

# Thursday South Side tour

## August 16

While we drive south, we're entirely on landfill. The original shoreline of Lake Michigan was approximately where you see the row of buildings off to the right. The current ground level is substantially above the original ground level. The original water table was so low that all of Chicago, including hundreds of buildings, was jacked up in the 1850s and 1860s to make room for a sewer system beneath the streets. The Illinois Central Railroad tracks, built at grade level, are now some 20 to 40 feet below what we think of as ground level. You can't see them from here.

We will be driving through the parks along the south lakefront. The lakefront parks were originally envisioned in Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, which has had a huge influence in Chicago planning ever since. In 1909 most of the city was cut off from the lake by railroad tracks and industry. Much of the current shoreline was constructed in the 1930s under the WPA. Several museums were built in the 1920s. The shoreline also is the site of a massive convention center and a regrettable football stadium. In 1909, this highway we're on was supposed to be a carriage drive.

Of the city's 28 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, 26 miles are public parkland, with 31 beaches, all free and open to the public. You'll see some big new pedestrian bridge that have been built or are under construction to improve public access to the lakefront. You'll also see patches of native plant restorations, which are part of a habitat project we'll get a closer look at later. Now I'll let you chat. Enjoy.

## Burnham Wildlife Corridor

Our first stop is a small patch of the Burnham Wildlife Corridor. This is a string of habitat areas that have been created in Burnham Park, which is the stretch of lakefront park from downtown south to Hyde Park. The idea is to create natural spaces that connect people and nature, and to create habitat for wildlife, especially migrating birds.

This area we're coming to at 47th Street has areas of prairie, woodland, and wetland, with a small boardwalk. It's owned by the Chicago Park District and has a devoted band of volunteer stewards.

We can't call this a restoration of a natural area, because it's entirely manmade. It sits on landfill between a heavy used set of railroad tracks and a major highway. However, the creation of these natural areas in the parks fits into a larger restoration movement since the 1960s that has brought back or created prairies, woodlands and wetlands all over the Midwest. In Chicago, the Park District is one of more than 200 government agencies, nonprofits and other organizations that work together on restoration through a partnership called Chicago Wilderness.

In gardening, our current focus on native plants comes partly out of the worldwide restoration movement.

## Kossiakoff House and Garden

Our next stop is a private garden in a neighborhood called Kenwood, which saw a big burst of development during and after the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Many of Chicago's wealthiest families were attracted to Kenwood at the time. This house at 4810 S. Ellis Ave. was designed by the architect Charles Sumner Frost for Orrin Potter, the president of the Illinois Steel Company, who gave it as a wedding present to his daughter Agnes in 1894. In 1946 it became a private school.

The current owners, Susan and Tony Kossiakoff, bought the property in 1998. The house needed extensive renovation and the double lot was speckled with blacktop playgrounds and overgrown plantings. They renovated the house and ran it as a bed and breakfast from 2003 until 2015.

The Kossiakoffs installed a pond and stream in 2000 and set about creating a natural and colorful garden. They planted river birches, conifers and maples. Their goal is to have something blooming throughout the growing season. In addition, they have added an herb garden, bee and butterfly friendly plantings and bushes such as azaleas, rhododendrons and hydrangea.

The Kossiakoffs have told us we are welcome to use the bathroom.

## 56th Street Gardens

The next stop consists of three private gardens. Regrettably, two of the owners will not be there because of scheduling conflicts, so our guide will be Carolyn Ulrich (UHL-rich), editor of Chicagoland Gardening magazine.

The first is a small vegetable garden belonging to Ron Gryznwinski (Grizz-IN -skee), a retired bank president. Unfortunately, due to a schedule conflict, he can't be with us today, but his neighbor, Carolyn Ulrich, the editor of Chicagoland Gardening magazine, will greet us and tell us about the garden. Ron grows many different vegetables including about 2 dozen kinds of tomatoes. He's grown 137 different varieties in all and catalogs them by name and number.

