**Foreword**

**[Richard L. DeGowin, *House of Moffitt: The First 20 Years/A Memoir*]**

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This book is, first of all, Dr. Richard L. DeGowin’s story. It’s not a 700-page “autobiography,” as you must have noticed by now if you are holding it. It’s rather a collection of vignettes from his life, described with as much detail and color as a white page with black type permits. Indeed, the reader may think he or she is holding the work of a novelist when they read:

His movements were quick, yet his speech betrayed a rural twang, so one’s first impressions of Dr. Moyers in mufti did not permit one to accurately speculate on his career. This short, wiry, clean-shaven man with light brown hair and glasses had grown up in a small town in southwest Iowa. In addition to his work as an ordained Presbyterian Minister, he performed as a trick rider in rodeos. Employed as a carpenter to defray his college and dental school expenses . . . he had worked summers for Moffitt, helping to build our house . . ..

[“Robert Moyers, DDS,” ch. XIII, Allied Victory. (To save your looking it up, the Islamic word “mufti” comes to us via Britain and refers to “civilian attire,” in this instance, I gather, a medical doctor who forgot his white coat.)]

The author’s observations and comments range from descriptive to reflective, humorous to poignant – interweaving the observations of a five-year-old boy with his mother at the 1939 New York World’s Fair with an adult’s perspective on The Great Depression and World War II. Together, this mosaic provides a rich, coherent picture of the life of this accomplished man, alone worth reading for the insight and joy it provides about him. [“A Tour of the East (21OCT-4 NOV 1939),” ch. VII, University Elementary School 1939-46; ch. VI, The Great Depression.]

But the book’s appeal to a variety of audiences goes well beyond that.

As the book’s title reveals, one subject and potential audience that may have been among the author’s original motivations, reflects his research regarding what he calls the “House of Moffitt.” This is not a reference to an American equivalent of a British royal family, such as, perhaps, “The House of Bush,” or “The House of Kennedy.” Nor is it the inspiring story of a young entrepreneur who started the successful chain of Moffitt’s Muffins outlets, as in the “International *House* of Pancakes.”

It is, rather, DeGowin’s significant contribution to the history and literature regarding a rather remarkable mid-Twentieth-Century home building effort. The Moffitt houses involved the unique design, materials, building techniques, motives, economics, business acumen, impact on a community, and politics of a man named Howard Moffitt. Moffitt was, among other things, willing to rent homes at reasonable rates in Iowa City, Iowa – what today we might call “affordable housing.” For anyone interested in the history, impact, occupants (including the DeGowin family), and other persons involved with Moffitt houses, this book is destined to become the go-to first source they should consult. [ch. III, Moffitt Houses; ch. IV, Yewell Street Neighbors; ch. XVIII 1203 Friendly Avenue 1946-1955; ch. XXIV Friends of Moffitt Houses.]

The book is also a contribution to the American history of what we call The Great Depression and World War II – along with the World’s Fair of 1939. The author’s contribution is not revealed on the grand canvas used by conventional historians, but rather – to borrow the macro-micro distinction of the economists – at the micro level of their impact on one boy and his family in one American city.

[W]e grew vegetables in our Victory Garden . . .. [Mother] saved in tin cans, grease for munitions manufacture, and flattened other empty tin cans, turning them in to scrap metal drives for the war effort.

My friends and I collected newspapers, old tires, inner tubes and scrap metal for Boy Scouts . . . scrap drives. We pasted 10-cent savings stamps in a little booklet until . . . redeam[ing] them for a $25 U.S. War Savings Bond . . .. [O]ur consumer habits of the Great Depression prepared us for austerity during WWII.

[“Service on the Home Front,” ch. XI, Survival of the Free World in Doubt.]

The impact of those overwhelming historical events aside, the book is also sprinkled with descriptions of what life was like in general for children growing up in Iowa during the 1930s and 1940s, both life on a farm (a short walk from Dick’s house at “99th and Plowed Ground”) and in a university town – the freedom they had to roam, the activities they created for themselves, their clubs, and their schools.

[G]rowing up in our south side Moffitt neighborhood, no one locked the doors of his house or automobile. . . . [I]t was not unusual to find a neighbor standing in our living room, having entered without knocking, announcing herself to my mother with, “Yoo-Hoo, Laura.”

Boys and girls, their dogs yelping at their heels, ran freely all over the neighborhood, playing tag, hide and seek, kick the can and king on the hill. . . . Older kids played softball, touch or tackle football or bicycle polo. Later, there were war games.

[ch. V, Yoo-Hoo Yewell Street.]

Boys cut grass with push reel lawn mowers and weeds with sickles. . . . Fans served to cool bodies, somewhat, by evaporating sweat from perspiring skin in the summer, and without air conditioning . . . life slowed down, and school didn’t start until after Labor Day.

[ch. VI, The Great Depression.]

Many days after school . . . found me walking east on Ginter Avenue’s dirt extension from Yewell Street to the Dunlap farm to play with Jimmy [in] the haymow of his barn. . . . Swinging from ropes hanging from rafters . . ..

[“The Farm,” ch. XI, Survival of the Free World in Doubt.]

His early jobs did not end with push reel lawn mowers. Among other things before he became Dr. DeGowin, Dick delivered newspapers to the neighbors, served food at the University of Iowa Hospital Employees’ Cafeteria, serviced automobiles, was part of a county surveying crew, and worked “in” cement for a contractor. [ch. XIX, Summer Jobs.]

