Couple of “Good Ole” Southern Illinois Boys

The boys, once with roots in Wayne County, the other White County, have teamed up to write a page-turning biography about a Lincolnesque boy born into poverty, whose father had a third-grade education, who walked miles to a small rural school, who recited poetry from memory, who started high school at age twelve, graduated high school, joined the Army, was high on the empathy showing compassion toward children and those seeking improvement in their lives, graduated from college after the Army, got advanced degrees (ultimately his doctorate) taught school, was in the Illinois Senate, was a U.S. Congressman for ten years, considered President George H.W. Bush a friend, rubbed elbows and posed or pictures with four presidents, ran for governor of Illinois but was defeated, and was President of a University (SIU). The person is Glenn Poshard.

The Wayne County component of the duo, and author of the book, is Carl Walworth. The Carl I know is Librarian of the Mattoon Public Library. He graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in journalism. He was formerly publisher and editor for the “Journal Gazette and Times-Courier” newspaper in Mattoon-Charleston. Walworth is also an independent writer and editor and the author of Poshard’s book. He was raised by his mother, Eula, on an 80-acre farm in Wayne County. He describes the situation as “economically poor while rich in relationships.” Family difficult times were overcome with “hard work, persistence, education, and personal integrity to make life better.”

The biography is the result of over five years of work and hours of discussion between the author, Walworth and Poshard. A reader will recognize the familiar geography and political figures mentioned in the book as well as Poshard’s challenging childhood. Poshard’s father was a hard-working man who provided for his family, who had a third-grade education and one functioning arm, the other arm was lost in a hunting accident. Poshard said, “My dad never made an excuse or complained. He could mow wood all day long with one arm.” Poshard grew up near Harvard, Illinois, about eight miles from Carmi, in a rural home with an outhouse with no electricity, running water or plumbing. He walked 2 1/2 miles to school from a rural school. He was advanced to a higher grade one year because the other students in his class moved. He started at Carmi High School at age twelve and graduated when he was seventeen. Poshard attributes the mentoring by certain high school teachers, Miss Dixon in English who encouraged Poshard’s love of poetry, and history teacher Jim Endicott who was a significant influence on Poshard’s political career. Poshard said Endicott had a passion for teaching. He taught thousands and influenced generations. Endicott gave him a passion for history, teaching and politics that he has attempted to pass on to others.

Poshard’s early days in White County will be familiar to many in his area. He loved to fish for catfish on the Wabash River; he listened to Cardinal baseball games on KMOK and four hours of the Grand Ole Opry from WSM in Nashville on Saturday evenings. He delighted in seeing his first Cardinal game at Sportsman’s Park in St. Louis and Stan Musial hitting a home run against the Milwaukee Braves. Although Glenn was a gifted athlete at baseball and running, especially the 880 where he was fastest in school, he could not participate in athletics because he had work to do at home after school.

Religion was a major factor in Glenn’s life. As a youth, Glenn’s mother Cleatus Rose took the family to the Chapman Grove General Baptist Church “with its simple altar, wooden benches, and fundamentalist teachings.” Some Sundays would be all-day affairs complete with fried chicken dinners. Poshard said, “We were the most churched kids in White County. Every Wednesday night, Saturday night, Sunday morning and Sunday night we were at church. Mom made sure of it.” (Son of Illinois p 7). His mother’s spirit must have been with him one night when he sat next to a Methodist minister husband (Doug Tanner), of a staff worker for a fellow Congressman, Tanner and Poshard spoke of Washington, D.C. as the seat of power and authority that stood in contrast to the teachings of my faith as a Christian. Christ taught us to be humble, loving, forgiving, not to seek our own way.” (Page 260). From that meeting came the group named Faith and Politics Institute, a bipartisan group that gathered to discuss morality, the use of power, compromise, money and fundraising, patriotism and other challenging topics. Poshard says the group did make a difference. Poshard also, “set aside as much as a week to spend time with the monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani Monastery in central Kentucky that was once home to Thomas Merton, one of his favorite writers.” (Page 264). Poshard says he likes the reflective life and counts Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and C.S. Lewis among his favorite writers, whose writings are also featured at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

There are a potpourri of events I found of interest. Poshard is candid about his own bouts with mental illness forcing him to resign a teaching/coaching position. He credits Dr. Sharon Longwell with a life-changing turnaround. When the White House held a dinner for incoming freshmen Congressmen, Poshard’s teenage daughter was downstairs in the White House while Poshard and his wife, Jo, met with President and Mrs. George H.W. Bush. Bush, being told of the circumstances, insisted that Poshard’s daughter join them. It was an event where no children were allowed. The book has a photograph of Glenn, Jo, and the President with his arm around daughter Kristen. On a light note, Poshard once, in an emergency, gave a speech in his wife’s yellow pants with large metal buttons. On another occasion he spilled chili all over himself and went to the bathroom, stripped, and tried to wash his clothes. A perplexed, young boy held the door open as three giggling women passed.

While in Korea, Poshard organized financial help for the children in an orphanage. Fifty years later a young girl who had been in the orphanage, insisted on repaying the favor by coming from Brigham Young University to SIU to tell her story. Consistent with his principles, Poshard’s post-political career is devoted to the Poshard Foundation for Abused Children.

Politics consumes most of the book and emphasizes what Poshard achieved legislatively to improve conditions in Southern Illinois. He got along with other politicians regardless of party affiliation and championed compromise and negotiation instead of political warfare. His principles controlled his votes and he held views that could be contrary to those of his party yet remained steadfast to those principles, often to his detriment, yet willing to change his position with experience and learning, refusing to be bought by PAC money.

I found the story of Glenn Poshard, the man, compelling, enlightening, challenging, hopeful and inspiring aside from his service in the Illinois Senate, as a five-term Congressman, candidate for Governor (1998) and President of Southern Illinois University. Get the book and read it. You can get it on Amazon. Make sure the local library has a copy. You will not be disappointed.