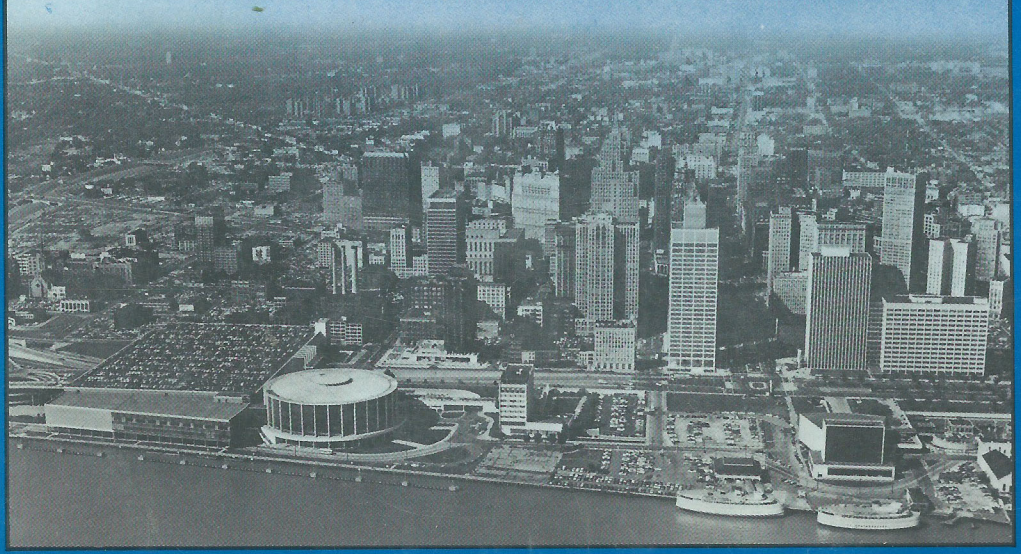
AMERICAN ODYSSEY

A Unique History of America Told Through the Life of a Great City

BY ROBERT CONOT



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With 64 photos. 7 maps. Charts.
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American Odyssey takes the reader on an extraordinary journey of the mind and spirit. For this work is a unique account of who we are and how we got there.

A dramatic narrative, a stunning history, and an analytic study, this book interweaves all three approaches to tell the life story of America through the development of a great city, Detroit.

Of all cities, Detroit is the sum of our achievements and challenges, a frontier outpost that became the most industrialized and unionized city in America. To Detroit the Ford family came from Ireland. To Detroit Thomas Edison, the world's most extraordinary inventor, traveled daily on his first job. Here was a center of the railroad industry that changed the orientation of the entire continent. Here the Republican party coalesced.

This was the city in which a maverick mayor led the movement for urban reform in America. A city where a combination of unique factors—never before explained—gave rise to the automobile industry, which in turn changed the face of the nation.

It was in Detroit that the banking structure of the nation finally collapsed during the Great Depression. Here the immense social and economic divisions precipitated two of America's most devastating riots. Since World War II, the city has played a leading role in drawing the Federal government's attention to domestic affairs, and in bringing about immense changes in the relationship between government and people.

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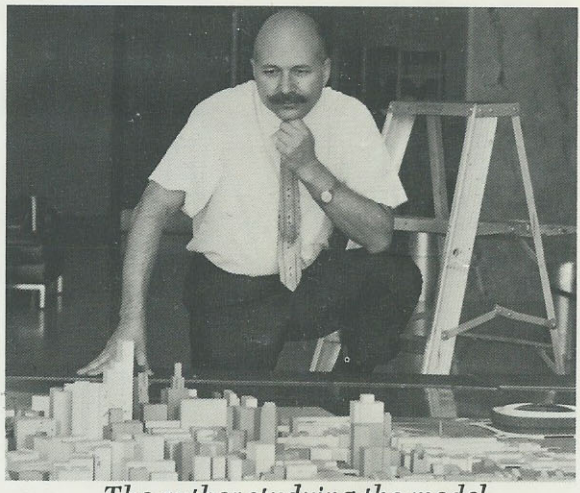
In telling this story, the author extends his canvas to include the history of all major American cities and the nation itself. At the same time he provides fascinating portraits of both famous and ordinary families unto the third and fourth generations.

