

## Your town, USA

Even with their fast-food qualities, Images of America books preserve local history **BY JAMES V. HORRIGAN**

**WALK INTO A** bookstore almost anywhere in America and you'll find a shelf full of thin paperback books with distinctive sepia-toned covers. Light on text, heavy on photos, numbingly similar in format and content, they're volumes in Arcadia Publishing's Images of America series of local history books.

Since 1994, Arcadia has put out more than 5,000 books for local, sometimes tiny, niche markets. Images of America was Arcadia's first and remains its most successful series. The series began by covering cities and towns; then it branched out to parks and neighborhoods, and now includes colleges, businesses, individual buildings, and vanished sports teams.

Massachusetts has more Arcadia books devoted to its local history than any other state—nearly 350 titles covering 250 markets, according to Lynn Ruggieri, Arcadia's public relations coordinator. Another 20 Massachusetts titles will be added this year, including *Greater Boston's Blizzard of 1978*, by Alan Earls; *Chinese in Boston: 1870-1965*, by Wing-kai To; and *Aubuchon Hardware*, by Bernard Aubuchon Jr.

Whether it's the Boston Braves or Boston Harbor Islands, Allston-Brighton or Cuttyhunk, when Arcadia's research determines there's a market for a topic, an Images of America book is sure to follow. The drawback is the 128-page template they foist on authors, which makes the books so formulaic they might be described as McImages of America.

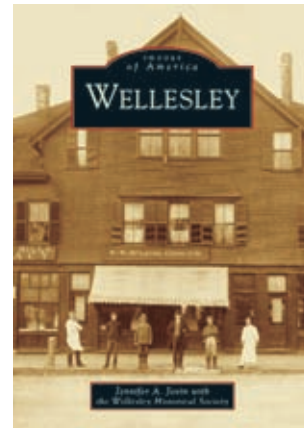
The photographs themselves are sometimes so prosaic they could be inserted into other books in the series with the very real possibility that nobody would notice. If you've seen one photo of a Kiwanis or Lions Club banquet, you've seen them all. The same goes for staged shots of Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, and high school marching bands.

Iron Rocha, acquisitions editor in Arcadia's Portsmouth, New Hampshire, office, says the cookie-cutter nature of Images of America books is by design: "We don't in any way claim that these books are a complete history of the area. They're really kind of a snapshot. We certainly do put the emphasis

on photographs because that's what we want to share, so they'll appeal to a broader group."

Needham native Jen Jovin, the author of a new book on Wellesley, says there is a reason for the books' one-size-fits-all similarity. "To a degree I think we all have a common experience, a shared history," she says. "I think the books would be missing something if we didn't include those so-called generic qualities."

Fair enough, except when generic spills into cliché,



like the 1901 photo of Wellesley shopkeeper William McLeod. He wears an apron and stands behind a counter next to a young assistant, with jars of preserves in front of them and shelves of canned goods behind them. It's nice, but I swear the same shot is in my Images of America book on Dedham. And Westwood. And Cambridge. And Nahant.

Wellesley even has what may be the ultimate Images of America cliché: a long-gone tavern reportedly once visited by George Washington. My guess is there are dozens of Arcadia volumes, from Virginia to New England, with a similar photo and boast to go with it.

**IT USED TO** be that municipal histories were written only once a century, and the person who penned it, often some crusty old town clerk, was the one person in town qualified—or inclined—to do so. But Arcadia Publishing has made it so that virtually any-

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one can now write a municipal history.

For example, Arcadia had been looking for 15 years to do a book on Wellesley with no luck. That changed last spring, when Jovin, then 24, received her master's in history from Northeastern University and sent off a résumé to Arcadia headquarters in Charleston, South Carolina.

Her hope was to land "an editorial assistant job or something," but when publisher Tiffany Howe saw that Jovin had interned at the Wellesley Historical Society and put together an exhibit called "Your Town," she decided they had found

## Writing an 'Images' book has to be a labor of love.

the person they were looking for. Howe forwarded the resume to Rocha, who contacted Jovin immediately to see if she was interested.

