

THE REAL CITY

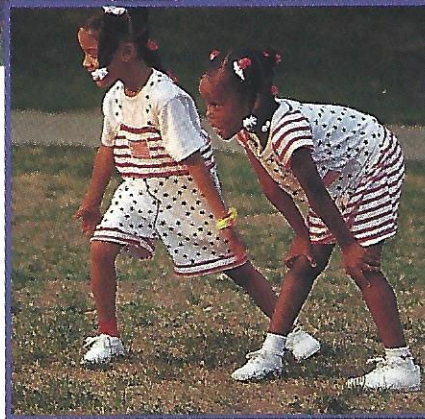
Chicago's secrets are in its moments, its places, and its people

by Paul Engleman

The best view of Chicago used to be looking east from the Ogden Avenue bridge, just below North Avenue. Ogden is the contrary diagonal, the North Side's only southwest artery, a broad concrete swath that cuts against the imperious grain of the grid, defying the tedious logic of all the other streets.

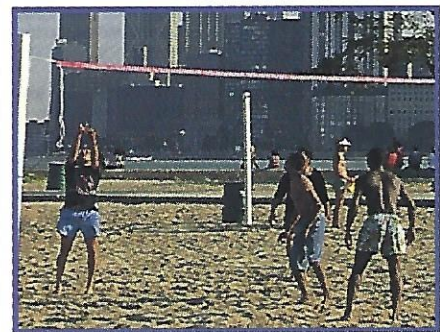
Fittingly, the vista from the bridge presented the city in all its intriguing contradictions, its squalor, and its splendor—in the foreground the dismal housing crates of Cabrini-Green, in the background the shimmering skyscrapers of Michigan Avenue and the gleaming palaces of the Gold Coast.

The discovery of Ogden—a deserted, efficient shortcut—provided a moment



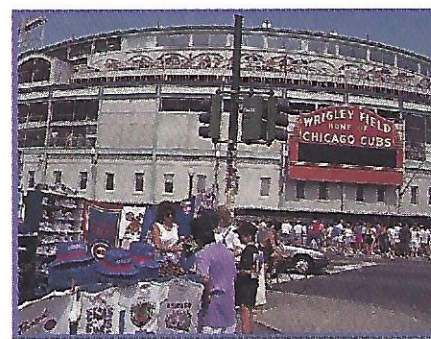
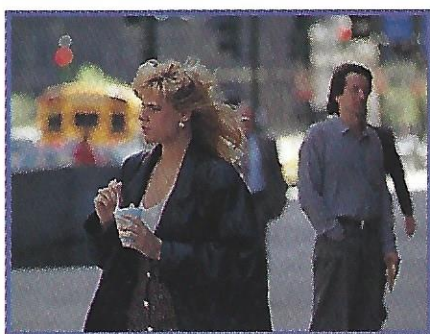
when I felt like an insider. But the discovery of that view provided much more: It made me feel as if I had glimpsed the real Chicago, uncovering an angle on the city apparent only to people who really knew the place. That may have been an illusion, but it's one that I've nurtured at various times over the past 18 years as I've moved from neighborhood to neighborhood, going from outsider to insider and back again as I learned more about the city's complexity and its secrets.

I formed my first vivid impression of Chicago when I was 11, living in New Jersey. I was halfway through Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* when Sister Thomasina confiscated the book, insisting it was indecent despite my protests that it was cited in the history text that she had distribut-



ed. Sinclair's descriptions of the stockyards, of women and children slaving amid the stench of rotting animal carcasses in the packinghouses, of immigrant families living in squalor, were horrifying and fascinating. At some basic level, I understood the cruel irony that the misery these people endured was the basis for other people's prosperity. They were the foundation on which a great city had been built.

Four years later, while watching TV coverage of the Democratic convention, I formed another lasting impression of Chicago. Burly policemen armed with clubs engaged in combat with scrawny kids only a few years older than me. And at the center of it all was Richard J. Daley, the bellicose mayor, flanked by two



sons and shouting obscenities at a Jewish guy giving a speech, scowling before news cameras and saying, “Duh policeman isn’t dere to create disorder, duh policeman is dere to *preserve* disorder.”

