

Boy, do we ever need “deal makers” now

By Jim Nowlan

Veteran newsman Bob Hartley has drawn generally affectionate portraits of three large-in-life, colorful southern Illinois politicians from the mid-20th Century in “The Deal makers of Downstate Illinois” (SIU Press, 2016).

There may be some lessons for pols today.

Until one man-one vote districting in the 1960s, deep southern Illinois often dominated Illinois politics. Today the great swath of the Prairie State south of I-70, the only identifiable region of our state outside Chicago, doesn’t even claim its own congressman, the population-starved region carved up to serve interests farther north.

Yet in chronicling the lives of John Stelle (McLeansboro, pop. 2,000), Paul Powell (Vienna, 1,700) and Clyde Choate (Anna, 5,000), Hartley brings to the fore an era in which it was quite okay for ambitious men to do well for themselves in politics while doing good for their voters back home.

Southern Illinois has always been hard scrabble, many folks without two nickels to rub together. The soil is generally thin, and the copious amounts of coal (and maybe oil and gas from future fracking) poured forth bittersweet dividends of dangerous but decent jobs, murderous labor conflict and environmental degradation.

So political jobs and government largesse have always been more important in that region than elsewhere in Illinois.

John Stelle is probably the least known and yet the most important of the three politicians featured, for he was truly the father of the GI Bill, arguably one of the most productive pieces of legislation ever enacted.

A strong personality who didn't suffer fools lightly, Stelle was gassed, wounded and decorated in World War I. Returning home to rural Hamilton County, the entrepreneurial Stelle built a sizable farming, banking and oil portfolio, all the while playing in American Legion and Democratic politics.

His low point came in 1940. As lieutenant governor, he took over the governor's mansion for 99 days in the wake of Gov. Henry Horner's death and, some say, plundered the state.

He made his friend and Springfield paint dealer George Day the state purchasing agent. The two bought so much yellow paint for striping highways that rumors persist there are barrels full of the stuff still stored at the highway department.

But Stelle redeemed himself and more in 1944 when took leadership in Washington via the American Legion of the drive to provide benefits for servicemen returning from World War II. In just seven months, he pushed the massive policy initiative of generous education benefits for millions through a reluctant Congress.

One-time Illinois House Speaker and Secretary of State Paul Powell is best known for, on his somewhat unexpected death in 1969, leaving \$800,000 in cash stuffed in shoe boxes in his Springfield hotel room.

Unfortunately, that overshadows a political career during which Powell, who never went beyond high school, built a tiny "normal school" for teacher training into Southern Illinois University, a major graduate research university.

[In addition, in the 1950s, Powell worked across the political aisle with GOP governor William Stratton to put together many deals that built highways and served people in his region as well as across the state.]

Powell also pushed valuable horse racing dates through the legislature in behalf of new business combines that didn't even own the tracks their horses trotted on.

In return, Powell was basically given many thousands of shares of stock in the enterprises at 10 cents a share, shares that paid \$1 per in dividends in the first year and for many years after.

As Hartley explains, ethics were "flexible" in those days.

Clyde Choate was Powell's protégé in the legislature, a partner in many of Powell's accomplishments. He deserves more space than I have left, but I must get on to lessons learned.

Most important, politics wasn't personal then. Pols scrapped and fulminated across party lines and geo-political regions and regions in the legislature during the day.

Their work done, they piled into cars together and went out to the Lake Club or down the road to Mick and Mary's roadhouse in Thayer for steaks and bourbon with a splash of branch water, where they had a good time and sealed political deals.

Second, while they might take a few bucks here and there, their word was as good as gold.

Today, I hear that while the pols won't take a dime under the table, their word's no good. Pity.

Third, the southern Illinois dealmakers saw their political business as indeed that of doing deals, of allocating scarce government resources around the state.

Today's Illinois political environment is toxic, with parties and their candidates vilifying, and worse, opponents with half-truths at best, destroying the camaraderie in which deals can be reached.

Let's hear it for the good ol' days, or at least elements of that bygone era.