The reference above to “their schools” meant, for Dick DeGowin, something special that no longer exists – an elementary and high school run, not by a local school board, but by a college of education: the University Elementary and High School of the University of Iowa’s College of Education. (As Dick puts it, “my teachers showed me how to acquire, retain, analyze, and use information for work and pleasure, and how to communicate verbally and in writing.” [“Academics,” ch. XIV, University High School 1946-1952.] ) Those interested in educational research and innovation, indeed in K-12 education generally, will find the memories and reflections about this part of Dick’s life of special interest. [See generally, ch. VII, University Elementary School 1939-1946; ch. XIV, University High School 1946-1952; ch. XVII, 50th Reunion of U-High Class of 1952.]

As the son of an internationally known and honored medical doctor and professor, Dick ultimately decided on a medical career of his own. His tales of the challenges of medical school will certainly be of interest to those who have undergone such experiences themselves, those who are now in medical school, and any readers who are curious as to what their own doctor may have experienced. (Dick’s father, Dr. Elmer DeGowin, discovered the procedures for the preservation of blood, and established “the longest continuously operating [blood bank] in the United States” – the one in the University of Iowa Hospital in Iowa City that bears his name today. [“The Blood Bank,” ch. IX, Banking Blood.])

There are probably better sources than this book for the thorough study of the vocabulary of medicine. But just as any working person will tend to notice in others that which they know best – such as their car, hairstyle, or designer clothes – the reader will find sprinkled throughout the book, intermixed with the results of Dr. DeGowin’s gift of detailed observation and description of people, whatever may have struck him about the person’s medical condition, diseases, and prescriptions in the language he might have used with a fellow physician. It’s an insight into how our doctor friends may view us as well; but not to worry, the medical jargon is rare, and usually more amusing than distracting.

He didn’t just have some “medical problems at birth.”

[At birth Dick] greeted the light of day with several disturbing features, neonatal jaundice and a large cephalohematoma [followed shortly after by] staphylococcal dermatitis . . ..

[“1934,” ch. I, A New Deal 1932-1935.]

I have a “back pain.” Dick’s father, by contrast, had “inflammation of paraspinal ligaments . . ..” [ch. XII, Responsibility and Trust.] One man “was recognized for his discovery of primary aldosteronism . . ..” He describes another person as having “a generous paunch from a love of food and a history of hypothyroidism.” [“Spring 1955; ch. XXIII, Transition and Decision 1955.]

Here’s what Dick was doing in class while others at Michigan were drinking beer:

I worked [helping a] laboratory technician grow Ehrlich Ascites Tumore Cells in the peritoneal cavities of mice. We harvested the cells . . . and injected them into rabbits to make antisera. Later, we obtained plasma from the rabbits and titered their antisera. Then we injected the antisera into mice . . ..

[“Tumor Research Project,” ch. XXII, Upperclassman.]

And Dick’s dog? You guessed it:

Shorty was a lovable black and white mongrel dog, who in his former life served with distinction as a talented experimental subject at The University of Chicago. He had learned to lie quietly and breathe through the tube of an apparatus that measured his basal metabolic rate, [then] a useful . . . test of thyroid function.

[“1312 Muscatine Avenue,” ch. A New Deal 1932-1935.]

The reader will also occasionally come upon candid revelations of the author’s political and ideological positions – first developed by him at a very early age. (“[A]s an eight-year-old child, I voiced my fears . . . that Franklin Roosevelt . . . might become a dictator like the enemy’s axis leaders . . ..” “A good democratic government rules by the will of a free people whose elected leaders trust their constituents to freely possess and use guns . . ..” [ch. XI, Survival of the Free World in Doubt.]) He writes that “the blame laid on George Bush for the Great Recession . . . resulted from policies initiated in the Carter Administration . . . and expanded by the Clinton Administration . . ..” [ch. VI, The Great Depression.] If Dick’s views square with those of the reader, he or she will be warmed and reassured to find themselves with agreeable company in these pages. If not, it’s worthwhile to reflect upon what the author says, thereby gaining insight into a well-educated man’s thinking that is shared by a very large proportion of the American body politic today.

On a personal note, aside from politics, Dick and I have lived lives on closely parallel tracks. (Even as to politics, it is my memory – not in this book – that with his mother’s instruction on political process, he and I went door-to-door together, circulating a petition that played a role in the ultimate location of a swimming pool in the Iowa City Park.) We are within four months of each other in age, both born in the mid-1930s, to college educated parents whose marriages held for a lifetime (“privileged to grow up in families where . . . mothers and fathers stayed together . . . .” [Preface.]). We both grew up in small families, in the same university-dominated community, an Iowa county seat town surrounded by farmland, with fathers who were university professors. We went through 13 years of school together, and shared many of the same activities – including band [ch. XVI, The Music Man.], debate [“The Debate,” ch. XIV, University High School 1946-1952.], and what Dick calls “The Johnson County Bureau of Investigation” [ch. XV, The Johnson County Bureau of Investigation] .

This was followed by college and our graduate educations (his in medicine, mine in law). We both had wives named Karen (mine deceased, his still living), families, and careers. Both my Karen, and my wife of 25 years, Mary Vasey, were also members of the U-High Colossal Class of 1952 – a statistically significant percentage of all the women in our class, and a tribute to their quality (as well as their tolerance of their less-accomplished male classmates). Indeed, I even figure from time to time in these pages.

Thus, my fascination with Dick’s book comes, in many ways, from the fact it is my story as well as his. I have nothing like the power of memory that he displays in these pages. As a result, if I ever do undertake a comparable bit of writing, much of it – with credit to him of course – will probably draw upon what he has recalled. If you are near our ages, and share any of our prior locations, schools, professions or activities, you may find this book additionally appealing for that reason as well.

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