I couldn’t believe someone who sounded so dumb could be the mayor of a major city. I didn’t realize that someone who sounded so dumb could really be very smart.

New York has always leaned toward Europe, and Los Angeles to the Pacific Rim, even before it was called that. But Chicago is a place unto itself, a freshwater port, the true American city. Kipling knew that right away: “I have struck a city—a real city—and they call it Chicago.”

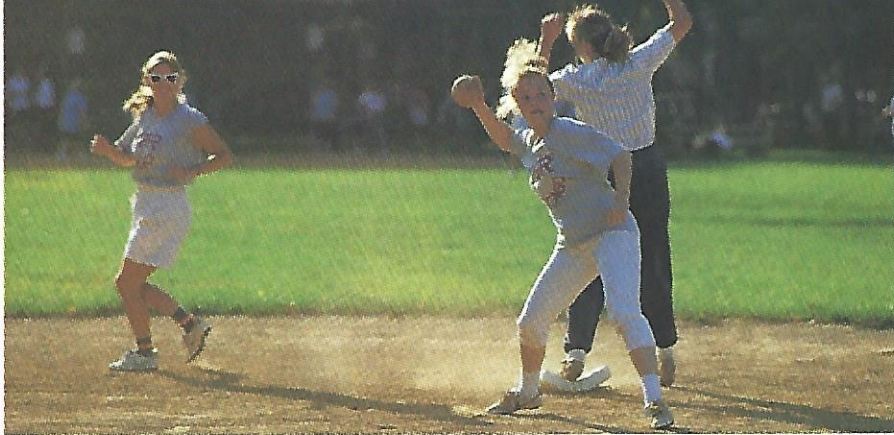
It was already a city of legend then. It was the city that rebuilt itself from ashes after a tremendous fire—started, some naïvely reported, by a cow. The city where all the railroads came together. The railroads brought people, and they kept coming. There were 112,000 when Lincoln was nominated for President downtown in 1860, half a million 20 years later, 1.7 million by the turn of the century. A century later, even though the city has been leaking population for decades, there are still nearly three million.

I first set foot in Chicago on a bright winter afternoon in the early seventies when I was in college. A friend brought me into town by way of Lower Wacker Drive, and our first stop was Billy Goat

Tavern. By the time we got to street level and set off on foot, darkness had fallen and we were less than sure-footed. But standing on the Michigan Avenue Bridge, I was sure I would end up living here.

It was a magical moment, enhanced by the numbing glow of alcohol. It wasn’t the graceful elegance of the Wrigley Building that attracted me or the glistening ripples of the river. It was the dark, mysterious underground, the fuzzy misperception that this was so much a city that there was another city beneath it.

We ate at a trendy Lincoln Avenue spot that has since undergone a dozen deaths and reincarnations, attended a play in the building that has since spawned Tut’s, Waves, Metro, and the Smart Bar. On the way back downtown,



Clark Street was eerily deserted. An elderly man slipped on a patch of ice and fell. Seemingly from nowhere, a group of people appeared to help him to his feet.

Big shoulders. The literary image that gave Chicago its identity was provided by Carl Sandburg. In its evolution into contemporary perception, Sandburg's image came to be embodied by Daley, the savvy, surly boss who swapped jobs for votes and steered the Machine with his fist on the throttle. Although it was Jane Byrne and a snowstorm that did in Daley's Machine, it was Harold Washington who changed the image of Chicago—from a stubborn, segregated city of haves and have-nots to one in which the outsiders finally had a claim, or at least thought they had one.

With no historical antecedent, Washington himself came to symbolize the new Chicago. And he exulted in doing it. When Chicagoans traveled to other cities, he'd say, people no longer formed their hands into imaginary guns and made cracks about Al Capone, as happened to me several times in Italy. Shortly after I heard Washington say that, I told a man on a plane I lived in Chicago. "How's Harold?" he asked. Shortly after that, a friend told me a rental-car clerk in Los Angeles had asked him the same thing.

The broad-shouldered image found its

last gasp of life in Ditka, the defiant Republican in a den of Democrats, scowling on the Soldier Field sidelines, oblivious of the winter chill. But Ditka went from winner to whiner and left a loser, with shoulders drooping.

