

Ask Vance: The Best Questions and Answers from *Memphis Magazines* History and Trivia Expert

Vance Lauderdale

(Memphis, TN: Bluff City Books, 2003)

Color and black and white photos,

125 pp. \$19.95 softcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

Recently I was with old friends planning an outing to some exotic locale where we could push the envelope a bit without getting into too much trouble. The usual suspects were named - Las Vegas, Key West, Atlantic City, and New Orleans - when I tossed out another suggestion. "How about Memphis?"

My idea was greeted with a tepid response. PR was quickly applied.

"Yes Memphis!" I continued. "For starters, we could stay at the Elvis Presley Blvd Inn on Highway 51, which was one of the original Holiday Inns. Then there's the giant milk bottle on the building on South Bellevue... and the vacant lot on North Main that contains the black, blue and white tiles of the Suzore Theatre where Elvis's parents fetched him for a radio interview after "That's All Right" was first played on the airwaves. Of course, we would need to get some libations for Mint Juleps at Joe's Liquors as well as see whether they've got the neon on their cool "Sputnik Star" sign working again, and..." my voice trailed off.

I then realized that I was still under the influence of a roadside book by the unlikely title of *Ask Vance*. The book's subtitle proclaimed, "Memphis magazine's history and trivia expert solves local mysteries of who, what, when, where, why, and why not."

When *Ask Vance* made it to my address, I was in the process of moving and the publication very nearly made a nonstop flight from my mailbox onto a massive pile of junk intended for the Salvation Army. After all, I didn't care a hoot about Memphis! I suppose if pressed I could parrot it was located along the Mississippi River and the largest city in Tennessee. It was also both the Graceland home of Elvis Presley and the assassination site of Martin Luther King. But the truth is the city had failed to register on my radar screen ever since the Memphis Tams of old American Basketball Association folded in 1975.

Now that I think about it, I did pitch *Ask Vance* onto this mighty discard pile, but as fate would happen, the book fell open revealing a phrase, "Remembering the Red Barn." Intrigued, I leaned over to examine it and was soon reading about a mid-1960s hamburger joint that, indeed, was a big-barn-shaped place painted red in Memphis. There was also a Red Barn restaurant in my hometown of Denver--and it was my favorite place to eat as a kid! I was hooked. By the end of the day, I was no closer to having packed my belongings, but I had managed to consume this publication.

Ask Vance perhaps isn't so much a book but a compendium of columns by Vance Lauderdale featured in the monthly, *Memphis Magazine*. This award-winning column (various Southern Journalist's Societies) on local history has been about since 1991 and is regarded as the publication's most popular regular feature. In a nutshell, readers send letters to Vance inquiring about everything from what became of their favorite café to what use to occupy that odd-looking building to what a pair of old cement lamp posts standing in a vacant lot use to demarcate. A photograph is included with each response.

Two aspects in particular make this publication especially intriguing. Foremost is the amazing little tales Mr. Lauderdale can weave from minimal physical evidence. The inquiry can be about something as seemingly minor as an old fence, an odd sign, or a stairway leading to nowhere. Yet, through careful library research, contact with a few stalwart old timers, and his own understanding of local history, Vance is able to solve roadside mysteries of the Memphis area. Unfortunately, as more and more of the roadside SCA'ers covet vanishes, it will be important to emulate Vance and be able to do more with less. A sad scenario but probably inevitable.

The other particularly noteworthy quality of *Ask Vance* is the impact this column has probably had on

historical awareness in Memphis. While many roadside publications might be said to be "preaching to the choir," the fact that this is the most popular regular feature of a well-read, general interest city magazine is very inspiring. This shows the potential of roadside related topics in a wide panoply of publications which may have many applications for SCA members.

In a ying-yang sort of way, the strengths of Ask Vance are often also its weaknesses. The short columns allow the book to be read either in brief snippets or a long night. Yet, for readers unfamiliar with Memphis as I am, a brief history of the town would be nice but a map of the city showing major streets, neighborhoods, and especially the location of the various "mystery" locations is essential. I would highly recommend that if another edition be published, it contain these features to make Ask Vance truly more of a book than a compendium.

The other comment is that staid responses are not the forte of the author, who is known to have a cold bottle of Kentucky Nip at hand while working away at the reader's letters. Mainly, this provides a little zip to the writing and I think it works especially well in a magazine format. However, in book form, especially when read cover-to-cover, some of the diatribes may get a bit redundant.

In an attempt to get into the psyche of the author, I attempted to contact Vance Lauderdale for some quotes concerning his book. These attempts were unsuccessful so I scanned the SCA roles hoping to find someone to assist me. It's amazing the number of movers and shakers in such a small organization as the SCA. This was again proven to me when I found that Michael Finger, an SCA member, was Senior Editor of Memphis Magazine. When contacted to ask about the curmudgenoly Vance Lauderdale, Michael indeed would go on record as saying that Vance is a great talent but, "like all great talents, he has some major character foibles that make him our most high-maintenance writer."

So Michael, I wish you well handling Vance, SCA readers, I think you'd enjoy this roadside read, and friends, look for a Memphis postcard from me in the mail.....

Douglas Towne is the SCA book review editor and unlike Michael's experience with Vance, all the reviewers he's edited have been a pleasure to work with. After reading Ask Vance, he'd like to thank his parents for favoring the Red Barn over McDonalds and Gerald Govan, a forward for the Memphis Tams for giving him his first autograph at age nine.