Above all, *American Odyssey* is a profound examination of the crucial issues facing the nation: crime, education, poverty, the economy, inflation, taxation, and the workings of the political system. The author offers new perspectives and a plan for the future that, if followed, could help bring about a revitalization of American institutions and society.



The author studying the model of the proposed redevelopment of Detroit's inner city.

Mr. Conot has spent the last nine years studying and writing about American history and social problems. His much acclaimed book, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*, was a definitive study of the Watts riot in 1965. Two years later he wrote the historical section of the report of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders. For the past five and a half years he was engaged in the research and writing that have resulted in *American Odyssey*.

Jacket Photo: City of Detroit

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Mirabel and children like her faced Judge Edwards and the Juvenile Court with an insoluble dilemma. They were being processed through the court by the thousands, yet for most the state had no facilities. For the hard-core cases there was the Boys Vocational School at Lansing, a dirty, overcrowded, unkempt firetrap that served principally as a prep school for a life of crime. The Wayne County Training School was intended only for the mentally deficient. For children with emotional problems, for the children whose parents were unfit to care for them, for children who were being corrupted by their environment, there were no facilities.

The psychotic, the promiscuous, the delinquent, the maladjusted, the homosexual, and the homeless—all were crowded together into the juvenile detention home. Intended to serve as a processing center, it frequently held children for months at a time. Children with severe problems were mixed with children with few problems. Since security had to be tailored toward the dangerous and violent, the detention home was run more like a jail than the Wayne County Jail itself.

Mirabel spent three weeks in the juvenile home. Then the court, not knowing what else to do with her, returned her to Freda's home. To save face, the court placed her in Freda's care instead of Donald's.

In the spring of 1954, when she was fourteen years old, Mirabel attended a dance at a neighborhood school. It was eleven o'clock when she and a girlfriend left the dance. They were followed by three boys. The boys cornered the girls at an alley and demanded that they all go "someplace where we can have some fun." When the girls refused, one of the boys pulled a knife, put it to Mirabel's throat, and warned that "you're gonna get stuck! One way or the other, you're gonna get stuck!" Mirabel's girlfriend, with two of the boys in pursuit, ran. Pressing the knife against Mirabel, the third boy forced her into the alley and against the side of a garage. Reaching under her dress, he attempted to pull down her panties. She bit into his arm, pushed him away, and tried to run. With a yell of pain, he caught her, tripped her, and slammed her to the ground. As she lay there stunned, he ripped off her panties and raped her. She was still on the ground when one of the other boys returned and, brandishing a bottle, told her she would "get her head bashed in" if she did not stop crying. But the headlights of a car turned down the alley, and he fled.

She cried over his absences, and she deeply resented Madriga. She was far more articulate than Madriga, whose conversation consisted mostly of grunts. She would taunt him until he reacted violently, and then dodge around him and escape into the street. A week after Joella was taken to the juvenile home, Katherine for once was not nimble enough to elude Madriga. He caught her and whipped her with his belt. When Katherine finally wrenched away from him, she ran to the police station, exhibited the welts, and reported that they had been inflicted by "a man who's fucking my mother!"

That brought the entire Jansen family to the Juvenile Court again. Four children had been removed from the home in 1938, and Peter and Marie could hardly recall what they looked like. Alice, the two-year-old girl who had been placed in boarding care, was an attractive, blonde child, and after some time she had been adopted by a middle-class family in Dearborn. The two younger boys had been kept on farms until they were seventeen. Neither of them had done well in school, but they had not gotten into major difficulties. After they were dismissed from the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court, they faded into the adult world. Jim, the oldest boy, was drawn to trouble wherever it existed. A few weeks after he had participated in the 1943 riot, he was picked up again. He was placed in one boarding home after another without success. In 1947 he enlisted in the army. Unable to adjust to discipline, he stole a .45 automatic, went on a binge of armed robberies, and was sentenced to the penitentiary.

To Peter and Marie these children were like strangers who had come and spent a while with them, then disappeared into another existence. Peter had a greater sense of failure than Marie. When Judge George Edwards asked him if he was not ashamed, he shook his head: "I like to do right by my children, but I don't get jobs."

