

CTPA June 13, 2012 Quarterly Meeting

1920s Chicago...Roaring Wheels of Change

Presented by Donna Primas CTG

Lawry's upstairs dining room

When CTPA President Donna Primas wrote to our scheduled speaker the morning of June 13 to reconfirm the evening's schedule, she learned he had to cancel due to a personal emergency. Hopefully we can reschedule Kris Habermehl, a CBS helicopter pilot, to speak about Chicago's maritime history, so that he can share his experiences viewing Chicago sites from on high.

After calling and getting no answer or negative responses from a few CTPA members (to see if they could "pitch hit" as a speaker), Primas decided the path of least resistance was to present information she had researched and presented with her genealogist sister, Caron Brennan.

Business Meeting

Although 62 people had RSVPed, only 44 showed up, perhaps because of the change in topic and speaker, which was emailed out to all CTPA members the day of the meeting.

CTPA President Donna Primas introduced new CTPA members in the audience and those who are CTPA Associate Members. She then reviewed dates for members who wish to take the Certified Tour Guide test this year. Please RSVP to Wayne Galasek wgalasek@aol.com if you wish to attend sessions or sign up to take the test.

Written test STUDY SESSIONS

(Harold Washington Library, Room TBA)

Monday, July 23, 6-8 pm

Monday, Aug 20, 3-5 pm

Written TEST dates:

Monday, Sept 10, 6-8 pm

Monday, Sept 17, 3-5 pm

Slide test STUDY SESSIONS

(Primas' condo theater, Wabash & Huron)

Monday, Oct 1, 3-5 pm

Monday, Oct 22, 6-8 pm

Slide TEST date:

Monday, Nov 12, 12-6 pm

Presentation - 1920s Chicago...Roaring Wheels of Change

The source of inspiration for Donna was how often she had been asked about Al Capone and gangsters since 1983 when she began giving Chicago highlights tours in Spanish and English. She never really liked taking people past vacant lots and talking about the "bad boys" of Chicago history. Rather she wanted to focus on still-standing elements that date to the 1920s while also focusing on positive things that occurred in this technology driven decade. For the genealogists who first heard the presentation, she included many photos of attire, both from her family albums and books.

In the absence of our scheduled speaker, Donna generously shared with us her power point presentation chocked full of images and information (about 100 slides!). Here is a brief summary of the topics she covered in great detail.

What do we think of when we hear "Chicago"? Some iconic images might come to mind, many of which were built during the 1920s: Wrigley Field (1914), the Chicago Theater, the Field Museum, Buckingham Fountain, the Bowman and the Spearman sculptures. But lamentably, most visitors think: AL CAPONE. So weigh the impact of Capone—who reigned for only six years, 1926-1931, and professed to be "just a businessman giving people what they want"—against what we can still see today!

As an aside, when first doing research for her presentation, Donna said that gangster tour guy **Wayne Galasek CTG** had told her that Public Enemy No. 1, John Dillinger, was a 1930s outlaw, not a gangster. That is not well understood by visitors, but true. Besides Dillinger falls outside the 1920s decade as he was shot and killed July 22, 1934. Donna also remembered that **CTPA member Enid Rieser** had spoken at a meeting about a true story and book that was the basis for the musical “Chicago”: *The Girls of Murder City* by Douglas Perry (University of Chicago Press). Donna read this source and many more. During her presentation, she referenced several excellent photo collections such as *Chicago Under Glass*, *Historic Photos of Chicago Crime* and *Chicago Days*.

Lifestyle changing, momentous things happened in the 1920s, so she then switched the lecture focus to the positive. Donna outlined that in the 1920s women earned the right to vote; King Tut’s tomb was unearthed, beginning an Egyptology craze; new words came into the lexicon in the 1920s – speakeasy, bootleg, flapper, jazz, brassiere, zipper, bath tub gin. Donna told us that one derivation of the term “flapper” referenced unbuckled galoshes which would flap.

