



# **SIUE's Theising details East St. Louis history in "The Rise and Fall of an Industrial River Town - Made in U.S.A."**

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EDWARDSVILLE - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Andy Theising, PhD, professor of political science in the College of Arts and Sciences, is the author of *The Rise and Fall of an Industrial River Town – Made in U.S.A.* Theising took time on Thursday, June 21 for an “Across the Years” presentation during the SIUE East St. Louis Learning Resource Center’s Success and Continuing Knowledge (S.A.C.K.) Lunch and Learn program to discuss East St. Louis history that is detailed in the book.

A 20-year SIUE faculty member, Theising is a Florissant, Mo. native, who originally did not want to study East St. Louis but was guided there by a mentor. “I had an advisor who did his doctoral dissertation on East St. Louis in the 1970s,” Theising said. “I

wanted to study property tax and school desegregation programs. My advisor listened, said there hasn't been a scholar who had gone back to East St. Louis in 20 years and said I should go there.

“So, I went to East St. Louis and just fell in love with the place. I found it so fascinating, and I started talking to people and listening as they shared their stories. Then I started finding historical memorabilia and became more interested. I started collecting books, photos and documents, and donated it all to SIUE. The SIUE archive probably has a couple thousand items.”

Theising always starts the East St. Louis story in 1840. “Illinois was a new state in 1818” he said. “Back in those days, government didn't build stuff. It was all built by the private sector. Here is Illinois, a new state, they needed to light a fire under people to start building stuff.”

Theising described how Illinois sold bonds to start the Internal Improvement Program. “But what was interesting was the program didn't work, and Illinois racked up so much debt that the state nearly went bankrupt. The state tried to build bridges and roads, but they were not thinking of logistics. As a response to that, they deregulated everything. In the 1848 constitution, they relaxed all the rules, because they wanted people to come and take advantage of the situation, create cities, make money and build.”

Then John Bowman came along; he was the founder of East St. Louis, its first mayor. In addition to being mayor, he was an attorney, real estate agent, owned a title and abstract office in Belleville, publisher of the East St. Louis Gazette, financier of the East St. Louis Gas Light Co., attorney for the Eads Bridge, attorney for the stock yards and railway, and more.

Bowman wanted an industrial city, one that would be home to commerce. Industry doesn't want rules and restrictions and East St. Louis was a wide-open town where anything goes. Laws were selectively enforced, and the Chief of Police wielded the power.

People wanted to call East St. Louis “Illinoistown,” but railroads called it East St. Louis to distinguish it from St. Louis. Bowman instituted the railroad stop name in 1861. In 1885, then ex-mayor Bowman was murdered in his front yard just outside the city limits on 10th St. and Ohio. The crime was never solved.

East St. Louis was a place where gambling took place, liquor sales were high and saloons were on every corner. Liquor license fees comprised 50 percent of the city's budget in 1917. Companies had slush funds strictly to bribe officials.

Nevertheless, the population in East St. Louis just kept growing. The working class population doubled until about the 1920s. It was the second poorest city government in the U.S. in 1918. Factories were working around the clock, but not all jobs were equal.

The 100th Anniversary of the East St. Louis Race Riots was in 2017. “East St. Louis may have been a melting pot, but people did not get along,” Theising noted. “The element of racism was here. Southern Illinois acts more like a part of St. Louis than it does Chicago. Missouri was a slave state, and a lot of that racism extended into southern Illinois. While segregation was the law in Missouri, it was illegal in Illinois, but we did it anyway. It was tradition.”

Theising maintains that the city started its decline after the riots and never truly recovered. The East St. Louis Higher Education Campus was in the Franklin Bottom area, an African American neighborhood, and the campus was burned. So, the East St. Louis decline began.

“When East St. Louis was no longer profitable, everybody left,” Theising stated. “People left. Organized crime left. Factories left. They didn’t leave because they were going out of business, they left because they could make more money elsewhere. Companies decided to go where it was more profitable to build their goods and companies.”

Theising said East St. Louis was abandoned as everyone walked away. The institutions of government left behind pollution, violence, racism and legacy for another generation to fix.

During the program, Theising fielded a question as to why East St. Louis hasn’t been able to build up its riverfront. “The land, which is across from the Arch between the bridges, has not changed hands in more than 200 years,” Theising responded. “Once owned by the Wiggins Ferry, it is now owned by the Terminal Railroad, and they aren’t selling.”

Despite all of this sadness, greatness still has emerged from East St. Louis: Olympian Jackie Joyner-Kersey, renowned dancer, anthropologist and social activist Katherine Dunham, jazz legend Miles Davis, concert pianist Eugene Haynes, and strong churches. “Mount Sinai Church has done impressive redevelopment efforts in East St. Louis,” Theising said. “The nonprofits have stepped in, such as the Christian Activity Center.”

The College of Arts and Sciences’ (CAS) Targeted Funding Initiative (TFI) supports the S.A.C.K. Lunch and Learn program. CAS Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, first created TFI

grants in 2016. The program offers a way to continuously innovate and find novel ways of doing things. It utilizes funding acquired through the College's Winter Session courses and is supplemented with other internal CAS funds.

Central to SIUE's exceptional and comprehensive education, the [College of Arts and Sciences](#) has 19 departments and 85 areas of study. More than 300 full-time faculty /instructors deliver classes to more than 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Faculty help students explore diverse ideas and experiences, while learning to think and live as fulfilled, productive members of the global community. Study abroad, service-learning, internships, and other experiential learning opportunities better prepare SIUE students not only to succeed in our region's workplaces, but also to become valuable leaders who make important contributions to our communities.