CHICAGO'S BOSWELL: BESSIE

Bessie Pierce Chronicles
Vivid Life of the City She Loves

By Ruth Moss

As Boswell was to Samuel Johnson, so Bessie Louise Pierce is to Chicago. Diminutive, gentle Miss Pierce has tackled a great research project, a history of our city from its wilderness birth to dynamic maturity.

For nearly 30 years, Miss Pierce has pieced together her fascinating factual account. Three volumes have been published. She currently is writing the fourth.

This story of Chicago's life has become Miss Pierce's life story, too. Yet, as Boswell, the biographer, was satisfied to hide himself behind the man he admired and whose life he chronicled, so Miss Pierce, the historian, has lost herself in the city she has studied for almost three decades.

Despite such scholarly passion for anonymity, Boswell's name is as well remembered as Johnson's. So Miss Pierce's name has been linked irrevocably to that of Chicago, the city she met as a young girl and loves "for its breadth and passion, its culture and vision of life."

But what of this woman who is famed as a tender of Chicago's family tree?

Miss Pierce describes herself as "a horse and buggy child, with all the rural virtues and concepts." She and her sister, Anne, then of Waverly, Ia., first knew Chicago as a vacation spot. With refreshing small town enthusiasm, they marveled at Fords and Franklins, Overlands and Pierce-Arrows whizzed by.

They even survived the shock of seeing women, with fashionable Merry Widow hats, puffing cigarettes!

Miss Pierce's first real stay in Chicago was in 1918, when she took her master's degree at the University of Chicago. Earlier, she had been graduated from the State University of Iowa. Later, she received her Ph.D. and taught history there. She returned to the University of Chicago in 1922 at the urging of the late Charles E. Merriam in his campaign to make the university a center for social science.

Thus Chicago was to become the scholars' laboratory for the contemporary disciplines of political science, economics, and sociology. But all the scholars knew was the fact they knew little of how the city had come to be.

Miss Pierce had her assignment. Thru the years while carrying a full teaching load, she has answered their questions. Her search has led her to newspapers for an understanding of what the people thought was important at the time, thru city records, manuscripts, letters, and papers, constantly checking and weighing.

The result?
"For a person not a Chicagoan," Miss Pierce admits, "I'm the greatest Chicago booster that ever was. I liked the city from the start, and have become more and more enthralled as the years (25 of them) have whizzed by."