

Orvie: The Dictator of Dearborn: The Rise and Reign of Orville L. Hubbard. A review.

In 1989 my friend David Good published his book on Orville Hubbard, long time mayor of Dearborn. The title was *Orvie The Dictator of Dearborn: The Rise and Reign of Orville L. Hubbard*. We lived in Dearborn (as did Dave) and I had helped him with some background information and was cited in the credits. *The Detroit News* asked me to write a review of the book, partially based on the fact that I was the co-author of *A Time of Turmoil* which dealt with Dearborn. I got nice feedback from the review, which ran in the Sunday issue April 25, 1990.

A personal friend once told me about a phone call her father received when he worked for former Dearborn mayor Orville Hubbard. The call came in the evening during the family meal. Hubbard's abusive words were so loud the whole family could hear. Later the little girl asked her shaken father why he let that man talk to him that way. The father had no answer except to say someday he would resign.

David Good, deputy features editor of the Detroit News, has drawn a vivid portrait of the man called a sadistic martinet, a miniature Mussolini, a tyrant. In Orvie The Dictator of Dearborn, Hubbard the person comes off almost without redeeming qualities. He used "physical and mental abuse" to control others and was especially cruel to people close to him. One department head was forced to get down on all fours and bark like a dog.

Anyone opposing him was subject to "nonstop vituperation." And when his wife sought legal relief for herself and her children, Hubbard stopped the action cold: "I knocked her around on her ass," he explained. "That settled a couple of things."

In the public arena, Hubbard's 36-year reign as the "King of the Mayors" was not much different. The book chronicles a litany of disputes, investigations, motions of censure and "endless bouts of litigation based on whim." When Hubbard was not battling his political opponents, he was fighting department heads, city employees, the Ford motor Co., grand juries and anyone else who got in his way. Neighborhoods that cross him found their garbage uncollected. One—the mostly Arab South End—was literally slated for destruction until a judge intervened.

And yet this is the man whose name is still spoken with reverence by many Dearborn old-timers. Indeed, Good considers him a close runner-up to Huey Long as "perhaps the most arrestingly original elected official of twentieth-century America."

How did Hubbard maintain his appeal across four bruising decades? For starters he was a leader of exceptional vision whose initiatives are legendary: the purchase of Camp Dearborn ("the citizen's country club"); the construction of senior housing, strengthening and encouraging neighborhoods and neighborhood associations; upgrading or removing substandard housing; building neighborhood parks and "tot lots"; proposing the consolidation of 15 suburban communities into one, and of course the efficient provision of high-quality services (shoveling snow from sidewalks, paving church parking lots, providing free baby-sitting for shoppers). For these things, Hubbard well deserves the statue in his honor that stands outside Dearborn's city hall.

Still, the warts are there, not the least of them Hubbard's record on racial matters.

Roy Wilkins of the NAACP called him the nation's "meanest man in race relations." The bulletin board in city hall was filled with clippings of hostile stories about blacks. In a notorious interview, he endorsed "segregation one million percent." He led a nasty fight against integrated housing, defeating a coalition that included the city council, Dearborn newspapers, Ford and most of the city's major civic groups. And in the infamous Kendal Street riot of 1963, when a crowd of 400 conducted a 29-hour assault on a house suspected of being sold to blacks, his police cautiously patrolled the area but did not intervene.

Good's discussion of the Kendal Street incident is not only a highlight of the book but provides him an opportunities to include two heroes in a story with very few. In a lawsuit

charging Hubbard with failing to fulfill his duties during the riot, Judge Wade McCree and juror Lewis McGhee, both black, put the principles of the law above their personal feelings.

McCree did so in his charge to the jury: "No one is on trial here for his attitudes about race." McGhee did so in his vote to acquit. "This was a time for honesty, not race. Just honesty," said McGhee when a buffoonish Hubbard embraced him after the trial and asked him out for a victory meal. McGhee faded into the crowd and did not attend the celebration.

But Hubbard's racial record exposes more than a bigot. It reveals a fatal flaw that ties together and explains much of his career. He was given to "shameless opportunism," writes good, always ready to "pander to the fears" of the public rather than to soothe them. He was always the populist, quick to take the side of the little guy, but it was a pathological populism that played on and strengthened unhealthy impulses.

The cost was great. Hubbard considered or tried for almost every position imaginable: the bench, Congress, state senator, governor, city manager of Grand Rapids. The fact that all of these eluded him is not accident. He had charisma, creativity and administrative ability, a "formidable strategist" seldom outmaneuvered. Yet as in a Greek play, he was held back by the very things that made him a success. As Good puts it:

"The tragedy of Orville Hubbard was not that he turned out to be a racist or a dictator or a petty, self-aggrandizing egotist. It was that these traits condemned him to 36 years in Dearborn's city hall instead of permitting him to move on to higher office. In a very real sense, Orvie's long mayoral tenure was not his glory but his badge of mediocrity."

Orvie The dictator of Dearborn is rich in local color, detail and observations. It is enriched by 50 hours of bluntly candid interviews with Hubbard. Its crisp style makes for easy and entertaining reading. Like eating peanuts, the reader will find it hard to stop with just two or three chapters.

Near the end of his life, an incapacitated Hubbard, destroyed by a stroke and unable to speak except in grunts, went to the home of a long-dead opponent against whom he had conducted one of the most vicious campaigns of vilification. The man's gracious widow, noting Hubbard's obvious distress, asked, "Mayor, does your conscience bother you for what you did?"

"And he nodded his head, and I said, 'You did a terrible thing to an honest man. Shall I tell you something? He forgave you a long time ago. I've forgiven you, too, so let's forget about it. And thank you for coming.'"

Perhaps someday those words can be Orville Hubbard's epitaph.