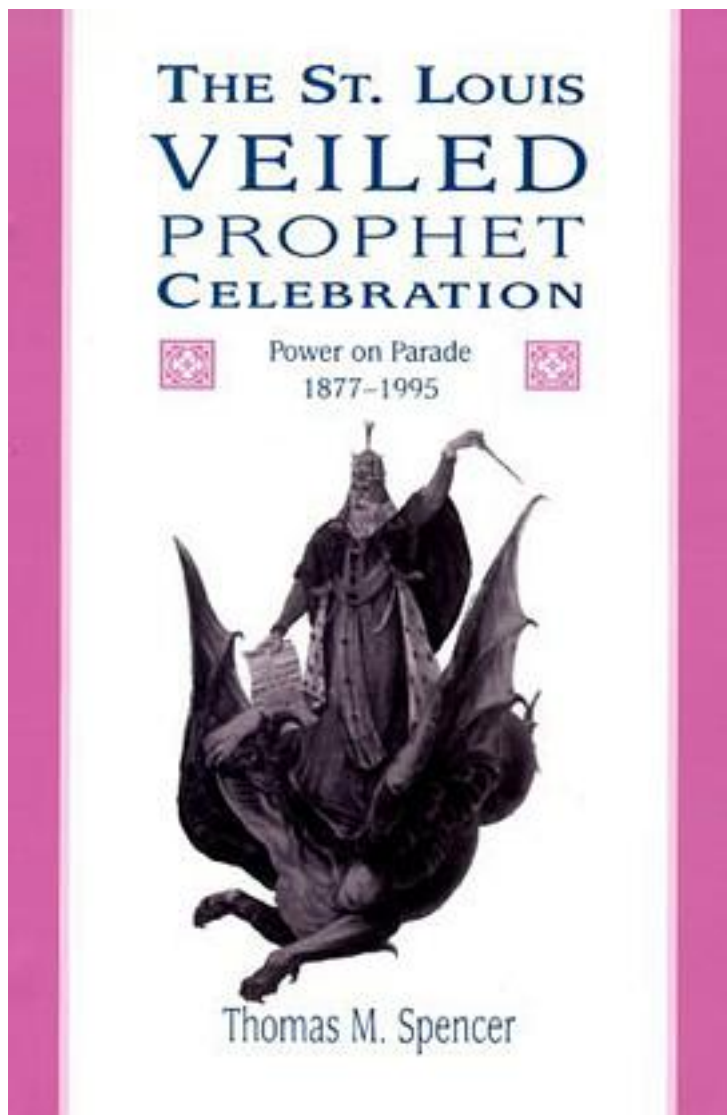


The St. Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration



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The Veiled Prophet organization has been a vital institution in St. Louis for more than a century. Founded in March 1878 by a group of prominent St. Louis businessmen, the organization was fashioned after the New Orleans carnival society the Mystick Krewe of Comus. In The St. Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration, Thomas Spencer explores the social and cultural functions of the organization's annual celebration -- the Veiled Prophet parade and ball -- and traces the shifts that occurred over the years in its cultural meaning and importance. Spencer shows that the celebration originated as the business elite's response to the general worker's strike of 1877. Symbolically gaining control of the streets, the elites presented St. Louis history and American history by tracing the triumphs of great men -- men who happened to be the Veiled Prophet members' ancestors. The parade was intended to awe the masses with its symbolic show of power. The members believed that they were helping to boost St. Louis economically and culturally by enticing visitors from the surrounding communities. They also felt that the parades provided the spectators with advice on morals and social issues. From 1900 to 1965 the celebration continued to include educational and historical elements; thereafter, it began to resemble the commercialized leisure that was increasingly becoming a part of everyday life. The biggest change occurred in the period from 1965 to 1980, when the protests of civil rights groups led many St. Louisans to view the parade and ball as wasteful conspicuous consumption that was often subsidized with the taxpayers' money. With membership dropping and the news media giving the organization little notice, it soon began to wither. In response, the leaders of the Veiled Prophet organization decided to have a "VP Fair" over the Fourth of July weekend. The 1990s brought even more changes, and the members began to view the celebration as a way to unite the St. Louis community, with all of its diversity, rather than as a chance to boost the city or teach cultural values. The St. Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration is a valuable addition not only to the cultural history of Missouri and St. Louis but also to recent scholarship on urban culture, city politics, and the history of public celebrations in America.

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