it got overlooked."

When asked what part of the book was the hardest to remove himself from McElhiney said, "To some extent I was torn over the section on the industrial development of Woburn in the 50s, 60s and 70s. In my law practice I see the practical side of it. But living here I see the down side of it too. I learned why and how those seeds were sown for all that development, and every 5 years we have another conscious decision to bring in more and more and more. At some point I think we will have gone too far."

But Tom Smith summed up the overall impact McElhiney's book will have on Woburn when he said, "What John brings to the table here is so good. He hasn't just taken in this information, he has processed it, considered it, and organized it, observed it and passed those observations on to us. It's at once a very technically crafted history that has a soul. It's an instant heirloom. This is not a book that someone is going to read once and then have it gather dust on the bookshelf. It's going to be passed around the family, and they will probably have to keep track of who they lent it to last. But it will stay with families. What he's done is left a breadcrumb trail for people, who want to look more closely at a certain aspect of Woburn history, to follow. He's given them a reference place to start their search."

McElhiney was careful with the facts as would be any lawyer, but he wished most of all to be accurate. At the same time has no desire to hurt anyone in the process which presents a difficult juggling act. And to his credit, the 100 of so people to whom he has given an advance copy of his book, including myself, all agree he told the truth without resorting to unnecessary sensationalism.

This Sunday will be your opportunity to get your very own copy of John McElhiney's book and judge for yourself. "Woburn: A Past Remembered" will be on sale for the first time between 2 and 4 P.M. at the Woburn Public Library, February 6, 2000, and John McElhiney will be there in person to sign it for you.

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