

Dave Clark “Show Us Your Neighborhood” Walking Tour of Route 66 (WEST) May 11, 2016

On a not warm Wednesday, May 11, I went on Dave Clark’s second walking tour of the downtown Route 66 environs. The first tour was held the week prior and walked eastbound. (*We do not have a write up of the East Bound tour.*) Today, our tour headed west. Sharon Sylvester, Bill Moss, Deborah Kerr and myself were in the group.

Dave Clark is a vast well of information, and he literally wrote the book on Route 66 – which some of us bought for \$20. The walk began on Jackson Boulevard mid-block where the Board of Trade classical female sculptures stand majestically, if old-fashioned-ly. We learned that this boulevard was historically free of streetcars, near several grand hotels and train stations (plural), in order to maintain the classy 1880s neighborhood character. Picture the LaSalle, the Grand Central, and the Dearborn Street stations (actually we can still picture the Dearborn), and the superb Great Northern Hotel (where the Federal Center stands today), and the Grand Pacific, managed by John Drake, son of the Drake Hotel Drake and head of the Republican Party of Illinois, the man who led the fight against the infamous Yerkes.

Jackson Boulevard ran west from Grant Park all the way to Douglas Park, with an asphalt surface from the 1880s. We walked on, entering the totally re-done interior of Burnham’s Insurance Exchange Building from the early 1900s, a “square donut” clad in white glazed terracotta, sporting a rebuilt cornice, visible from the boat tours on the south branch of the river. I was happily shocked to see that the atrium, once “builded over” had also been fantastically rebuilt, and now one looks up and up beyond a glass ceiling to views of the sky, exposing the white glazed brick square interior. Fantastic! The building, as Dave pointed out, was actually a “double donut” with a 1912 addition, but that lobby was not as fabulous.

Throughout the tour we learned things like the Rock Island Line took 66 hours to travel from Chicago to Los Angeles. The Berghoff was saved during construction of the Federal Center, something about a narrow walkway in back, a \$10,000 retainer to a ghost law firm in Pekin, Illinois (home to Senator Dirksen) and no need to take down the restaurant. We were shown a very plain brick building on the north side of Jackson that none of us would have identified as being designed by Henry Ives Cobb in 1899. On the northeast corner of Jackson and Franklin, in a terracotta and limestone building were the headquarters of the Northwestern Railway.

Easily a dozen buildings came down when Sears Tower went up. We sat for awhile in the beautiful garden at 311 South Wacker Drive to learn that in 1970, Grand Central Station (designed by Solon Beman) was torn down just in time to avoid being named a landmark! That was the period of time that part of Dearborn Station survived during the building of Dearborn Park along abandon rail tracks which covered nearly all the area south of the downtown. (On the boat tours we sometimes talk about how Chicago was built up and up in the Loop because we were surrounded on three sides by water and on the south edge by railroads.)

Along Franklin Street was a warehouse district, near the south branch of the river. At the river, we looked over the bridge to the south at a big, ugly concrete remnant of which I always said that Amtrak should remove or improve. Guess what? It’s the remnant of the 1915 Strauss jackknife bridge over the river, visible in all the old postcards but no longer standing. Strauss invented the Chicago bascule bridge and held patents on them; and went on to greater glory by designing the Golden Gate Bridge.

I knew we’d built a tunnel under the south branch of the river at Washington Street, and that on the Fourth of July in 1871, Chicago opened a tunnel under the main branch of the river at LaSalle Street (an entrance of which can still be seen north of the river), so people fleeing from the Great Chicago Fire could escape over-and-under the LaSalle Street bridge. But I did not know that Yerkes had built a tunnel for cable cars under Van Buren Street. Yerkes helped keep Jackson Boulevard free of horse cars (streetcars pulled on

tracks by horses). We learned that old stagecoaches were somehow re-used as omnibuses, often used to transport people from one train station to another. Railroads put the old stagecoaches out of business.

Dave talked about the demise of the Great Northern Hotel and other buildings which came down during construction of the Dearborn Street subway in the 1950s. To fill the space before anything substantial could be built, low-rise “taxpayer” buildings were erected. One had a bowling alley inside.

Walking further west, we admired the fancy white glazed terracotta of the 1915 Marshall & Fox building, once headquarters of the CB&Q Railway (Chicago Burlington & Quincy), on the southwest corner of Jackson and Clinton Street. We were passing Union Station when Dave mentioned that Lincoln could travel for free as a “red hat” (VIP designation) when he took the IC or Chicago & Alton Railway from Springfield to Chicago.

Some of the old buildings in this area west of Union Station housed manufacturing and some garment district sweatshops, where piecework was completed by immigrant women. At this point, we were facing the famed Lou Mitchell’s breakfast-and-lunch restaurant with the terrific neon sign. Dave said that George Mitchell had a lunch counter since 1923 in a manufacturing building across the street, and moved over to the south side of Jackson to build the restaurant, which sports a sign saying “since 1923,” when actually it came into being in the 1950s. The current owners bought Lou Mitchell’s in the 1980s.

On and on we walked, hearing about Haberdasher Square, once clothing manufacturers and now a condo. We saw the Wurlitzer Building where organs for movie theaters were made. Hart Schaffner Marx was in a building by Alschuler and moved across the street to new headquarters in the 1949 designed by Al Shaw. The company was super loyal to the employees and didn’t want them to have to move to the suburbs. Eventually the company did move, and now the ‘50s white glazed brick edifice is a condominium.

We turned north for a block along Jefferson. Dave talked about Old St. Pat’s and Ogden Avenue. There was a sign in 1963 showing both Routes 66 and 34 along West Adams Street. Dave rattled off numbers of once-existing highway numbers: 32, 14, 54, 41... Well we still have Highway 41. The 1909 Plan called for Ogden Avenue to extend to Lincoln Park. It once crossed high over Goose Island, ending at Chicago & Milwaukee Avenues. There’s still a little bit of Ogden there, at Exit 50A downtown-bound on the Kennedy.

Walking east on Adams, we encounter the site of the former Café Bohemia, west of Union Station. There, one could dine on exotic meats including elk, moose, buffalo, venison, and even lion and tiger. Dave said that when a new fresh hunter’s catch arrived, the restaurant would drape the carcass over the sign in front. Oh, dear. Apparently this was in the 1930s.

We walked through Union Station where much is blocked off, being remodeled by Amtrak. Finally! The famous stairs have been painstakingly replaced, and a video nearby shows on a loop in fast-forward how that work was done. This building emerged out of the Plan of Chicago as a square donut with an 8-story building around the big atrium. It once housed all the Fred Harvey Company concessions, including every amenable service besides the usual barber shop, newspaper stand, drug store, lunchroom, etc.

Our tour ended at the stairwell made famous by the scene in the movie, “The Untouchables,” where Kevin Costner and Andy Garcia saved the world and a baby in a bouncing baby carriage from the bad guys.

Congratulations to Dave Clark for a terrific tour. I wish more people had joined him. I could see this being done again in the winter when we’re not so busy with work.

Respectfully submitted,
Judith Randall, CTPA Co-Secretary