It's not Mike's kind of town anymore; it's a Michael sort of place, at least for the time being. Broad shoulders have given way to long arms, the wobbly walk to a stunning stride, the sulky scowl to a million-dollar grin. And on a black face, no less. That would seem to be a sign of progress, a friendlier icon. But progress moves in different directions. The Michaelization of Chicago has a facile quality about it, a commercialism reflected in the ersatz city that has sprouted along the Ontario-Ohio corridor in River North and the ascendance of Niketown as the city's leading tourist attraction. Chicago's shoulders are getting a badly needed massage, but let's hope they don't get totally malled.

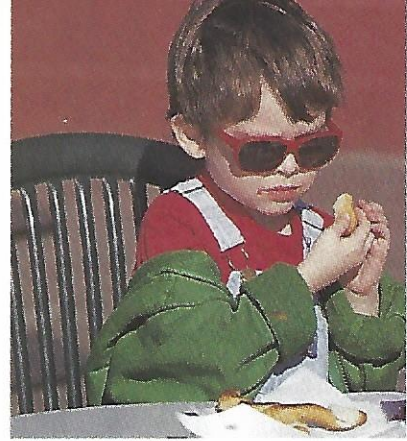
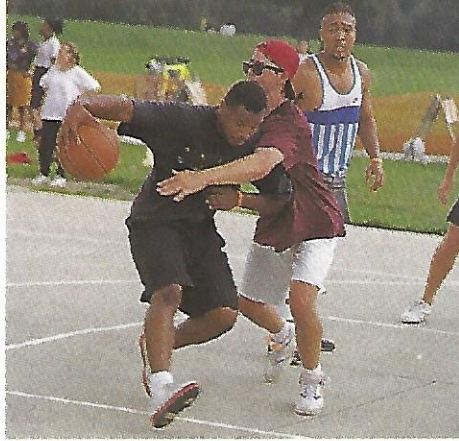
I settled in a small apartment in Lincoln Park, as most white newcomers out of college did at the time. I ate overpriced hamburgers and deep-dish pizza and drank beer on Clark Street and Lincoln Avenue. I was an outsider but I felt like I was starting to know the city. I kept hearing that Chicago was the city that works, but it seemed pretty clear

that it worked for some, not for others.

I moved to a larger, cheaper apartment near Wrigley Field (this was before real-estate agents christened the area Wrigleyville). With the Ravenswood el clamoring by a block to the south, cheers from the ballpark riding the breeze from the north, and Mexican-American families living in my building, I thought I was in one of the "neighborhoods" I had been hearing about. It wasn't until the landlord asked me to be a witness while he slid an eviction notice under the door across the hall that I realized I was becoming an insider and my neighbors were on the outs.

I moved to a cheaper building on Waveland, on the second floor between two young couples in love. John and James were black; Steve and Bev were white. Steve was a talkative guy, but John and James told me he didn't talk to them. "You've got to understand," Steve once volunteered. "I'm from the Southwest Side." The ice started to break when John, James, and I pushed Steve and his 14th Ward sedan out of a snowbank. Steve was starting to feel like a North Sider, if not a 44th Ward insider.

Chicago is 228 square miles stretching 30 miles along Lake Michigan. It is 550 parks, eight forest preserves, 29 beaches. It's 200 good restaurants and 2,000 bad ones, a hundred stands serving the best



dog in town and a dozen dives named all manner of Johns—Big, Little, Jumbo, or just Johnny's. It's a city in which football is serious business, politics is a game, and gaming is a political football. It's heaven for symphony lovers, *paradiso* for opera fans, nirvana for jazz hounds.

It's a thousand grim-looking buildings where half a million kids go to school. It's a church on every block and a bar on every corner. At some churches, the people go in on their knees. At some bars they come out on all fours. At some schools kids go in and out through metal detectors. On Sunday, no one can go to the public library.

Chicago is a melting pot that's constantly on simmer, human evolution played out on a crowded stage before a packed house. But the people on the stage live in parallel universes, circling in different orbits, weaving along separate paths.