So Katherine was boarded in a home, and Joella, whose IQ was in the mid-70's, was committed to the Wayne County Training School.

"That's all right," Joella told Judge Edwards, "I ain't gonna be there long." When he asked her what she meant, she continued: "I'll just get myself a baby."

The brighter children, those who presumably should have benefited the most from the training at the school, were the ones who disliked the school most. Wayne County had begun operation of the school in 1926 when, following World War I, the number of retarded children in the public schools had risen astronomically. A generation earlier, when the compulsory attendance law was not enforced, they would have dropped out and been used to fill menial jobs, and no one would have noticed. But with the changed attitude toward the use of eleven-year-olds as child labor, and with the migration of the population from rural to urban areas, an "epidemic" of mental deficiency had suddenly been noted in Detroit, in Michigan, and in America. The public schools had not known what to do with the children who did not respond to the traditional methods of teaching. The children that the Wayne County Probate Court had been trying to commit to the Lapeer State Training School, the only school for feeble-minded operated by the state, had been placed on a five-year waiting list. Most never had been admitted to the school, but were abandoned to the hazards of the city's streets.

That was when the county had decided to erect its own training school at Northville, twenty-three miles from downtown Detroit. Across the road was the Detroit House of Correction and nearby was the Maybury TB Sanitorium—

all conveniently lumped together on the borders of the county and far removed from the city's consciousness.

By the late 1950's and early 1960's, children were being sent to the Wayne County Training School not so much because of their mental deficiencies—two thirds of them tested high enough to qualify for service in the army—but because of a whole host of mental, emotional, and social disturbances that combined into what could be called the Inner City Syndrome.

Although the training school served the entire 2.6 million population of Wayne County, six out of ten of the children came from the half million people living within or adjacent to the inner Boulevard area of Detroit. (As the population of the Boulevard area turned predominantly black, so did the population of the training school.) Increasingly it was a dumping ground for children with difficult problems for which no solution could be found. The Detroit school system kept referring children to the training school in the hope that a more structured and disciplined setting would make them better learners, and the Juvenile Court committed them in order to remove them from the inimical environment of their families and the slums. It was like hoping for improvement by a transfer from hell to Siberia. In the training school the children were immersed in a dehumanized culture that treated them as "a biological machine, so to speak, which must eat, sleep, and work." [1]

Nearly nine out of ten of the children were in the school because of psychological problems associated with their families, their upbringing, and their environment.* At least one third of those admitted were suffering from "cultural deprivation"—malnutrition, physical neglect, and child abuse. The problems, and the causes of the problems of many children were so complex and so well hidden in the labyrinths of their pasts that they were all but undiagnosable, and classified as "unknown."

Yet the school was still operated as if it were dealing with mentally retarded and epileptic cases. Only nineteen thousand dollars a year was budgeted for psychiatric services. Although the table of organization provided for seven psychologists, three were actually employed, and none of these had a Ph.D. The teaching staff was 25 percent under strength. The psychologists and the social workers felt as if they were operating in a vacuum. Counselors, who were assigned more than a hundred cases each, worked in essentially the same manner as the Juvenile Court's probation officers—they concentrated on alleviating crises.

In theory, since its population was supposed to consist of the mentally handicapped, the school had an "open" setting, with no physical restraints placed on the children. In actuality, two thirds of the children presented behavior problems. There was an explosive mixture of the mentally retarded, the physically handicapped (whose "mental retardation" might be due to a lack of hearing and whose lack of hearing might be rooted in psychological trauma),

* Nearly half the children exhibited severe behavior disorders that formed a delinquent or predelinquent pattern. More than a fourth of the remainder were there because they had been unable to withstand the tremendous stresses imposed upon them by unstable, chaotic, or violent family situations. One out of seven had severe, chronic personality disorders that might be characterized by hysteria, aggressiveness, antisocial activity, or explosive outbursts. Many exhibited overt sexual aberrations—promiscuity, homosexuality, exhibitionism, and sexual assaultiveness.

and the emotionally disturbed. The administration of the school, therefore, directed its principal efforts to maintaining peace and order.

