

## Holy Joe: Joseph W. Folk and the Missouri Idea

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

"Holy Joe: Joseph W. Folk and the Missouri Idea." *The Annals of Iowa* 57 (1998), 178-179.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10165>

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meanings are always clear and reasoned. Numerous illustrations and excellent tables and charts amplify the work. This exacting study of the Frisian immigrants to the United States should take a place beside comparable works by Jon Gjerde, Robert Ostergren, Walter Kamp-hoefner, and other recent students of immigration history.

*Holy Joe: Joseph W. Folk and the Missouri Idea*, by Steven L. Piott. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. xi, 208 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY HERBERT F. MARGULIES, UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA

In 1902 Lincoln Steffens, with the help of Charles Westmore, shocked the nation with an article in *McClure's* titled "Tweed Days in St. Louis." In the first of what would become a series of articles, Steffens described corruption in St. Louis and told of the spectacular prosecutions by circuit attorney Joseph W. Folk.

Steven J. Piott updates the story of Folk first told in 1953 by Louis G. Geiger. Born in 1869, Folk grew up in western Tennessee in a well-to-do Baptist family. He developed a strong moral sense and personal ambition. A lawyer, he settled in St. Louis. Typically, it harbored a "boss," Edward Butler, a Democrat who systematically corrupted elections and a majority in the municipal assembly.

In 1900 the Democrats, for tactical reasons, put forth a reformist platform and ticket. The reformers' candidate for circuit attorney was Folk, an amiable, honorable man known for representing striking streetcar workers. Initially quiet, in 1902 Folk launched a flurry of grand jury investigations and trials focusing chiefly on corruption in the granting of streetcar and streetlighting franchises in 1898 and 1899. He even secured indictments against Butler. "Bribery is treason," Folk said in a typically fervent plea to a jury, "and the givers and takers of bribes are traitors" (45-46). Many of the early convictions, including Butler's, were later set aside, but the boss's power was broken.

In 1904, campaigning for the "Missouri Idea," that public office is a public trust, Folk won the governorship. He accomplished conventional Progressive reforms, such as good roads, but his greatest zeal was for law enforcement, including enforcement of an 1855 Sunday closing law against saloons. People called him "Holy Joe."

Folk urged civic consciousness, direct democracy, less partisanship, and strong law enforcement. He made enemies of businessmen involved in corruption, of party leaders, and of Sunday drinkers. Thus he failed when he tried for the Senate in 1908 and 1918 and the

presidency in 1912. He did, however, serve as chief counsel to the Interstate Commerce Commission and later practiced law in Washington, DC, until his death in 1923.

Piott gives Folk higher marks than did Geiger, who saw him as out of the Progressive movement's mainstream. The author stresses the strong moral dimension of progressivism, argues for the centrality of civic consciousness, official accountability, and rule of law, and credits Folk for stimulating municipal reform nationally.

Some questions Piott ignores. How does St. Louis reform compare with Toledo, Des Moines, and elsewhere? Was machine politics totally bad? Was direct democracy and bipartisanship wholly salutary, or was something lost with the undermining of parties? On balance, however, Piott deserves appreciation for bringing Folk back into the spotlight and updating our understanding of him.

*A Lucky American Childhood*, by Paul Engle. Singular Lives: The Iowa Series in North American Autobiography. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. xxiv, 192 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN E. MILLER, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

This twelfth volume in the University of Iowa Press's Singular Lives series, written when Paul Engle was in his seventies, is dedicated to his daughters and grandchildren. He considered it important for them to understand the curious sort of life he had led, he said, because "it was unique to this country and it will never come again; you will never see it" (xiv). Not a conventional memoir, this well-wrought paean to childhood and adolescence provides a highly selective account of growing up in the small-town Midwest (Cedar Rapids) during the early twentieth century (the author was born in 1908 and died in 1991). Several chapters were originally published in *American Heritage*, *Holiday*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Engle achieved academic success and publishing renown, winning a Rhodes scholarship in 1932, becoming a professor at the University of Iowa, and directing the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1943 to 1966. He published eleven books of poems and a novel in addition to memoirs, children's stories, and an opera libretto. None of this seemed to have been forecast by his childhood, at least as he recorded it in this appealing autobiographical account. Rather than reminiscences of teachers, schools, and books read, his stories here are about life in the family, eccentric uncles, soda fountains, newspaper hawking, horses, and community rituals.

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