She invited us to think about the built environment: skyscrapers in Art Deco mode and new technology and discoveries. Freud and psychoanalysis, the suffragettes marching and winning the vote, a boom in print media (and advertising!) and listening to live radio broadcasts in one’s home (interviews with Charles Lindbergh, transmission of the World Series and even hearing the “monkey trials” live, the battle between two great lawyers about teaching Darwinism in schools).

But look back for just a moment to what came before...pre-1920s America was a very classist society led by industrial might, the gilded age and robber barons. It was an era of conservative attire and very formal social behavior. Soon after 1901 and the end of the Victorian period, Chicagoans enjoyed film productions by Essanay Studios and suffered the Eastland Disaster (1915). But 1919 was the straw that broke the camel’s back: a really bad year: the repeal of the Child Labor Act, race riots, labor strikes, the Black Sox scandal, the 1918-19 influenza pandemic which took 5-10% of the world population – and the Volstead Act was passed!

People were ready for change and big changes took place in the 1920s. How is this relevant to genealogists or even tour guides? She showed us: 1920, opening of the Michigan Avenue Bridge and the Drake Hotel, 1924 the Allerton goes up (Tip Top Tap not illuminated until the 1940s), and soon after landfill provides Grant Park and the space to build the Field Museum.

Donna presented a detailed chronology of transportation leading up to and through the 1920s: how people went from walking, using horses, installing cable cars, electrifying trains and operating elevated trains. (She gave a nod to **CTPA member Greg Borzo’s** book *The Chicago “L”* as being helpful and full of images.)

Donna spoke about automobiles and their impact on life in the 1920s and about the new science of aeronautics and many records set. We heard about the basic Ford Model T (sold 1908-1927) being supplanted by a remodeled and lower priced Model A, which at \$300 in 1927 and with financing plans, was affordable to even the factory workers at Ford. We saw a map of the narrow gauge tunnels under Chicago produced in 1928, and learned how in 1926, Route 66 was begun. New mass-produced inventions included the electric iron, the radio, the vacuum cleaner and clothes washer—these became “necessities” as running water and electricity became standard in cities.

Some tables itemized the 1920s cost of living. “Gladstone Homes” were sold for about \$2,000 by catalogue giant Sears. A “forbidden highball” cost 15 cents before prohibition, 75 cents after. A streetcar ride was 10 cents. Teachers’ salaries were \$871 a year.

American began to buy on items on credit, enticed by advertising—something that continues today! In the 20s, people attended live vaudeville shows, watched silent movies and saw the first “talkies”—films with sound.

Donna also supplied many photos—personal and published elsewhere—to illustrate the trends and big differences in clothing styles from the 1910s to the 1920s. The actress Mary Pickford had her hair cut very short in a barber shop, and women across the nation imitated her “bob” haircut. By 1926 women in the workforce sported knee length skirts and bobbed hair, and smoked in public. Chicago was a center for jazz music 1917-1928 and Louis Armstrong played here. Flappers danced the Charleston in straight shifts and suffragettes marched wearing trousers.

In another aside, Donna related that her sister Caron Brennan, who has presented this topic with her, is the family genealogist who (thanks to the internet and around 2002) discovered that the DIEHL branch of their family tree has lived in Butzbach (outside Frankfurt, Germany) since the 15th century! She showed images of some early immigrant family members who farmed ice from the Vermillion River, drove an ice cream truck and lived on the West side of Chicago. Her grandmother was in several photos, dressed flapper style!

As a footnote, about the 1920s, gangsters and crime, Donna also discovered in her research that in 1929 a crime lab was established at Northwestern University and the first police academy of Chicago formed, giving preference to the Irish because they could speak English!

Judith Randall CTG
Co-Secretary CTPA



Donna Primas' grandmother, Hazel Diehl, above; Hazel & friends with kittens, above right; other family members in the 1920s, below.