"I was like, 'Wow!'" Jovin laughs. "The prospect of writing a book was totally unexpected, but I thought about it and said, 'Yeah, sure.' It worked really well because I was able to take a lot of research I'd done for the exhibit and transfer that to book form. I had to expand upon it and find more photographs, but my previous research really was the founda-

tion of the book."

She signed a contract in June, with a manuscript due December 18. Arcadia sent along detailed guidelines, including a template on how to sort photographs into subjects, which became chapters like "Faces around Town," "Local Enterprise," and "Wellesley's Dedication to Education."

Choosing 200 photographs, writing the captions, and compiling a 1,200-word introduction took the better part of six months.

"I was going to Wellesley about once a week and spending probably seven or eight hours at the historical society," Jovin says. "I did so pretty faithfully, right up until I had to submit the book."

Arcadia writers don't get advances against royalties and Ruggieri declines to say how much Jovin will be paid, but previously published reports list author royalties in the Images of America series at approximately 8 percent. With the typical volume retailing for \$19.99 and sales not likely to exceed a few thousand copies, an Images book is more a labor of love than a ticket to fame and fortune. "I knew I wasn't going to become a millionaire from it," Jovin says.

But Arcadia authors can also purchase books wholesale and find nontraditional venues to market them. In Wellesley,

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## TWO BITS

that could mean setting up a table at the town dump on Saturdays, or working the crowd at the high school football game between Needham and Wellesley on Thanksgiving.

"Their contract says that they cannot sell to retailers," Ruggieri says, "but we encourage authors to sell to individuals at book signings, lectures, etc."

Another perk sometimes offered by major publishers is the fancy book launch party, something that Arcadia contributors have learned to do without.

Ruggieri says historical societies often throw parties themselves, but Jovin's not expecting one. "It would be great," she says. "I'd be very much in favor of having an opening, but the Wellesley Historical Society is actually a very small organization. They don't have a large staff and nobody's mentioned anything to me about it."

Laura and Katie Taronas, authors of *Paxton: Then & Now*, had an experience with local officials that proved to be far different than Jovin's. Initially, Rocha says, the historical commission was cooperative with the Taronas sisters, but then it changed its mind. No reason was given. With Paxton's 250th birthday coming up in 2015, Laura Taronas wonders if the commission has plans to publish a book of its own.

"I thought they would be excited that two teenagers were interested in the history of the town," says the 17-



year-old, who wrote the introduction and captions. "It was a little odd, but I guess I understand."

Luckily for them, about 20 years ago their grandfather found a cache of old Paxton photos at a yard sale. Absent official support from the town, those images comprise the majority of the book's "then" photos, which are juxtaposed with

"now" shots taken by Laura's older sister Katie, 19. Together, the Taronas sisters make up Arcadia's youngest writing team.

Although some Arcadia authors, in gratitude for the support they receive, donate their royalties back to the local historical society, the Taronas sisters are offering the book's proceeds to Moore State Park and the Richards Memorial Library, both located in Paxton.

To further make their point, they dedicated the book to the people of Paxton, "past, present and future," taking care to note that "history belongs to all of us." **CW**

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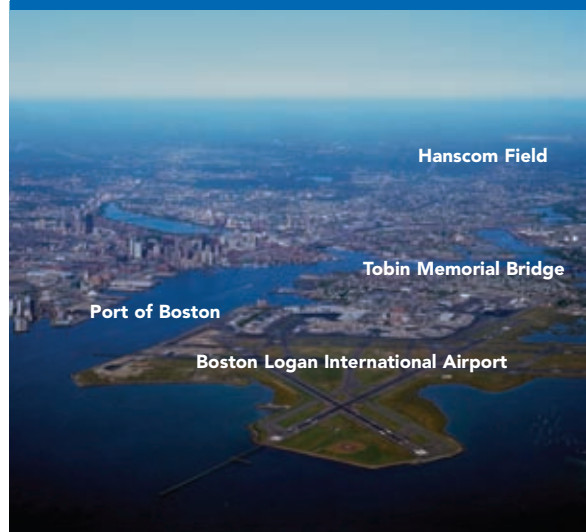
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