
R E V I E W S

Willard Garvey: An Epic Life

by Maura McEnaney

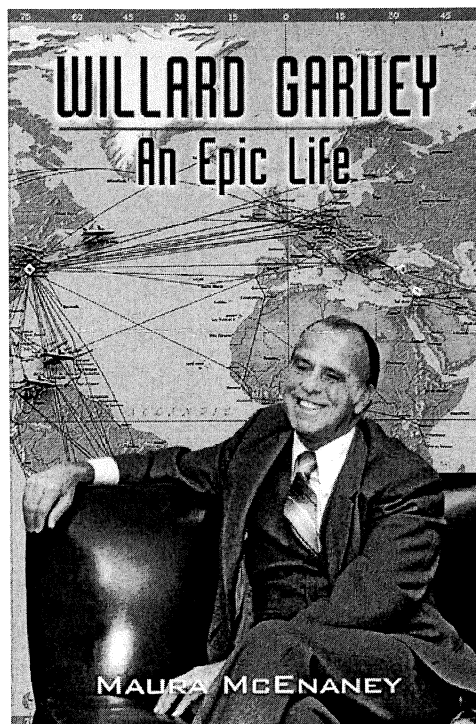
xix + 309 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Oakland, Calif.: Liberty Tree Press, 2013, cloth \$26.95.

Maura McEnaney's *Willard Garvey: An Epic Life* is an engaging biography of Wichita entrepreneur Willard Garvey. The son of Ray Garvey, who transformed Kansas's grain industry in the 1930s and 1940s, Willard Garvey built on his father's business endeavors and then went further to develop a multitude of projects and ventures from real estate to ranching. The book is a celebration of Garvey and his dedication to the ideals of self-reliance, capitalism, and the free market. The tone is understandable given McEnaney's background as a researcher affiliated with the libertarian-leaning Independent Institute, which itself has ties to the Garvey family. The publisher is the institute's Liberty Tree Press. In addition, the accolades for the work in the beginning pages read like a who's who of Kansas conservative/libertarian figures.

McEnaney chronicles the life of Garvey from his youth in Depression-era Wichita through his World War II military service to his death in 2002. With wife Jean at his side, Willard displayed a nearly inexhaustible energy and creativity, firing out ideas and plans often faster than those around him could handle. Garvey developed a talent for organizing activities with military-like precision, insisting that everyone around him, from employees to his own children, report regularly on their efforts based on a "GO" ("Goal-Oriented") format.

The study presents a resoundingly positive view of Garvey and his legacy. Miscalculations in business practices do figure prominently, such as his unsuccessful efforts to promote private home ownership in developing countries. Family ties to John Birch-related figures are presented openly. However, the author offers little detailed analysis of controversial racial, economic, and social issues in the city, much less of how the Garveys figured in those dynamics. Critical voices appear in the text only in passing, just long enough for Garvey to dismiss them and move on. For a deeper sense of the social debates of late twentieth-century Wichita, other books such as Gretchen Eick's *Dissent in Wichita* may be more useful.

It may be helpful to compare this work with that by another Garvey biographer: historian Craig Miner, who held a Garvey-endowed chair in business history. Miner wrote *Harvesting the High Plains*, the story of how Willard's father Ray and John Kriss created a dynamic agricultural business model in the midst of the Great Depression. Like McEnaney, who describes herself as a family friend, Miner worked with the Garveys. Both authors are gifted storytellers and present their respective Garveys as exemplars of American business acumen. Miner, however, better explores the context of agriculture and business, helping explain why the elder Garvey functioned the way he did. Thus, Miner's Ray Garvey comes across as remarkable and accomplished,



yet still an ordinary human being who happened to see opportunities that many of his colleagues did not. McEnaney's Willard Garvey appears as a confident, larger-than-life leader, and from childhood mostly free from the insecurities that plague the rest of us. In *Willard Garvey: An Epic Life*, the reader gets a sense of setting, such as Wichita of the 1950s, but merely as backdrop instead of as the context in which he functioned. In *Harvesting the High Plains*, John Kriss is a revealing foil; in *Willard Garvey*, other figures, such as wife Jean or assistant Bob Page, are influential and significant yet remain supporting cast members to the leading man.

It is hard for locals, including myself, to ignore the legacy of Willard Garvey in Wichita. Craig Miner was my first department chair. I bought my first house in Garvey's first major suburban project, Bonnie Brae, with a backyard that overlooked the Garvey-founded Independent School. *Willard Garvey, An Epic Life*, therefore, is a useful, entertaining, and revealing window into a person and a family that has left its mark on Wichita, on Kansas, and on the nation. Moreover, there are few scholarly books about Wichita in the later decades of the twentieth century, Miner's *Wichita: The Magic City* and Eick's *Dissent in Wichita* being the most prominent. This book fills an important niche in explaining how Wichita developed from the 1950s through the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Reviewed by Jay Price, professor of history, Wichita State University.