

Robert Morel
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Forty Minutes north of Chicago, IL there is a town called Zion. This is not a history of that town.

Zion City, IL

Tuesday morning, late March. Sometime after eleven my roommate-turned-guide¹ and I cross into Illinois, heading south from Milwaukee. Twenty minutes later we turn off IL 137 and reach the outskirts of Zion, IL, population 20,792.² We have yet to encounter any signs of a population center. The roadside is still bordered by reeds, fields, and the occasional gas station. Turning a corner, we pass a sign promoting the Zion Shopping Center. “Construction begins Summer 2001” it boasts from its still tree-filled lot. Maybe they’ll get around to it next year.

We enter Zion-proper about the time the coffee is wearing off. It’s been a long drive. Looking around, I see the post-WWII American dream of the automobile suburb. Well kept ranch houses line the street, lawns stretched out in greeting. We pass by a supermarket, some gas stations, a few smaller shops, but mostly we stick to the residential areas. The town is littered with parkways, groves, and city parks. The concentration of green space is amazing. Sections of the town project a 1950s wholesomeness that would make the Cleaver family envious.

¹ David Kennedy, a former engineering intern at the Zion Public Works department, acted as my guide through Zion, IL. Although he is not a resident, I trust his knowledge of the city.

Zion is not, however, a generic suburb. Driving through the town I notice the street names—Elijah, Galilee, Salem. These are all biblical names. Even the name of the town itself is from the biblical promised land. Further hinting at Zion’s religious background is the abundance of churches. According to Dave, my guide, Zion has the most churches per capita in Illinois. Since we pass at least one every three blocks I am inclined to believe him. Names like Christian Love Baptist Church, Living Word, Trinity Assembly of God, and Christian Faith Fellowship give the impression of religious homogeneity—there is not a Synagogue, Temple, or Mosque in sight. This is a Christian town, and judging by the street signs—Biblical names alphabetically arranged from east to west—it was planned to be a Christian town from the start.

Passing more churches, schools, and ranch houses, we arrive at Shiloh Park, the center of Zion. It is roughly 200 acres of park space—a well ordered grove. And in its direct center, acting as the hub of Zion, is a church. My suspicions are confirmed—this must be a planned religious community. The creation of Zion City was no accident, there was a dream in the making here. But what was it? And whose dream?

I head to the cemetery for answers. It may be the best way to find out who was important in Zion. At the very least it may give me names to work with. Besides, our contact at city hall is out to lunch. Located in downtown Zion, Lake Mound Cemetery is an unassuming lot filled with gravestones and a few trees. The oldest cemetery in Zion, it barely fills an acre. The tombstones hint at the age of the town. Many date back to the 1870s, a few are older. I find one broken tombstone from 1853, but the name has been

² *Zion, IL Street Guide 2001*. Zion Chamber of Commerce, Zion IL.

worn off. Towards the center of the cemetery there are a number of larger family plots, many with obelisks or large markers. The largest of these plots belongs to the Carman family. At the center of the plot is an obelisk that reads:

*John Carman
Apr 05 1881*

It is the most visible marker in the cemetery. The Carmans must have been important—or rich, which amounts to the same thing in a fledgling town. Satisfied with our search of the cemetery, and shivering from a chill rain, we head back to the truck.

A cup of coffee later we head over to the City of Zion Public Works Department where my roommate-turned-guide worked for a summer. After a brief reunion with his former coworkers Dave introduces me to Ron Colangelo a civil engineer for the City of Zion. We chat about the current state of Zion as he copies a city plat for me. He offers me little historical information, but creates a revealing image of Zion today. I learn that it is still a dry town by law, but that the local Appleby's has a liquor license. To my chagrin Appleby's also has all of the old city plats on its walls. Apparently the public works department never expected someone to come asking for copies of old city maps. My questions unanswered, we bid the Public Works adieu.

Fortunately City Hall is more revealing. Here the secretary for the mayor's office validates my conviction that Zion originated as a planned religious community. More importantly, she gives me a name: Reverend John Alexander Dowie, founder of Zion City, currently residing in a corner of Lake Mound Cemetery.

Back at the cemetery we find the grave. It is an unassuming tombstone in a small family plot near the corner of the cemetery. There is a single tree next to the grave. Overshadowed by the Carman and other large plots, we overlooked this one on our first visit. John Caraman, in fact, is no one of note in the story of Zion--without enough context, tombstones can be misleading. Under this small, weathered tombstone next to a single tree, however, lies the Reverend Dowie, founder of Zion, Illinois: Born 1847, Died 1907.

But I still don't know *why* the Reverend Dowie founded Zion. Having exhausted our personal resources, Dave and I head to the new Zion Public Library. The librarian happily directs us to the local history section. I am surprised by the amount of material I find. The books, especially those published by the city, tell the same story. It goes something like this.

Zion City: The Official Story³

Reverend John Alexander Dowie journeyed from Scotland to America as an itinerant preacher in 1893. A charismatic orator, Dowie began preaching in Chicago almost immediately. Dissatisfied with what he saw as the hypocrisy and evils of most denominational churches, he officially formed the Christian Catholic Church on February 22, 1896. Following the call of "Salvation, Healing, and Holy Living," his congregation soon suggested forming a new community, free from the sins of the rest of the world. In

³ All information in this section is from *Zion City Illinois*. A Pamphlet created by the City of Zion Historical Society. No date or author is listed, but it is likely from 2001 since it references events from 2000 on a few occasions. Although there are other materials on the subject, the story is similar in most of

1898 Dowie's closest disciples were busy surveying land for this new city. By 1899 they had chosen a spot along Lake Michigan, just north of Waukegan, Illinois. Considering it a perfect location for his new city, Reverend Dowie purchased roughly 7,000 acres from farmers in the area. On July 14, 1900 these 7,000 acres became the city of Zion.