The next gardens we'll see are on the next street, back-to-back with this garden. You can walk around the block, or you can go out Ron's back gate, across the alley, and through Carolyn's back gate. It's the front gardens that are interesting, so you'll want to proceed straight through to the sidewalk.

These are two Queen Anne Victorian houses that were built at the same time by the same architect in the 1890s. However, they represent very different gardening styles. One is the electric cottage garden of Carolyn Ulrich. The other is the much more carefully designed garden of Kris Barker. A high-rise apartment building next door creates shade and wind challenges for both gardens, but one is more shaded. We think you'll enjoy seeing the contrasting choices of these two gardeners.

We're now going to head south on Woodlawn Avenue. We'll drive by Robie House, which is one of the masterpieces of Frank Lloyd Wright. It will come up on your left after a while at 58th Street and Woodland Avenue.

**(Read this while heading south to the Midway and driving along the Midway)**

What we're doing is taking a drive to give you a sense of the 1893 world's fair that did so much to shape Chicago physically as well as culturally. If you read a book called *The Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson, this is the area he was writing about.

The World's Columbian Exposition was a huge event: More than 27 million people visited the fair in six months, at a time when the population of the United States was about 63 million people. It had a huge influence on American culture and architecture. It showed off the latest technology and great art from all over the world. It brought together scholars and business people from all over the world. Here's one of many examples: Yoga was introduced to the United States at the fair's Conference of World Religions.

You can find out a lot about the fair online, but I want to talk about the landscape.

The fair was headed by architect Daniel Burnham and the landscape architect was Frederick Law Olmsted. We all know about Frederick Law Olmsted, right?

Olmsted had designed the South Park System in the 1870s. It consisted of two parks, Washington Park and Jackson Park, linked by a broad narrow park called the Midway Plaisance. Originally, it was supposed to be a recreational canal, but that never happened.

### (When you reach the Midway, point it out)

Olmsted was brought back to convert these parks for the fair. The Midway Plaisance became the site for the fair's side shows--the entertainment area. There were hootchie-kootchie dancers. There was the world's first Ferris wheel, which was 250 feet in diameter, almost twice as tall as the London Eye. There were anthropological exhibits featuring real Africans and Eskimos living like animals in a zoo. We're still grappling with the unpleasantness of that memory.

Once we leave the Midway Plaisance, we will go past the only remaining building from the fair. Then we'll go past a surviving artwork from the fair and end up at the Garden of the Phoenix. This is a Japanese garden on an island in a lagoon.

### (While passing the Museum of Science and Industry)

What you see on the right is the only remaining building from the fair. Most of the buildings were temporary, kind of like theater sets, made from plaster and lath. But they needed one solid, fireproof building to house all the artworks from around the world. That building was eventually converted into the Museum of Science and Industry.

### (As you go south on Lake Shore Drive)

As we go west here, you're going to see a golden statue that is a remnant of the fair. This is the statue of Columbia that was the focal point of the Court of Honor at the fair. This is not the original location.

### (Coming up Cornell Drive)

Coming up on your right is Wooded Island. The 15-acre island is a natural feature that Olmsted sculpted into a retreat from the bustle and spectacle of the fair. It still has 250-year-old bur oak trees. Wooded Island is now the site of a huge natural areas restoration project that removed invasive trees and planted about 600,000 native plants. The island is known as one of the top birding sites in Chicago.

At the time of the fair, the only exhibit on the island was a tea pavilion from Japan. After the fair, the tea pavilion served tea from the 1930s until World War II, when the proprietor was interned for being a Japanese-American.

The 2-acre Japanese garden deteriorated until it was restored in the 1970s through a sister city relationship between Chicago and Osaka, Japan. It's now undergoing a new restoration effort, but I'll let our guide give you the details on that.

There will be some walking to get to the garden, since some of the bridges are still under repair. So be prepared for that. We will have a guide from the Chicago Park District.