A friend of mine once had to get from Cicero to Hyde Park. An elderly man who overheard him asking directions stepped forward. "I know the whole South Side," he said; "lived here all my life. Name the place, I can tell you how to get there."

"I'm trying to get to Hyde Park," my friend said.

"Where?" The man's expression became quizzical and my friend assumed he had hearing trouble.

"Hyde Park," he replied, upping the volume.

"Never heard of it."

Another friend, a paramedic, had to go to an apartment building near 47th and Indiana on a sweltering summer day. Getting no response in front, he went around back. There, in a courtyard surrounded by buildings, he came upon two middle-aged black women wearing long cotton dresses and floppy hats. They were snapping peas. "They could have been on the porch of a Mississippi farmhouse," he told me. "It was like finding the rural South in the center of the city."

My car died in a snowdrift with the Democratic Machine during the blizzard of 1979. I moved into a high-rise across from the Lincoln Park Zoo. With Jane Byrne's myopia for anything west of Halsted, the lakefront seemed like the place to be. If convenience is happiness, it will always be the place to be. Buses came by every two minutes except when you were in a hurry; cabs trolled the streets at all hours.

Few residents had the curiosity to seek out the roof, so in warm weather it was almost a private back yard, an ideal vantage to gaze over the city—northwest to O'Hare, southwest to Midway, straight west to Iowa, south to the Loop. But the real view was east, to where there was nothing but water.

Looking out onto the lake every day,

the possibilities seemed almost limitless. I regularly thanked Daniel Burnham for permitting people to get close to the lakefront instead of walling us out as in Cleveland and Buffalo. The lake and the river are the reasons the city was built here. They're the reason the city exists. Living near the water's edge, I felt like I had found my place.

If any literary figure should have been embraced by the citizenry of Chicago, it was Nelson Algren. Simone de Beauvoir was Algren's lover; he called her Frenchy. He would take her out on the streets to see pimps and hookers, down to the morgue to see stiffies, to the cop shop to watch police lineups, into seedy taverns to get sloppy drunk.

Algren understood how Chicago came to be what it is. It grew great, he said, "on a bone-deep grudge." He gave the town an identity—city on the make.

Algren was a bridge between the saloons and the salons, between the outsiders and the insiders. But even he, the ultimate insider, was an outsider when the final hand was played. In 1981, when the block of Evergreen Street where Algren had lived was named after him, his erstwhile neighbors rebelled. Who the hell was this Algren guy? they demanded. And they arranged to have the name changed back. *(continued on page 104)*

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THE REAL CITY

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After eight years, when rent went sky high, I finally moved down to street level, on Kedzie south of Logan Square. It felt like a demotion at first. I expected to miss the lake, but I got used to it. Gazing at the mansions across the grassy boulevard from my balcony, I felt connected to the city's parks—to Humboldt and Garfield and Douglas—just as Frederick Law Olmsted had intended when he conceived the system of leafy thoroughfares

The city on the make is what you make of it.

that join the green squares on the grid and that once formed the perimeter of the city.

The boulevards, more than buildings, are the living history of the city. They're a link not only to different neighborhoods, but to the grandeur of days gone by and, we hope, days ahead. On misty mornings, on my way to the el or the cigar shop, with the sunlight reflecting off the Illinois Centennial monument, Kedzie Boulevard sometimes felt like Paris or Rome. The voices of many people on the sidewalks made it sound like Warsaw or San Juan.

Stay in Chicago half an hour and someone will tell you it's "a city of neighborhoods." But, as Charles Bowden and Lew Kreinberg point out in their book *Street Signs Chicago*, people didn't come here to build neighborhoods; they came here to make money. Neighborhoods evolved only because they offered a sense of personal boundary in a space too big for people to feel comfortable.

Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods are what give the city its character. Sprinkled with curiosities, they offer outsiders a chance for discovery, insiders a sense of belonging. There are neighborhoods in Chicago where the locals never leave, not because of economic disadvantage, but simply because they feel no need to. They

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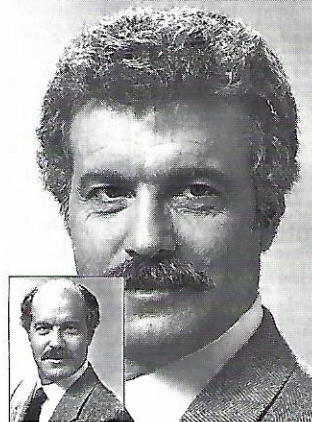
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do their shopping at Your Snappy Shop, Mr. A's Fashions, Styles to Fit Your Wallet. On the equally insular Gold Coast, the neighborhood shops are on Oak Street and Michigan Avenue. When people leave, they head for O'Hare.

I now live in a small house with a big yard on the Northwest Side. The 24-hour Dominick's at Lawrence and Pulaski is the cultural center of my existence. Irv's clothing store is no longer inconveniently located. "The junction to downtown" is a phrase that finally has meaning.

There are real bakeries up here, and crowds of real people in them on Saturday mornings. My son gets a free cookie from one of the ladies at every one of them. Back in Lincoln Park they charge him half a buck. A man on Elston will make a leather jacket for \$200; for \$10, he fixed the one I bought on Michigan Avenue. English is a second language on most of the play lots. Bookstores are rare, record stores are unknown, video stores are still waiting to be Blockbusted out of business. Hardware-store owners can tell you how to fix something. The odds of finding a good restaurant aren't much better than of winning the lottery. But the booze still flows on every corner.

Making your way out in the neighborhoods is like searching the racks in a resale store. Nothing is new out here until you find it. It's a sort of urban alchemy. Ordinary stuff turns to gold the instant you touch it.

In a city this large and diverse and daunting and complex, only the arrogant or ignorant would call themselves insiders. But they're out there, the people who can move from neighborhood to neighborhood and still feel like they belong.

Insiders who crave Italian beef might go all the way out North Avenue to Johnnie's. But they won't tell you it's the best in the city, because they know the possibility—they hope for it—that the best is served at a place they haven't found yet.

Insiders know the els, they know the secret cityscapes, they know the drab, gray back porches. They know Lower Wacker. They were using Clybourn and Elston long before the poodle walkers appeared. One says take the Skyway; it's shorter, there's no traffic; see the mills, admire the armpit-perfect curve formed by the south shore of the lake. Another says

boycott the Skyway; it's a monument to greed, the best measure of folly we had until Presidential Towers.

Insiders know their streets. They can tell you the longest, Western Avenue, and the shortest, officially Longmeadow. They may not remember where it is, but they know there's a Memory Lane.

Insiders will eat at the newest Lincoln Park *ristorante*, but every so often they'll forgo this week's trattoria in favor of a jaunt to 24th and Oakley, to Bruna's or one of the other joints that seem to have been there all century, and certainly before Chicago discovered risotto.

Insiders will choose the Garfield Park Conservatory over Lincoln Park. They'll golf South Shore instead of Waveland and maybe someday they'll take off their shirts and try Marquette Park. They know the seats at Wrigley according to climatic conditions. Some swear by the Blackhawks; all swear at owner William Wirtz. They know what time the band starts playing, not when the doors open. They know where the 4 a.m. bars are and they get out of them by five on weekends. Some of them actually know where house music was invented. Some have been to a Rave.

Insiders know the places that help make the connections with the past. They can feel the rhythms that have echoed up the rivers and across the prairie. I know someone who says that on certain nights, when the breeze and temperature are just right, he has smelled the stockyards in the soil near Canaryville. Of course, this has only happened after he's been in the 3600 Club.

The north end of Ogden has been shut down, and the best vantage for my favorite view now would appear to be the roof of Bub City. I haven't checked it out yet. I'll eventually find a new spot, or someone will find one for me. There's always something worth finding here.

The city on the make is what you make of it. If you can afford the time, and in some cases the money, there's a lot to be made of it. No guide to Chicago can tell you all of the city's secrets. Discovering them for yourself is more satisfying anyway; it's the reason to visit, the reason to stay. In our pages this month, we offer a compass to point you in some interesting directions. We hope one of them will lead you to a place or a moment when you feel like you've found the real Chicago. ~

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