Being a religious experiment, Zion was a carefully planned city. Centered on the 200 acre Shiloh Park, four wide, tree-lined boulevards stretched out in the cardinal directions. The congregation planted trees throughout the city, drilled artesian wells for their water supply, and created an unprecedented amount of park space—all in preparation for the projected 200,000 residents of Zion.

During this time, the congregation lived in a tent encampment until city lots went up for sale in 1901. Soon houses, a block-long general store, and a hotel sprang up. While Dowie raised funds for his 16,000 seat, 400 square-foot temple, in 1902 the congregation erected a Tabernacle with a capacity of 8,000 people. It lasted 35 years until it burned down. Also in 1902 Reverend Dowie moved into Shiloh House, his custom built, \$90,000, twenty-five room mansion. The next year Zion College welcomed its first class of students. By 1905 thriving printing, lace-making, and coal industries were underway.

Then something changed. On January 1, 1905 Reverend Dowie—due to his failing health—moved to Mexico. Without their charismatic leader, the congregation's

them and this pamphlet is a good summary. Furthermore, it is how the City of Zion chooses to tell its own story.

ambitions waned and city development faltered. And the money was running out. The city could not support itself, much less the \$2,000 that Dowie requested each month.

In 1906 Dowie appointed Wilbur Glenn Viola to the position of Deputy General Overseer of Zion. Then on March 9, 1907 the Reverend John Alexander Dowie died, leaving Zion fragmented and bankrupt. All church property immediately went into receivership, the Christian Catholic Church split, and many families gave up on the dream of holy living. Only through a strong hand and political savvy did W.G. Viola prevent the dissolution of Zion City. He began a crusade against the breakaway sects of the Christian Catholic Church, pitching it as a battle of light against darkness. Although not completely successful in his efforts, Viola managed to preserve Zion's founding values and hold the town together until his death in 1949.

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And that's where all of the stories end. Not one author thought it important to look beyond the first generation of Zion City. It appears that they assume Zion became another run of the mill 1950s town. Judging by the literature, one would think that Zion's unique character died along with Dowie and Viola. But my observations of the town lead me to believe Zion is more complicated than that.

First, there are the churches. Even if Dave is wrong and Zion does not have the most churches per capita in the state, the town is still littered with them. And it is not just

the number of churches that is noteworthy. From the outside at least, they are all in excellent condition. Many of them practically glisten white. There must be more than a handful of churchgoers to keep so many churches this pristine. And all of the churches are Christian. The Christian Catholic Church is gone, but other sects abound. Apparently Jesus Christ is still lord of Zion.

Also, Zion is still a dry town. The Appleby's, I later learn, is actually on county land surrounded on all sides by the city. One story is that the city made an exception in order to attract business. Another story claims that the land was never part of the City of Zion and that Appleby's bought it from a private owner. Either way, Appleby's existence here is only a small shift away from the town's dry ideals. There is still no bar in Zion, only a restaurant that happens to serve liquor. It brings business and money to the town while maintaining a family-friendly, chain restaurant atmosphere. And Zion is not only dry in regards to liquor. According to Jim Kennedy, a former resident of Zion, smoking was outlawed in the town as recently as the late 1970s.⁴ Although Zion now permits smoking outside, I am surprised by how few residents I see lighting up.

Other traces of Zion's past ideals linger as well. Zion retained its original city seal until 1992. This seal depicts a shield divided into four sections. On top is a dove carrying a palm branch in its beak, the right side depicts a crown and scepter, the left a cross, and the bottom contains the town name. Above the shield is a banner with the words "God Reigns." Zion only abandoned this seal because courts deemed its endorsement of

⁴ Related to me through his son, David Kennedy.

Christianity unconstitutional. The city spent \$100,000 in legal fees defending the old seal. It cost only \$45,000 to replace it.⁵

Finally, there are signs of ideological renewal in the town. A wooden city limits sign welcomes one to the city with the slogan “ZION, Historic past, Dynamic future.” The 2001 *Zion, IL Street Guide* extols the current virtues of the town: a new library with over 114,000 items, the Shiloh Port Water Park, a hands-on energy museum, the Illinois Beach State Park, and the 575 acres of park space. Zion, although aware of its past, does not appear to be stuck in it.

Maybe this combination of Zion’s Christian past with a commercial is best explained in a button stuck behind the public works secretary’s desk. “ZION, Heraldng a New Future” it reads. In five words, this small blue button explains Zion better than any other source I encountered. It invokes Zion’s Christian past to signal progress. Zion is neither the leftover of a religious utopia nor a generic lakeshore town. There is still a dream here.

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Dusk. On our way out of town, Dave and I stop at the local equivalent of a dairy queen. A girl behind the counter takes my order of black coffee and a sunday without batting an eye. I wonder if she is used to people ordering this combination for dinner. I sit by the window, looking at a field across the road. It is too early to tell what crop it is,

⁵ *Zion City, Illinois*. Pamphlet. P 18.

probably corn. Dave sits down across from me. Shaking my head I mention to him what a strange place Zion is. He nods, shrugging his shoulders. I get the impression that he knew everything about Zion all along. He just wanted me to figure it out for myself. Or maybe he knew that if he gave me too much background all my observations would be clouded by it.

Either way, it is time to go. Fortified with coffee we head back to the truck. Heading north up IL 137, we leave Zion City IL. We leave Zion to its memories and its future.