

Believing in Warren County: Fighting the "Gloomy Prophecies"

Steve Sorensen © 2004
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By the way...

A dear friend of mine, gone now for about 20 years, bequeathed to me a manuscript he had written in 1940 with the unwieldy title "An Economic Survey of Warren County, Pennsylvania, as a Background for Banking Service, 1926-1938". During a recent dip into this little depression-era treatise about Warren, I found something interesting, and maybe instructive.

Holger N. Elmquist was the author. Many of our older citizens will remember him as a hard-core fly fisherman, assiduous officer of Warren Bank and Trust Company, deadly serious businessman, meticulous gardener, avid practical joker, loyal friend and fervent optimist.

Holger's analysis of the local economy covered the years leading up to 1929's stock market crash and most of the years now known as "The Great Depression." Many people, he said, were "licked, and ready to move out" at the time of his writing. After a comprehensive examination and report on the health of all industries in Warren County, he made an observation that I think is revealing about this enduring and endearing community.

He wrote, "The gloomy prophecies which have gained such wide currency in the community are not just of recent vintage," and he went on to quote J. S. Schenck, writing of the Warren County of 50 years earlier, for supporting evidence. (A few

lucky locals – unfortunately I'm not one of them – still have Schenck's 1887 "History of Warren County, Pennsylvania" on their bookshelves.)

Schenck noted the waning importance of the lumber and petroleum industries, bemoaned the loss of a variety of their spin-offs, and predicted that once-prosperous Warren would lose its eminence among Pennsylvania counties. He made pessimism sound like poetry. "Henceforth, without a doubt, old Warren must take her place in a column and move along in an ordinary uneventful way side by side with counties

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which, at the beginning, were less profusely endowed with nature's bounties." Schenck even said that without adjustments, "the chances for starving are exceedingly flattering."

It might be worth our psychologists and historians asking, "Where does this pessimism about Warren County come from?" But I'd rather our questions be oriented toward the future. "Why must it persist?"

Yes, why not change? Surely we can.

I write this as one who grew up locally, loving this

town and all it offered. I enjoyed the hills and the streams around Warren, learned the discipline of work, and benefited from the proximity of a large and loving family. I learned a little of Warren's history, and that much of what we enjoy today was founded on the sacrifices of people who risked fortune and sometimes life to produce something that would endure.

Warren's history is a tale of citizens who have risen against pessimistic tides to establish businesses and organizations that live in perpetuity. Churches stand today as testimony to

those who sacrificed for what they believed. Businesses sustain many families today because one family was willing to live a hard scrabble existence to invest for the long-term. Retail stores, both small and large have come and gone, but have provided

livelihoods for many through the years.

The success of these endeavors spun off a hospital, a public library, theater and arts programs, and other organizations of unusually high quality compared to what most rural areas offer.

Today, in our debates about education, our economy and our environment, we are beginning to realize that Warren County must grow a larger vision. "It's a small world," we love to say, but in a community, a psychological sense of



smallness inhibits our flexibility and restricts our vision, like dead reptilian skin. Fortunately, we are beginning to shed our sense of smallness.

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If we are to fight the "gloomy prophecies" of today, inherited from depression-era Warren, and from a half century earlier, we need many of those people to come from our own controversy-ridden schools. But the preservation of any school is less important than determining how our schools can best focus on motivating and exciting students who will believe not in one community against another, but in Warren County as a whole, and who will rise to the entrepreneurial challenge to make this county a place of prosperity again.

Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He has been a puppet, a pauper, a preacher, a poet, a pawn and he knows a king. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created.