

Gritty City Creates Knowledge Zone, But Some Feel Left Out

by Con Chapman

WORCESTER, Mass. This gritty central Massachusetts city is known to some as the Industrial Abrasives Capital of the World, and to others for its numerous railroad car diners. What it is not known for, to the dismay of many, is its educational and cultural attractions.



Boulevard Diner

“We’re sort of a country cousin to Boston,” notes civic leader Emil Niland, and even though Worcester is the second largest city in New England, it is the Rodney Dangerfield of the region, getting less respect than Hartford, Connecticut and even Providence, Rhode Island.



Historic scenes of picturesque decay

But a new generation of boosters is out to change that by creating a multi-pod “Knowledge Zone” around the city in recognition of the

many institutions of higher learning located here, including Clark University, Holy Cross College, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Assumption College and UMass Medical School. "People need to know we're a world class intellectual center," says Niland, before excusing himself to yell at his daughter. "Karen, take that pigeon out of your mouth, you don't know where it's been!"

Miss Worcester Diner

But some are feeling slighted by the designation, and even a bit miffed. "If they're in the Knowledge Zone, what are we in—the Ignorance Zone?" asks Richie Stevens, a carpenter, as he downs a shot of ginger brandy and sips a Narragansett beer chaser. "Those guys can kiss my ass and call it a love story for all I care."

Worcester pigeons, looking resentfully at more attractive and graceful swans.

Town-gown tensions between students and academics on the one hand and blue-collar residents on the other, tend to remain submerged beneath the surface of everyday life until a minor incident at a neighborhood bar located near a campus flares up. "You get a lot of New Yorkers here who couldn't get into Tufts or Brandeis," notes Brian Padraic "Smitty" Moynihan, proprietor of Moynihan's Tavern in the tough Main South district. "They're

insecure, and all hell will break loose when they make some condescending crack about an industrious yeoman carpenter like Richie here," he says, and it is clear that he is kidding about his patron's work ethic.

What makes matters worse is that Moynihan, Stevens and the other customers in the bar are fictional characters in a play—"Breakfast at Moynihan's"—by this reporter, and thus are ineligible to vote out members of the City Council who approved the Knowledge Zone concept. "It's not fair and it's not right," says a long-time patron known to one and all only as "McNiff." "My grandparents came here from Ireland long before a lot of your Johnny-come-latelys," he says with a trace of bitterness as others nod their heads in agreement. "Just because they live in a prose world doesn't mean they're better than us."

