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Can East St. Louis Make A Comeback?

By Bill Nunes

How the mighty have fallen. East St. Louis, the city that started out as a sandbar where St. Louis notables such as Thomas Hart Benton fought duels (Bloody Island), and grew to become an industrial giant known as the "Pittsburgh of the West," has hit bottom. The Casino Queen and MetroLink might have given the city a temporary reprieve, but drastic changes need to be made to keep the city from becoming a social and economic sinkhole.

The premier city on the American Bottoms (from Chester to Alton, and from the Mississippi to the bluffs at Route 157) once knew a prosperity that was unequaled in its heyday. The city founded by Capt. James Piggott in the 1790s had its origins as a supply depot for the city of St. Louis. In the 1840s the community became the major supplier of coal, lumber, grain, hogs, cattle and other materials for the Gateway to the West.

The decade of the 1870s proved to be a watershed for the city with the establishment of the stockyards in National City and the construction of Eads Bridge, one of the first major span across the Mississippi. Swift, Armour, Hunter, Morris and Circle packing houses hired more than 6,000 workers to process meat. Immigrants from central and eastern Europe and African-Americans from the South flocked to the city for good-paying jobs.

By the 1890s, East St. Louis was the fastest growing city in America, doubling its growth every 10 years. In the midst of this boom, industrial plants began springing up in the city, in outlying areas and along the river bank. Steel, brass, chemicals, cotton seed oil, malleable iron, zinc, beer, sulphuric acid, wood, glassworks, baking powder, soap, paint pigments, grain, roofing materials and many other commodities were produced or processed there. During the 1920s, East St. Louis was the 86th largest city in the country.

When the Depression came along in 1929, times were tough, but the National Stock Yards Bank was the largest in the country in terms of assets, and one of the few that never missed a dividend payment during hard times. It lent money to other banks in the area, enabling the city to be one of the few that had no banks fail. After World War II stimulated economic recovery, a saying about the town developed: "If you can't find a job in East St. Louis, you won't find a job anywhere."

The city reached its peak during the '50s. The population exceeded 80,000; it had a football team with a 44-game unbeaten streak that was ranked second in the nation. With 55 major industries, its assessed valuation reached $192 million. Twenty-seven railroads traversing the city made it second in the United States to Chicago. A new high school was built in 1958, civic and religious organizations flourished, and the coveted All-America city status was conferred at the end of the decade.

East St. Louis had a small tax base. Compared to other cities of its size, East St. Louis ranked next to last in income from taxes and property. Monsanto (Sauget), Aluminum Ore (Alorton), the Stock Yards (National City) and Emerson Electric (Washington Park) located just outside the city limits for tax advantage purposes. The rise of the trucking industry doomed the railroads; organized crime had a grip on the place; crooked politicians siphoned off millions, and organized labor killed the factories with unreasonable wage and work-rule demands. One by one, companies went out of business or relocated elsewhere where labor and power were cheaper.

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Race relations had always been a problem stemming from the race riot of 1917, and the WPA-built swimming pool at Grand Marais that whites decided not to open rather than allow blacks to use it. Blue collar workers, seeking higher social status, for years had been moving up to the bluffs in nearby bedroom communities. But this trendy migration turned into mass exodus after H. Rap Brown came to town in the mid-'60s and gave his patented "burn, baby, burn" speech.

The city now looks like a war zone. Many homes are either falling apart, boarded up or burned to the ground. The streets are lined with trash, and high weeds exist in most vacant lots.

There is a lot of positive talk about revenue from the Casino Queen, but any sociologist will tell you that gambling isn't the solution to a city's economic woes. There is no industrial base left in the city. Harcross Pigments on Lynch Avenue is the only large industrial concern still in production.

What is it going to take to turn the city around? The problems of alcoholism, single-parent families, gangs, crime and drug addiction are social ills that are not easily overcome. A solution must involve a return to personal responsibility and traditional values. That will be difficult considering the opposing messages pop culture is sending today's youth.

Education is the escape route from the ghetto, but this truism largely goes ignored. Absenteeism is high and achievement rates are low throughout District 189 schools. It is difficult for teens to get their act together when they see regular media reports about charges by state officials of fiscal irresponsibility on the part of school officials.

There is a lot of talk about East St. Louis making a comeback and that people should be buying up property in anticipation of the renaissance. But it isn't going to happen soon. Governments have poured billions into the city with little to show in return. People are afraid to go to East St. Louis.

Mayor Gordon Bush is to be commended for his fine efforts to turn things around, and he has taken many positive steps in the right direction. But the task is overwhelming. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development describes East St. Louis as "the most distressed small city in America." How do you bring about changes in the only city in America that exists by government largess. The cycle of poverty is difficult to break. A spirit of gloom and doom is everywhere. Too many in East St. Louis are resigned to the status quo, resulting in a situation that is almost impossible to surmount.

In the recent hit movie, "City Hall," the mayor (played by Al Pacino) gives a dramatic speech at the funeral of an African-American child who has been killed by a stray bullet during a shootout between a criminal and the police. "Were we not once a great city?" he asks. "Can we not restore the greatness that was ours?"

The plight of East St. Louis is something the area can no longer afford to ignore. What is needed is a mix of volunteerism, civic-mindedness, respect, a bootstrap mentality and economic support. The task ahead is difficult, but not impossible. The job will have to be done one block at a time, one neighborhood at a time. Someone once said: "The greater the challenge, the more satisfying the victory." A lot of people are pulling for East St. Louis to turn it around.

Bill Nunes, Glen Carbon, is the author of "Coming of Age in '40s & '50s East St. Louis," and is working on a sequel: "East St. Louis — The Glory Years."