BOOKS

Bessie Louise Pierce: Gatekeeper to Chicago history

By Rick Kogan
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The bookshelves in the apartment where I grew up in Old Town were heavy with history, most specifically with books about the history of Chicago. Among the best, the very best, were three very thick books handsomely bound in blue and written by Bessie Louise Pierce.

She has been gone a long time, having died in 1974, but she has for an even longer time been an invaluable friend and essential companion for anyone researching or writing about the city's history. That she is little remembered now by any but the most devoted historians diminishes not at all the importance of what she created here and the joys of reading it now.
Pierce was born in 1888 in rural Caro, Mich., and raised in Iowa, ever describing herself charmingly as "a horse and buggy child, with all the rural virtues and concepts." She attended and taught in Iowa schools and colleges (those experiences formed the basis for three books she wrote about education) until being offered what was supposed to be a temporary appointment overseeing the History of Chicago Project at the University of Chicago.

That is when her life's work began in earnest and with tireless enthusiasm. While carrying a full teaching load in the history department, she began her Chicago history book career with "As Others See Chicago," a gathering of observations and opinions of previous visitors to the city, published in 1933.

Then came the big books, meticulously researched, scholarly and accessible. The first volume was published in 1937 (covering the years 1673 to 1848) and the second (1848-1871) in 1940.

The third volume (covering 1871 to 1893, years that Pierce described as "the most crowded and dynamic the city had known," did not arrive until 1957, three years after Pierce had retired from that "temporary" job that had lasted 44 years at the university. It begins this way: "The Great Chicago Fire began on October 8, 1871. It was a Sunday, and the sun shone warmly upon saint and sinner alike. Here in this city of lights and shadows were the prescient signs of urban maturity; the symbols of the faith of her founding fathers that the promise of the future was ever onward and the destiny of the city 'among the stars.'"

That is simply great writing, and it is everywhere to be found in these volumes.
Here is Pierce in Volume II on the 1865 funeral of Abraham Lincoln: "On May 2, the body of the dead President was escorted by at least forty thousand Chicagoans through muddy streets to the Court House, where a crowd estimated at one hundred twenty-five thousand saw his remains. In the minds of many, John Wilkes Booth was not solely to blame; to them it appeared that the South had unleashed the emotional forces which had laid Lincoln low. The years to come were to witness Chicago participating in a dreary and vindictive punishment of those held guilty of the 'infernal rebellion.'"

I met Pierce when I was a teenager and remember a tiny woman, perhaps no more than 5 feet tall with white hair and a quick and lovely smile. She and my father, a newspaperman who wrote a number of books about the city's history and its colorful characters, were friends, and he was a great admirer of the woman and her work.

I have been spending these cold winter nights rereading that work and finding it as vibrant as I remembered. Little wonder that Pierce received much praise and many awards during her lifetime. But as is so often and carelessly the case, her books went out of print for many years until the University of Chicago Press (press.uchicago.edu) brought them back to life in 2007 in paperback editions, giving subtitles to the three volumes: "The Beginning of a City," "From Town to City" and "The Rise of the Modern City."

Never married, Pierce returned to Iowa in 1973 and died the next year. She was working, as she had been for decades, on a fourth "History of Chicago" volume.

We will never have that. But what she gave us is more than enough.

*Rick Kogan is a Tribune senior writer and columnist.*

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