

# Chicago

## *City of Broad Shoulders*

September 25 - 28, 2011

My brother Brad and I played a lot of baseball when we were kids. Our "Field of Dreams" was a grassy farmyard with a granary as a backstop. Brad had a pitching arm, and I was usually the catcher on our two-man team.

I never deluded myself enough to think I could have made the big leagues, but Brad had just enough talent to make dreaming about it possible. He went on to play senior baseball and fastball for local leagues and still follows the game.

We decided to take a late September trip to Chicago to see the Blue Jays play the White Sox in one of the last games of the season.



Take me out to the ball game,  
Take me out with the crowd,  
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,  
I don't care if I ever get back.  
Let me root, root, root for the home team,  
If they don't win it's a shame,  
For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,  
At the old ball game.

*Take Me Out to the Ball Game* – Jack Norworth and Albert Von Tilzer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4-gsdLSSQ0>

# Chicago

## *The Windy City*



Before this trip, you could have put everything I knew about Chicago into a very small space. I still don't know much, but I did learn some things in the past few days:

- The town has a hundred names. The Windy City and City of Broad Shoulders are the most popular, but it has some lesser-known monikers:
  - Paris on the Prairie
  - The Miami of Canada (attributed to Mr. Burns on the Simpsons)
  - The Big Onion, and my personal favourite.
  - Hog Butcher for the World
- I knew President Obama was from Chicago. I now know that, as a young lawyer, he had an office in downtown Chicago and that he met a banker named Michelle Robinson, across the street from his office. And the rest is history.
- I also knew Oprah was from Chicago, and that's still the extent of my knowledge about her, other than that she owns some expensive real estate downtown.
- Chicago had gangsters. I knew that, but Brad and I took an "Untouchables" tour and learned a lot more, like:

- Prohibition happened because women got the vote. Savvy politicians earned the support of these new voters by running on a Prohibitionist platform and, in 1920, the country went dry.



- Not for long. Nobody quit drinking; they just quit doing it legally. Enterprising young men like Bugs Moran, Diamond Jim Torrio and Al Capone saw to it that nobody went thirsty.
- There was a lot of money in booze and soon the bad guys had more than the good guys, so they ran amuck for a few years. The gangsters ran the police and the politicians; the only opposition they had was other bad guys. A lot of killing and mayhem ensued until the citizens had had enough and, in 1933, the same citizens who voted for Prohibition, voted overwhelmingly to end "The Noble Experiment".



- I learned where the term "spike your drink" comes from. During prohibition, non-alcohol drinks were injected with alcohol through a hole in the barrel made with a spike.
- I learned that it is not necessary to have attended grammar classes to function as a gangster: *"I ain't got nothin' to do wit you Capone, till the day I stand over your head wit a pistol"* - Earl "Hymie" Weiss

- - Gangsters don't know much about geography: *"I don't even know what street Canada is on".* - Al Capone



- Gangsters have a flair for the obvious: *"Why do I rob banks? Because that is where the money is."* – John Dillinger



# Chicago

## Second City



Blues came to Chicago with the Great Migration of Black people from the southern states in the early 20th century. They adapted Delta Blues into their own form of music and called it "*Chicago Blues*".

Brad and I decided that a gritty little club around the corner from our hotel called "*Blue Chicago*" might be a good place to find *Chicago Blues* (boys from Saskatchewan don't just use their heads for hat racks). Astoundingly, they were in fact playing *Chicago Blues* at *Blue Chicago*.

The venue was exactly what I expected a Blues club to be. It was in an old - really old - three-story brick building, between an alley and a vacant restaurant. There was a partially lit neon sign hanging off the front, and a folding fire escape trailing down the alley side. A hand-painted cardboard sign propped on the door told us that *Blue Chicago* opened at 8:00; which it was.

What little light made it through the grimy street-side windows never reached much past our first three steps. A few dim light bulbs hanging over the bar helped us find some stools and a short plywood counter fastened to one wall.

A vertically challenged but friendly waitress brought us a couple of Miller High Life and we settled in for an authentic Chicago experience.



The band was still setting up, so we had a chance to survey the place. The inside looked a lot like the outside; old, brick and not too shiny. The art on the walls consisted of beer advertising posters, dusty *Blue Chicago* t-shirts for sale and pictures of Blues artists. I recognized Muddy Waters and Aretha Franklin, but the rest weren't familiar.

I was expecting 95% black folks in the audience but about half the patrons, and two of the band members, were white. Growing up, mine and Brad's only exposure to black people was Aunt Jemima on the pancake syrup bottle; being in the company of black people is still a novelty. The atmosphere at *Blue Chicago* was decidedly relaxed and soon, the only colour that mattered was **Blue**.

Peaches Staten and her Blues Band is described in her web site as "*A natural born showgirl with a fatback soul grit voice that makes you want more and more every time you listen to her*". I had no idea what "*fatback soul grit*" was supposed to sound like, but we heard it in songs like; *Long Distance Phone Call* and *Steal My Baby's Loving*.

The audience enjoyed it. They were an eclectic group of people of mixed race, mixed drinks, and mixed messages. The couple at the counter ahead of us personified the entire crowd. He was white, about 60 or 65, she was black and about half his age. They were dressed in flashy Blues fashions, obviously enjoying the music and each other.



Bet your bottom dollar you lose the blues in Chicago

*Chicago* - Frank Sinatra

# Chicago

## *The City that Works*

The town is sports crazy - If there were no team jerseys, half the population of Chicago would be naked.



The Chicago Black Hawks were my favourite hockey team when I was a kid; but that was a long time ago, when there were only six teams. I never saw Stan Mikita while we were in Chicago; he is probably playing shuffleboard at some retirement home by now.



Barmaid:

*"I took my husband to a ballgame; He isn't much of a sports fan. He asked a bunch of dumb questions like; "what does that buzzer mean?" I told him every time that buzzer rings it means "Shut the fuck up, go buy a foam finger, and let me watch the game." True story.*

The game on Monday night was a little disappointing, until the last inning. The Jays were down 4:1. Then they had a big rally in the ninth, got two runs and loaded the bases with Jose Bautista up to bat.



He struck out - it made for a "*Casey at the Bat*" finish.

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright,  
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,  
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout,  
But there is no joy in Mudville – mighty Casey has struck out.*

From "*Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic Sung in the Year 1888*" by Ernest Thayer



# *Chicago*

## *My Kind of Town*

Brad and I found some joy in Mudville. We had a Chicago Deep Dish Pizza just before we left. Hopefully the memories of Chicago will last longer than the heartburn.

We travel well together, probably because of all those hours playing ball. Next time Brad and I get together I think I will find my old glove.

