

Altgeld Rose to Fame

John Peter Altgeld was the most controversial public figure in the eastern half of the nation in the 1890s, but he's the forgotten man in his home community of Little Washington, Richland County, Ohio.

Hardly anybody now living in the little rural neighborhood southeast of Mansfield ever heard of Altgeld. And it's a good bet that most Mansfielders never did either.

Several books have been written about this courageous and colorful man. He has fascinated writers since he became governor of Illinois in 1892.

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Today he would be the idol of millions of young liberals throughout the nation, yet he was one of the most maligned men ever to hold public office.

Born in Germany in 1847, Altgeld was brought to Richland County when he was only a few months old. His parents settled near Newville in Worthington Township. The elder Altgeld held the popular German view of that era, that children should go to work as soon as they reached their teens. Schooling, it was felt, was a waste of time.

There were many Germans in Richland County at the time, including two of Mrs. Altgeld's brothers, Peter and William Lehnhart, who had told their sister of the riches of the new country in Ohio.

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But grubbing a living from the Richland County hills was no simple task for the Altgelds. The family was increasing rapidly. There were nine children in all. Twelve years after arriving here the family moved to a 140-acre farm near Little Washington. The family had rented the Newville land. Now the elder Altgeld purchased the land and it was heavily mortgaged.

Life was hard for all of the Altgelds, and most of them didn't do much complaining, but young John Peter didn't like the idea of working on a farm the rest of his life. He had dreams and he was ambitious.

The boy attended grade



John Peter Altgeld, who grew up in the Mansfield area and became governor of Illinois, might have been a national hero had he been born in the 20th century. His reform ideas were unpopular during his lifetime and he was attacked unmercifully by the press and his political opponents.

schools in his home community and learned to speak English. For a time he was enrolled in the Sunday School at the New Washington Methodist Church. When he was 12 his father told him to quit school and go to work.

Young Pete's mother sided with him and with her help the youth was able to get away to Mansfield to attend high school. He and two friends roomed over the Ritter Carpenter Shop and Tannery at Second and Diamond Sts. while they attended high school classes. His mother smuggled food to him from the farm.

The nation was in a Civil War and young Altgeld wanted to go. As soon as he was 16 he enlisted and was sent to Virginia. He didn't see much action, but he contracted a fever which

troubled him the rest of his life.

Young Altgeld wanted to become a teacher. He attended a private school in Lexington operated by a Rev. Gailey. After a period of training there young Altgeld taught at the Woodville School near Mansfield, walking the distance from his room downtown to the school and back every day.

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He wasn't satisfied, however, since a lot of young people were heading west to find adventure. With only \$10 to his name Pete headed west, working as he traveled. He had an idea he would like St. Louis, a boom town on the Mississippi. He got a job there, but earned little and he was still unhappy. He headed west again and got as far as Kansas where his fe-

e — Forgotten at Home

The Mansfield That Was

By VIRGIL A. STANFIELD

ver caused him more trouble.

He was helped by farm families and moved on to the north, looking like a youthful hobo. He finally came to the small town of Savannah, Mo., and decided to quit wandering. He got a teaching job, did some work on a farm, and started to read law. He was admitted to the bar and at the age of 26 ran for prosecuting attorney in Savannah. He was elected to his first public office.

After a year in the job he moved on to Chicago where he was to live the rest of his life.

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While Altgeld had a couple of love affairs in the west, he never forgot a pretty girl, Emma Ford, back in Washington Township. He had wanted to marry her before he left Ohio but her father objected. In 1872 Altgeld returned to Mansfield and Little Washington to see Emma. Her father had died and there were no longer objections to their marriage. The wedding took place at her country home.

Emma was an ideal wife for him. She was attractive and polished and she was at home in society and at political gatherings.

Altgeld was always a champion of the underdog. He fought powerful politicians and moneyed interests all his life, yet he at one time was almost a millionaire himself. He made his money in real estate in Chicago, owning a large downtown building.

Making money in the law practice in Chicago was no easy task in the 1870s. The Panic of 1873 had made money hard to get.

After he got his practice going fairly well Altgeld ran for Congress in Chicago but was defeated. He was a persistent young man and didn't quit there. He pushed continually for social reforms and made valuable contacts.

He ran for a post on the

Superior Court in Cook County and was elected. Some of his critics said he was too much interested in the underdog to make a good judge, but his record in court was a good one.

In 1892 he won the Democratic nomination for governor of Illinois and was elected by a 22,000 - vote margin in a normally Republican state. Farmers and laboring men voted for him.

The Haymarket riots in Chicago in 1886 had stirred the people. Newspapers said anarchists had caused the rioting. Four of the leaders were hanged. Others got long jail sentences.

When Altgeld became governor he was induced by the great criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow to investigate the Haymarket case. Altgeld was convinced the men who were in jail had been convicted unfairly so he pardoned three of them.

That brought charges from newspapers and others that he was sympathizing with the anarchists. More criticism was heaped on him a year later when he protested to President Grover Cleveland after the President had called out troops in the Pullman strike in Chicago.

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Newspapers, and especially the GOP press, from the midwest to the east coast denounced him. When he ran for a second term as governor he was defeated. At that time Free Silver was a major national issue and William Jennings Bryan was the spokesman for silver. Altgeld liked the idea and he campaigned hard for Bryan who never made it to the Presidency.

Altgeld was urged to run for mayor of Chicago but declined. He was mentioned for the Presidential nomination. However, the fact that he was born in Germany quickly put an end to talk of that kind.

Altgeld became friends with two great Illinois

poets, Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay. Masters wrote him into his "Spoon River Anthology."

The former Richland Countian soon won the respect of Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago and a well-known social worker and women's rights advocate.

For a time Altgeld was a law partner of Clarence Darrow the famed attorney who many years later was to square off against another of Altgeld's friends. William Jennings Bryan, in the evolution trial at Dayton, Tenn.

Altgeld was bothered by poor health through much of his life and on March 12, 1902, after a speech at Joliet, Ill., died of a stroke.

W. E. Ford, one of Altgeld's good friends back in Mansfield, visited him in Chicago shortly before Altgeld's fatal illness.

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The last time Altgeld was in Mansfield was in 1898 when he came here for the funeral of his sister, Mrs. John M. Frederick of Bellville. Most of the members of his family are buried in the German Church Cemetery south of here. He was buried in Chicago.

Possibly the best book about Altgeld and his career is "Eagle Forgotten" by Harry Barnard. The title is from a verse by Poet Lindsay following Altgeld's death.

The tribute said: "Sleep softly . . . eagle forgotten . . . under the stone, Time has its way with you there, and the clay has its own. Sleep on, O brave-hearted, O wise man, that kindled the flame."

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Altgeld made strong and lasting friends and powerful enemies. Often it seemed that his enemies outnumbered his friends.

He was a man of vision. He never forgot his struggles to get an education and was a tireless worker for schools. He pushed many social reforms.

He was, to many people, a great and good man, even if he is virtually forgotten in his home county.