

REVIEW ESSAYS

Et in Arcadia

The Growing Market for Local History

PATRICK J. FURLONG

Arcadia Publishing has brought out an amazing number of brief and reasonably priced works on local history during the past few years, but these are books of very uneven quality and value. They range from the intensely local (a single city park in Fort Wayne), to the very personal (a memoir of 1950s Kokomo), to the carefully documented social history of an immigrant community (the Germans in South Bend).¹ Arcadia's editorial touch is light; many of these books would have benefited from stronger professional support. Unfortunately for librarians and anyone attempting a subject search, none of them includes the customary Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.

Patrick J. Furlong is professor emeritus of history at Indiana University South Bend. He is author of *Indiana: An Illustrated History* (2d ed., 2001) and a forthcoming history of St. Joseph County.

Editor's note: All of the books cited herein have the same publisher and nearly all have the same city of publication. After the first citation in note 1, only variations from this pattern will be noted.

¹Geoff Paddock, *Headwaters Park: Fort Wayne's Lasting Legacy* (*Images of America series*; Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2002); Thomas D. Hamilton, *Kokomo, Indiana* (*Images of America series*, 2002); Gabrielle Robinson, *German Settlers of South Bend* (*Voices of America series*, 2003).

These volumes deal only sporadically in controversial or once-neglected topics. The Ku Klux Klan is never mentioned in the Kokomo book, but it plays a prominent part in the studies of South Bend and Valparaiso. Ethnic minorities are neglected in Elkhart, Kokomo, La Porte, Michigan City, and Valparaiso, but receive full coverage for South Bend.² *Hoosier High School Basketball* mentions neither the long-segregated state tournament nor specific African American players—not even Oscar Robertson—but African American players and teams play a vital role in *Baseball in Indianapolis*.³ Chronological coverage is similarly uneven—Elkhart and Michigan City history apparently came to a close around 1930, while Jeffersonville's story ends with the great Ohio River flood of 1937. The South Bend and Valparaiso authors carry their accounts to the end of the twentieth century, while the highly detailed story of Fort Wayne's Headwaters Flood Control and Park Project extends only from 1913 to 1999.⁴

Most of these histories are clearly intended for a local audience—a small group indeed for the narrowly specialized Fort Wayne, Portage Township, and beach communities books.⁵ High school basketball may be the unofficial state religion of Indiana, but Bob Adams supplies only a one-page introduction to his photograph collection on the subject, which is filled with pictures of gyms, coaches, and posed teams. Only two action shots appear among the book's two-hundred-plus images. In sharp contrast, W. C. Madden's baseball book tells a fascinating story of the long effort to maintain professional teams in Indianapolis. The pictures are clearly reproduced, and full of human interest. Madden's Indianapolis postcard book, on the other hand, has no story line, merely

²John Palmer, *South Bend: Crossroads of Commerce* (*The Making of America series*; Charleston, S.C., 2003); Lanette Mullins, *Valparaiso: Looking Back, Moving Forward* (*Images of America series*, 2002); Amy (Lant) Wenger, *Elkhart, Indiana* (*Images of America series*, 2002); La Porte County Historical Society, Inc. Archival Preservation Committee, *La Porte, Indiana, and its Environs* (*Images of America series*, 2002); Barbara Stodola, *Michigan City Beach Communities: Sheridan, Long Beach, Duneland, Michiana Shores* (*Images of America series*, 2003).

³Bob Adams, *Hoosier High School Basketball* (*Images of Sports series*, 2002); W. C. Madden, *Baseball in Indianapolis* (*Images of Baseball series*, 2003).

⁴Garry J. Nokes, *Jeffersonville, Indiana* (*Images of America series*, 2002).

⁵Dennis Norman and James Wright for the Portage Community Historical Society, *Portage Township* (*Images of America series*, 2003).

a half-page introduction followed by a publisher's curse of color images reproduced in black-and-white (not one of them credited).⁶

Two of these histories—curiously both about South Bend—depart from Arcadia's more common image series pattern. John Palmer is a librarian rather than a historian, and his work is far stronger on facts than interpretation. But his book is most emphatically a work of history, relying primarily on its text rather than its illustrations, supported by endnotes and an extensive bibliography. Palmer's coverage is episodic and sometimes eccentric—there is virtually nothing here about politics, while a 1934 bank robbery by the Dillinger gang receives four full pages—and he sometimes jumps from topic to topic, but he is attentive to the concerns of South Bend's many ethnic minorities. His coverage of the civil rights movement is both thorough and sensitive, particularly when he discusses the west side “riot” of 1967.

Gabrielle Robinson is both a professor of literature and a native German-speaker; her study of the German community of South Bend is solidly based on primary sources—mostly in German—supported by more than 250 endnotes but, unfortunately, no index. As they were in many other Hoosier cities—particularly Evansville, Fort Wayne, Hammond, and Indianapolis—Germans were the most prominent and successful ethnic minority in nineteenth-century South Bend. A significant number of them came (mostly for economic reasons) from Arzberg, in upper Bavaria. In South Bend, as in other Hoosier cities, the most vital organization of the German community was the Turnverein, a combination gymnasium, social club, and cultural center. In addition to gymnastics, German-immigrant families also dominated South Bend's musical life and brewing business well into the twentieth century.

When the United States declared war against Germany in 1917 millions of German-Americans demonstrated their patriotism by “forgetting” their language and their heritage, becoming almost invisible in the American ethnic mosaic. Only later in the twentieth century did Americans of German ancestry again celebrate their heritage. Robinson's thorough account of the German community in South Bend—men and women, Jews and Protestants, merchants and farmers—is a major contribution in social history.

⁶W. C. Madden, *Indianapolis in Vintage Postcards* (Postcard History series, 2003).

What can be said about this baker's dozen of Arcadia books? They are well-printed, generously if not always clearly illustrated, but mostly weak in notes, bibliography, and index. None of the authors is a professional historian, although Lanette Mullins and Garry Nokes earned undergraduate degrees in history. Only Gabrielle Robinson is a university-based scholar, although her specialization is literature, not history. Obviously Arcadia does not intend its books for historians, although historians can indeed make good use of some of them, especially *German Settlers of South Bend*. Local readers may enjoy the studies of Elkhart, Kokomo, and La Porte, but the serious histories of these cities remain to be written. Jeffersonville, South Bend, and Valparaiso are better served, but much more needs to be done. The Portage Township, Headwaters Park, and Michigan City beach communities books are so intensely local that Arcadia can scarcely hope to cover its costs. *Hoosier High School Basketball* is a major disappointment, but *Baseball in Indianapolis* is good sports history at the local level. As a rule, the press's editors should be reminded that while postcards can be an important source of historical information, their original publishers and dates must be documented and their original colors ought to be reproduced faithfully. Readers of the *Indiana Magazine of History* should approach Arcadia's books with caution, always keeping in mind that amateur historians sometimes write books which professional historians—and others—ought to read.