At the time of its construction, the school had been isolated and difficult to reach. It was conceived as a self-contained community—a village of subintelligent children. It had its own electric power plant, medical clinic, fire department, and employee housing. It raised its own food on its own farm, it baked its own bread in its own bakery, it sewed its own clothes, and then washed them in its own laundry. Since the children had been placed there because they were thought incapable of intellectual achievement, the emphasis of the "training" was on manual labor. They were set to hoeing and planting and picking in the fields; to hauling coal and firing the furnaces in the powerhouse; to sewing and washing, mending and ironing clothes; to endless sweeping and scrubbing of floors, polishing furniture, and washing windows. They were serfs, paying their own way, satisfying the requirement that they be in "school," but learning little or nothing, and being "trained" for jobs that in the real economic world were being transferred to machines.

Joella hated the ritual, the endless routine, the reform school sense of confinement and repression. It heightened the tensions, anxieties, and frustrations of the children. Screaming tantrums and fights were common, and almost necessary to clear an atmosphere that would grow taut beyond endurance. The malefactors were penned in barren isolation rooms, and sometimes kept there for weeks. They were assigned the hardest and dirtiest work details, so that in the minds of the children work was equated with punishment. Since recreation and exercise were inadequate, and, like the work, mind dulling, the one escape and entertainment offered to the adolescents was sex. Girls and boys were separated and watched—though that did not prevent an occasional tryst—so most of the sex was onanistic and experimentally homosexual. Since the children came from lower-class backgrounds they had an abundance of raw sexual experience, but, conversely, almost total physiological ignorance. Superstitions were rampant—one could get a baby from a snake or from being kissed during a full moon. Most of the girls looked upon sex as a kind of magic potion.

"There isn't nothing sex can't get you," Joella said.

One third of the children ran away every year. Nearly 90 percent of them had had contacts with the police and the courts, either through their own actions or those of their parents, before they entered the school. Like the Boys Vocational School (reformatory), the Wayne County Training School was a means of removing the most troublesome juveniles from the society of the city. Yet almost without exception the school failed to help them in any but the most marginal way; and they returned to that society with the same problems that had caused them to be removed from it. Like carriers of a disease that temporarily has been arrested, but not cured, they would not only themselves suffer recurrences, but infect others with it.

When Joella was allowed to go home for the Christmas holidays in 1953, she made up her mind she was not going back to the school. Lying about her age—she was fifteen and a half—she obtained a job as a waitress at a hamburger stand. Before the end of January she met twenty-six-year-old Ned Black Bear—who was married but was separated from his wife—and went to live with him.

Black Bear was of Indian descent. He knew little of his heritage, but in the

Comments on AMERICAN ODYSSEY

"*American Odyssey* is a book of extraordinary scope and power. With detail worthy of a Flemish Master, Robert Conot interweaves the many strands of American history until a picture of Detroit emerges as a palpable reality. What is at first a simple intersection of time and place emerges in Mr. Conot's expert hands as a living city. Urbanists, accustomed to the pallid abstractions of their models, will do well to immerse themselves in *American Odyssey*. There is no other book quite like it."

—John Friedmann, Head, Urban Planning,
University of California at Los Angeles

"The exciting thing about Mr. Conot's book is that it tells history the way it actually was, rather than the way it was supposed to have been. And, he has made it most readable and enjoyable by following the real lives of the actors who are on the scene."

—Carl L. Marburger, former Commissioner
of Education for New Jersey,
and Senior Associate for the National
Committee for Citizens in Education

"I find *American Odyssey* an exciting, responsible account of how our largest American cities have developed; what has driven them; the prices we have paid for our urban economic progress."

—Robert Wood, President
University of Massachusetts

"Robert Conot has rendered a great service in compiling this comprehensive analysis of those political, social and economic forces in America that have produced our urban crisis. I find this book the most enlightened treatment of our current urban scene as represented by the City of Detroit and its background."

—George Romney, former Governor of Michigan

"I have been reading *American Odyssey* and find myself totally fascinated by the author's approach. His *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* was, I felt, the only book to take an in-depth look at all aspects of the riots. He has expanded this approach in *American Odyssey* and will give those of us who write the laws the comprehension needed to write fair and just ones."

—Thomas M. Rees, Congressman
from California

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