

## REVIEWS

### *The Midas of the Wabash* *A Biography of John Purdue*

By Robert C. Kriebel

(West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2002. Pp. x, 182. Illustrations, appendix, references, index. Clothbound, \$14.95.)

John Purdue is best known for his gift that made possible Indiana's land-grant university. But how he actually spent his life as a merchant and American capitalist is told in great detail by Robert C. Kriebel in his 2002 biography, *The Midas of the Wabash*. Not only does Kriebel detail Purdue's hard work, accomplishments, and public beneficence, but he also reveals his subject's lack of tact, his moodiness, and his notable generosity.

Purdue was a mentor for many young and aspiring businessmen, some of whom were his business partners, others simply young men he bankrolled. He also had a special affinity for children, whom he often treated to candy and ice cream and took on long, chaperoned buggy rides.

Purdue used his hard-earned wealth to benefit his community and

his state in many ways. For example, he not only served on Lafayette's first school board, but in the absence of tax funds to support the schools, he used his own money to keep them open. For all of his generosity, Purdue (despite his early, brief experience as a grammar school teacher), knew little about higher education and much less about establishing a university, though he liked to think he did. Two of the stipulations accompanying his gift for a land-grant college were that it be called Purdue University in perpetuity and that he serve on the board of trustees for the remainder of his life.

Kriebel has done a masterful job of research. He successfully delves into Purdue's occupational environment and political activities. For example, Purdue once bought a Lafayette daily newspaper for a per-

sonal campaign vehicle in his unsuccessful bid for a seat in Congress. He also invested in a gold mine, as well as an early Indiana railroad, and he owned a large farm near West Lebanon. He established the Purdue Rifles, a military unit that saw Civil War action under a 100-day commitment.

Following the end of the war and his temporary residency in New York City, where he bought pork to sell to the Union military forces, he returned to Lafayette, where a Purdue-for-Congress movement sprang to life. Persuaded by his friends, Purdue ran for Congress, though his naiveté in mat-

ters political was monumental. Kriebel documents Purdue's accomplishments and portrays his personality as well.

For the student of Indiana history, *The Midas of the Wabash* is must reading. To ignore John Purdue's life is to miss an essential chapter of Hoosier history.

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*Ambrose Bierce*  
*Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*  
Edited by Donald T. Blume

(Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004. Pp. xxxii, 222. Appendix, notes. Clothbound, \$30.00; paperbound, \$20.00.)

*A Much Misunderstood Man*  
*Selected Letters of Ambrose Bierce*  
Edited by S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz

(Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003. Pp. xxvi, 258. Notes, bibliography, index. \$74.95.)

American writer Ambrose Bierce holds particular interest for students of Indiana history because, while he was born in Ohio, he was living in Elkhart, Indiana, when the Civil War broke out. He joined the 9th Indiana Volunteer Infantry and saw action in many of the major battles of the war—Chickamauga, Pickett's Mill, Missionary Ridge, Shiloh. His expe-

rience earned him fifteen commendations and, arguably, a career. After the war he became a journalist and made his reputation, in part, by writing disagreeably, but honestly, about his experiences as a soldier and as a civilian. Bierce was one of the few American writers to have served in active combat, and he was one of an even smaller number who refused to