

Blue Island, IL Back in the Day ...

[May 1 ~ Mayor Hart Starts Saving Blue Island...NOT!](#)

From The Keyboard Of Joe Gatrell

While I anticipate posting the next "on this date" (the bombing of the Transfer Inn on November 9, 1927), I will share this from the legend of John M. Hart. The story was passed along that Mayor Hart saved Blue Island. According to my research, this part of his legend is false. Blue Island actually was better off during The Great Depression than other communities. This was because Blue Island was still in part a farm town, and many were able to live off of the land. Also, the economy was better than in other places because bootlegging and gambling proliferated. Not to be overlooked, as the previous points illustrate, was that Blue Islanders were hardworking and creative.

JG ~ Here is where that part of The Legend of John M. Hart was created. City officials of that era were not up to the task of managing Blue Island's finances. Instead of implementing measures that would have kept Blue Island in the black, they argued and played politics and seemed to do everything they could to sink the city into debt. By the April, 1937 election, the City of Blue Island was over \$100K in debt, mostly to its employees. Can you imagine!

JG ~ Because Mayor Hart is credited with creating the pay-as-you-go philosophy (He did not.) and running city government on a shoestring (He did, and it was not a very long shoestring), he was credited with saving Blue Island. This falsehood may have been created by Mayor Hart himself. He was a master of self-promotion. Regarding the city and its finances, Mayor Hart was the strong leader who got aldermen to stop fighting amongst themselves and make some practical business decisions. Okay, he was a cheapskate who lacked foresight, and he was a dictator. At that time, a dictatorial cheapskate was precisely what Blue Island needed.

JG ~ Mayor Hart was so cheap that, by 1938 when the city finally could pay all of its past dues with a bond issue, he appeared reluctant even pay the employees owed back wages. A city employee named Helen Boeber forced the issue when she sued Blue Island. Boeber v the City of Blue Island, which included everyone owed money, forced the settlement of the debts and propelled the city into the black.

JG ~ Now we must revisit the nature of Blue Island to understand what John M. Hart truly did. At that time, Blue Island was virtually lawless and out of control. The police force was inefficient and corrupt (Sex in the squad car is not a modern innovation, but birth control apparently was!) Murder and armed robberies were common. Mobsters on the lam came to Blue Island for refuge. The city was known for its houses of prostitution. Long before the St. Anthony Hotel, there was the Burr Oak Hotel. Blue Island had a reputation for corruption, and its law-abiding citizens wanted to change that reputation.

JG ~ Enter John M. Hart. He was elected to, ahem, clean up Blue Island. He did this by making a deal with Babe Tuffanelli. Essentially, Babe could have all of the bootlegging and gambling as long as he ensured that there was no more murder on Main Street and no prostitution. This Babe did for the 28 years John M. Hart was mayor. During those 28 years, Mayor Hart did many things. He profited from Blue Island. He sold it, sometime he sold it out. He refused to permit it to grow and prosper. He enjoyed it as his kingdom and his enterprise. Mayor Hart may have saved the city's reputation (or sugarcoated it). He did not, however, save Blue Island.

[Kevin Baer ~ Hi Mr Gatrell, Great read. Looking at this today I see that our new mayor is in the pockets of the Rita's. Seems things really don't change much. Mobsters/politicans are one in the same. http://www.suntimes.com/.../2-blue-island-brothers-in... \(Mentioned article here: http://www.peetz.us/bissrita.pdf \)](#)

[Marge Mineika ~ Don't forget the Rock Island train was a great employer during the depression - My Mom always said they had soup because Grandpa worked on the railroad!](#)

[Kevin Seidel ~ Hey Joe...thanks for this. In California now, but really enjoy reading about the homestead.](#)

Barbara Rice VERY TRUE MARGE

[Kevin Seidel ~ yes marge, I remember my grandmother saying they used to feed the Hobo's from the train. My grandfather worked for the railroad.](#)

JG ~ Marge, Kevin S. and Barbara: great point about the railroads. Jack Sinese and Harry Robertson told me that their fathers worked for the railroad and never were out of work during the Depression. Thanks for your contributions! Kevin Baer, thanks also for passing along that information.

[Nadine DeRango Frale ~ Not sure if you have done so already... but, write a book on Blue Island? I bet you could write some fascinating chapters. I'd like to be the first to buy it. An autographed one of course~!](#)

JG ~ My worry, Nadine, is that I may not sell any books because I've given away so much history in these posts. Anyway, I've been researching and writing for 40 months. Volume I of A POLITICAL HISTORY OF BLUE ISLAND is with one of my editors. While I can not provide an exact date of publication, it should be SOON! There will be an announcement. Thanks!

[Bob Adams ~ Joe, you're the best! Thanks for all of your research and hard work.](#)

JG ~ Thank you, Robert, for your kind words and your contributions to our community. As for the history books, the best is yet to come, and it won't be boring.

[Nadine DeRango Frale ~ I would find it very hard to believe that you won't sell any of your books. Books are forever..... but probably not Facebook. Keep me posted!](#)

[Debbie Jenin Szafranski ~ when is this new book ready to read???](#)

JG ~ Just one more note about businesses that helped drive the Blue Island economy before 1937 and after 1965. Contrary to legend, the St. Anthony Hotel was not a brothel. As an SRO hotel, occasionally its rooms were rented to those who engaged in extracurricular activity.

JG ~ From 1920 until 1930, THE brothel of perhaps the entire south side was the Burr Oak Hotel at Burr Oak Avenue and Fairmont Street (now Irving). The BOH was operated by the notorious white slaver of the era, Mike "the Pike" Heitler. Death did something that Blue Island law enforcement could not or would not do: it closed the Burr Oak Hotel. After Heitler was murdered in 1930, the fix was off. The hotel closed. Thereafter, the building disintegrated into disrepair. It was demolished during the late 1930s. There is an apartment complex there today.

[Patricia Ann Cure Roberts ~ Kevin my grandfather also worked for the railroad, his name was Jim Baker. My uncle Jack Baker also worked for the railroad. My dad's parents had a farm in Worth, His name was Rudy Cure](#)

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[→→ Added: Joe's FB post from December 14, 2013 ←←](#)

Joe Gatrell

Oh, man. I'm really slipping. How did I miss this one? On December 14, 1974, former John M. Hart passed away at the age of 82. Mr. Hart served from May, 1937 until May, 1965. He and Donald E. Peloquin are the longest-serving mayor's in our city's history: seven terms/28 years. And now from history to trivia. Former Mayor Peloquin was born on Christmas Day.

[James Smith ~ My mother would have been 100 yesterday & I forgot](#)

[Marsha O'Brien Rauch ~ @ Jim Wow, maybe that is why your Mom was on my mind and in my heart this week.](#)

[Georgie Kocin Borchardt ~ Great info, Joe. THANK YOU!](#)