
Its first true brush with stardom fit Madison like a glove

By WILLIAM R. WINEKE

It was just after Labor Day, 1948, when Life magazine proclaimed Madison to be the best city in the United States in which to live.

We've never really gotten over it. The magazine touted Madison for its peaceful lakes, tree-lined streets, for its parks and for its tasteful homes.

Photographs by Life magazine icon Alfred Eisenstaedt illustrated the piece, titled "The Good Life in Madison."

It featured photos of Mrs. E. P. Sawyer and two granddaughters (on a teeter-totter) relaxing on the lawn of their Maple Bluff home with the state Capitol looming over the far Lake Mendota horizon, of teenage girls studying ballet and a double-page spread of pictures showing boys rafting and swimming, playing midget league baseball and catching butterflies in the Arboretum.

The cover featured local TV news reporter Jeanne Parr, and her son, Charles Noth. Parr later worked as a reporter for CBS, pioneering the field for women, and had another son, Chris, who gained fame as an actor on "Law & Order" and "Sex and the City."

"Madison's business heart lies on an isthmus between two lovely lakes, Mendota and Monona, and its residential areas fan out from their shores," the article said. "Consequently the Madison businessman is never more than seven blocks from excellent boating, fishing and swimming facilities. The city's economy, dependent on no one thing, is prosperous and stable and the University of Wisconsin attracts to Madison a steady flow of culture and youthful ideas.



Life magazine extolled the virtues of Madison in words and photos in September 1948.

"Its 80,000 people (1948 population) have carefully preserved and enhanced their city's natural beauty, even to the point of discouraging big, unskilled-labor industries from settling there. Over the years, Madison has developed a civic personality that is vital but not restless, sophisticated and friendly."

The Life article was just the first of many that would list this city's great — and not-so-great — attributes.

In 1996, Money magazine rated Madison America's best city. In 1997, Utne Reader ranked it the nation's fifth "most enlightened" city. Also in 1997, Ladies' Home Journal ranked Madison the No. 1 city in the nation for women.

The rankings go on and on (and on and on). Perhaps the least expected accolade came in 2004 when Forbes said Madison was the nation's top city for business and careers. Until then, assured by constant carping by local and state business organizations, Madison had assumed it was a poor place to do business.

But it was the Life report that started the ball rolling and convinced us that we are, indeed, God's gift to urbanization.

But, if you could transpose 1948 Madison to the current day, how would

the Madison of 1948 stack up?

Not very well, at least by today's standards.

Wisconsin State Journal headlines for that first week of September in 1948 note that the state of the city's famed lakes "worsens" as warm-weather algae blooms stink up the place, one reason being that sewage continued to seep from the city pipes into said lakes. We've got a better system now.

Another report assured readers that "Madison's long-time dream of a city auditorium — this time as a living war memorial — was one step closer to reality today."

The Madison Civic Center finally opened in 1980. In 1948, W. Jerome Frautschi was a small boy in Madison. Today, he is the donor of the \$205 million Overture Center.

In 1948, Jews could not join the Madison Club and African Americans had trouble finding homes in most residential areas of the city. No women had ever served as mayor or as top executives of UW, or, for that matter, as police officers or firefighters.

The city has changed since Life said it might be the best in the country — but it hasn't changed for the worse. ■