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Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



  
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From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](#) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

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Filling a Very Big Gap

by Hanon W. Russell

*Harry Nelson Pillsbury, American Chess Champion*, by Jacques N. Pope, 1996 Pawn Island Press, Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 376pp., \$26.95

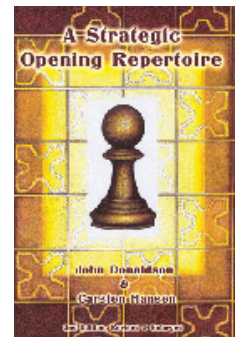
Until now, fans of the turn-of-the-century American star Harry Nelson Pillsbury have had to be content with the short biography and couple of hundred games provided by Sergeant and Watts’ book Pillsbury’s *Chess Career* to study their hero. At long last, however, a work that does justice to the brief life of this excellent player has appeared, thanks to the efforts of former University of Michigan student Jacques N. Pope.



According to the author’s preface, the book actually started out to be a search for additional Pillsbury games to supplement those available in the few existing sources. Gradually, the game research was expanded to include more detailed biographical information, another area sorely in need of further attention. The result was Pope’s *Harry Nelson Pillsbury, American Chess Champion*. To begin to understand how much more comprehensive Pope’s work is compared to Sergeant and Watts, one can simply look at the numbers: S & W provide a ten-page bio and 242 games; Pope offers 46 pages and 907 games (although the Introduction and back cover only claim 877).

The book contains four parts, two appendices and two indices of openings and players. One of the four parts is devoted to the biographical information, while the other three consist of the presentation of the tournament games, match games and others, such as those played at the club level or in simultaneous exhibitions including blindfold play, for which Pillsbury was justly famous. The appendices contain Pillsbury’s article on the 1895 Hastings tournament, his great win, and his brief autobiography published in 1899.

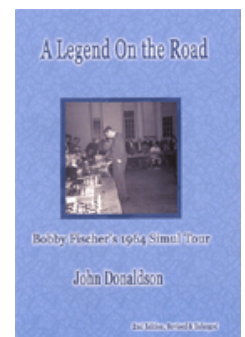
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In the biographical section, Pope clears up some old mysteries and creates a few new ones by bringing to light certain material that was not previously well-known. First of all, despite the many rumors to the contrary over the years, Pillsbury did die of syphilis, confirmed by Pope through a review of the death certificate (page 46). Of course, whether he contracted the illness in St. Petersburg, Russia or elsewhere, remains unknown.

This writer, at least, was unaware of the negotiations that occurred between Pillsbury and Lasker while the latter was visiting the U.S. in 1901. Although nothing ever came of them due to an unfortunate set of circumstances, these discussions apparently very nearly resulted in a series of exhibition matches between the two, which, presumably, would have eventually led to a title shot for Pillsbury (pp. 38-40).

Pope also offers us something more about Pillsbury's private, non-chess life. For instance, we are given some background information about his wife (including her name, omitted by Sergeant and Watts) and additional details about his teen years. A childhood friend recalls that "except for arithmetic and a decidedly better than average memory he was pretty much like any normal boy. He was fond of baseball and nimble enough in fielding erratic grounders on a 'cowpasture' infield. I recall a good deal of indignation among the boys when Harry was permanently lured away from the ball field by a fellow named Martin to begin spending his afternoons playing chess in Martin's barn" (page 1).

Being the good critic means that the more information one receives, the more one wants. Topics for investigation by future Pillsbury researchers might include uncovering additional data about "Martin" and Pillsbury's wife, Mary Bush; whether there are any living relatives in the Pillsbury family and locating more contemporary sources from Pillsbury's time both in the U.S. and Europe. As Pope writes in the Preface, "I hope that this work will serve as a starting point for a complete biography of Pillsbury's life, akin to the work by Lawson on Morphy, Brady on [Fischer](#), and Winter on [Capablanca](#)."

Turning to the games, the source of each is cited and occasionally the contemporary annotations are reprinted, as well. A review of Pope's use of Sergeant and Watts' notes reveals that they are identical except for the conversion to algebraic notation. One should not, however, purchase this book with the expectation of finding detailed, game commentary that delves into the secrets of Pillsbury's play. Such is neither the case nor the intention of the book.

What Pope does provide is a well-researched, comprehensive look at the life and chess of Pillsbury, a piece of literature long overdue. Although this writer was unable to recheck much of the biographical information presented without engaging in similar extensive research, Pope includes a bibliography that contains numerous periodicals and newspapers. All game scores that were reviewed appeared to be free of error. Despite an author and publishing house that are ostensibly unknown in the chess world, *Harry Nelson Pillsbury, American Chess Champion* is a quality work that will go a long way in filling a very big gap in the book shelves of chess libraries.

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**[Order](#) *Harry Nelson Pillsbury, American Chess Champion***  
by Jacques N. Pope

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