

ROCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY, KATE GLEASON FUND PUBLICATIONS

ROCHESTER
THE QUEST FOR QUALITY
1890-1925

BY
BLAKE MCKELVEY
City Historian, Rochester, New York



HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
1956

PREFACE

Rochester: The Quest for Quality has been written as a community biography of one of America's moderately large cities during the thirty-five years of its most dynamic and self-conscious generation. It may be read as a case history of urban advance in the period of American history which saw the most intense campaigns for civic reform, the most conscientious application of Christianity to social problems, the most rapid consolidation of corporate enterprise, and the weaving of old-American and immigrant social and cultural traditions into the fabric which still underlies contemporary American civilization.

Rochester was not unique in its quest for quality. If the city's promoters were perhaps too eager to claim the label, "Home of Quality Products," their advertising schemes frequently aroused local criticism. Moreover the city's reformers (who included many warm-hearted businessmen as well as hopeful idealists) were constantly returning from visits to cities here and abroad full of plans to correct some local defect by introducing a reform or institution developed elsewhere. Rochester's ablest leaders, not unaware of local shortcomings, repeatedly warned that many improvements were needed before the city could equal the excellence of Minneapolis, Dresden, Düsseldorf, or some other attractive model. Yet these same leaders and most articulate citizens were not ashamed to hope and strive to make Rochester "like Athens," or "the most beautiful city in the World," or as Eastman put it, "the best city in which . . . to bring up a family."

A critic of the preceding volume in this series, *Rochester: The Flower City, 1855-1890*, deplored my neglect of George Eastman. A few paragraphs were in fact devoted to the beginnings of the Eastman Dry Plate Company, and more will be found in the economic chapters of this volume on the remarkable growth of the Eastman Kodak Company, but George Eastman himself did not begin to play an active role in community affairs until approximately the middle of this period. His leadership really came to flower during the war and postwar periods, as readers will discover in my last four chapters.

Other personalities have not been neglected — George Aldridge, the political boss, Rush Rhees, the university president, Walter Rauschenbusch, the prophet of Social Christianity, Mrs. Montgomery, the leader in educational and social reform, Clinton Howard, the "Little Giant"

of prohibition, and many others. Perhaps the name that has appeared most frequently and at key points in the widest variety of city affairs is that of Joseph T. Alling who would be my selection, rather than Eastman or any other, as the most influential personality in the Rochester of these years.

These men and women, along with the half-million others who resided in Rochester during the period, were engaged first of all in making a living in a turbulent urban economy. Each had his private life with its joys and sorrows, its success and failures. In the course of the five years I have devoted to research on this period I have gained fleeting glimpses of their triumphs and tragedies — more particularly of the latter because of the morbid predilections of the daily press, which I have read with diligence and appreciation. But I have not tried to write a “peeping Tom’s” account of life in Rochester in these years. Many of that generation saw more clearly than had their predecessors that they were living complex and interdependent social lives, and when their first burst of optimism was challenged by the world-wide depression of the mid-nineties, they undertook, with a forthrightness rare in earlier decades, to set their city in order.

While it may be unnecessary to declare that all persons described in this book are based as faithfully as possible on the specific individuals whose names they bear, I should perhaps point out that most if not all the firms and institutions of that period have undergone such extensive reorganizations, both in policy and personnel, and often in function, that, although many of their names persist unchanged, their former character, as depicted here, has no intended application to them today.

During nearly two decades of residence in Rochester, devoted from the beginning to the study and interpretation of its history, I have inevitably developed a sympathetic relationship with my subject. I have endeavored on the one hand to guard against the danger of parochialism by making occasional visits to other cities in America and abroad and by comparing local developments with those elsewhere when historical or contemporary accounts are available, though I have not burdened this narrative with such comparisons except as they were made by local citizens or visitors of the period. I have, on the other hand, taken full advantage of local residence to participate as widely as possible in community affairs in order to learn first hand as much as one individual can of the traditions, the forces producing and resisting change, the frustrations and rewards of life in Rochester. I hope that the warmly gratifying as well as revealing associations thus enjoyed have not improperly colored my account of an earlier and in many respects quite different generation of Rochesterians.

Yet I have not tried to exclude value judgments. Indeed the era of

Rochester's "Quest for Quality" welcomed and almost requires them. Readers will find numerous "fortunatelys" and "unfortunatelys" inviting their identification, too, with this city's struggle for self-improvement. And if readers in other cities may at times find the local evidence of self-gratification a bit obtrusive, they should explore the records of their own towns in this period when "Our Fair City" was a widely popular after-dinner topic. Times have changed since the mid-twenties, and Rochester is not the only city that has lost some of the exuberant community spirit of that earlier period, but no account of urban life in the decades before and after the turn of the century would be complete without generous recognition of its earnest and hopeful meliorism.

However, if meliorism was a pervasive attitude, a moving spirit for the generation under review, its application was to the increasingly complex environmental situation of growing cities. A full understanding of urban history will require a broader analysis, encompassing many cities and calling on the techniques of other social sciences, some of which are as yet only in a tentative stage of development. In this study, which is essentially an urban biography, I have been content to follow the earnest efforts of the citizens of Rochester to meet their problems with the ideas and instruments they were able to conceive or borrow.

Of course the problems presented by a dynamically growing urban society, buffeted by a world depression and a world war, were more complex than any of the city's leaders supposed — more complex than I have been able to discover, even with the aid of hindsight. But the task of uncovering the forces and interests involved and then the attempt to weave them together into a coherent narrative have been absorbing ones; I hope that my account of this period's history will convey some of the drama and meaning its events contained.

Rochester, New York
January 15, 1956

BLAKE MCKELVEY

CONTENTS

I. ROCHESTER IN THE EARLY NINETIES	1
Confident of Its Prospects	
Happy in Its Social Life	
Pleased with Its Culture	
II. SOME DISQUIETING TENSIONS	24
Civic Uncertainties	
Utilities in Transition	
Economic Cleavages	
III. DEPRESSION AND RECOVERY	54
The Onset of the Depression	
In the Trough of the Depression	
Roads to Recovery	
IV. CIVIC AND POLITICAL REFORM	73
Good Government and the Democrats	
Good Government and the Republicans	
Mayor Edgerton and Boss Aldridge	
V. CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIAL ORDER	114
The Church Becomes Militant	
Christianity and the Social Crisis	
The Rochester Armageddon	
VI. CHANGING SOCIAL STRUCTURE	145
Population Growth and Diversification	
New Demographic Patterns	
VII. A MORE ABUNDANT COMMUNITY LIFE	168
Lake Resorts, Carnivals, and Expositions	
A Championship Town	
A More Animated Social Life	
VIII. CULTURAL ENRICHMENT AND DIFFUSION	198
Music and Art	
The Theater and Its Rivals	
The Intellectual Life	
IX. "ROCHESTER MADE MEANS QUALITY"	241
The Utility Empires	
"Home of Quality Products"	
Shoes, Clothing, and Unions	

X. ROCHESTER AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR	291
The War Comes to Rochester	
The City in Wartime	
On to Victory	
XI. CIVIC AND ECONOMIC RENEWAL	315
The Resurgence of Civic Reform	
Population Growth and Urban Expansion	
Toward Economic Stability	
XII. NEW DIMENSIONS OF URBAN LIFE	354
Unexpected Social Dilemmas	
Society and the Professionals	
A Greater University	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	395
INDEX	407