

**HOME**  
  
and  
  
**The Chicgo Bungalow**

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# Home

I moved into a slightly oversize Chicago bungalow built in 1914 on the Northwest side of Chicago, called Portage Park. (Supposedly this is where the Indians made their portage from the north branch of the Chicago river to the Des Plaines, on their way West.) About the only other point of distinction this bungalow neighborhood had, was that Abraham Lincoln had stayed in the Dickinson tavern which was once across the alley. My ten and a half year old brother, my parents, and a housekeeper had moved in about ten years earlier.

My father always wanted to make things better. (He was a classy guy) but he didn't much believe in mortgages. So my Mother never had the center hall colonial in the suburbs that she wanted and that her sister Martha lived in.. My Dad was an almost compulsive remodeler, he had already replaced the coal fired, octopus, gravity, hot air furnace with a gas fired, automatic, thermostat controlled boiler. This meant that no one had to go down early, in a cold house, before breakfast anymore, to add coal to the furnace. This also allowed a finished basement with a mahogany bar from a defunct tavern and various marble embellishments from a foreclosed Bank that was being remodeled into a Woolworth Dime store. The kitchen had been remodeled and a back porch had been enclosed as a breakfast / sitting room. (I guess an early family room.) The backyard had a vegetable garden and a very graceful pergola covered sitting area that hid the garage that was entered from off of the alley

Refurnishing had already started: changing from a wicker sunroom and sort of Arts and Craft living room and dinning room. Colorful Chinese rugs were said to have been bought for my arrival. (Which I still have.) A Duncan Phife dining room and a "french" living room soon followed. No notice was made of the contrast with the heavy dark oak surrounding of the Arts and Craft interior, with the more delicate new furnishings.

All went well and I enjoyed the first eight months of my stay, until the day before Christmas. My Mother went to the attic to find the last of the Christmas decorations. Her flashlight failed so she used some matches . Sparks caught some of the paper boxes and soon half the rear roof was on fire.

I was being bathed at the time and the housekeeper took me to a neighbor she was friendly with, but she didn't tell anyone. There was an anxious time until we were found later. Well the fire only burned off half of the back part of the roof and a large tarp covered it. We all lived in the basement for a couple of months for fear the water soaked plaster ceilings might fall. This, however, was my Father's golden opportunity to rebuild. The new rear roof was built in a gambrel shape that allowed a master bedroom on the second floor. The second floor now consisted of my brother's room to the front and my parent's in the back. My room was the open playroom in the middle with the stairway and which the others opened off of .(I always knew when my bother sneaked in after a teenage date.) A first floor bedroom was made into a siting room. I didn't get a room of my own until my brother moved out to live with his teen age love from down the street after a large celebration.

About five years went by, the house was repaired and completely refurnished. My Father thought we should have a summer weekend place in the country. He bought a 20 acre vegetable and chicken farm, in the area generally called Barrington. There were the tenant's house and a small house for our use. My brother and I spent some weekends there but my Mother mostly avoided the coal fired stove and other components of country living.

(Recently I tried to find the site of the ill fated summer home in what I thought might be a tony part of Barrington. I found it just South of a row of McMansions on a well paved street in Deer Park and just North of similar housing in Lake Zurich. The Mansions and the pavement stopped and a single lane rutted, gravel road, about one thousand feet long made two right angle turns and there it was, unwanted my either town. The somewhat scruffy farm looked about the same as it had sixty years before, without city sewers or water.)

Since the Farm wasn't a success, it was sold. We spent the next summers in a rented lakefront house in Wisconsin. My Mother thought that this was too far for visitors. Next came a similar rented summer home in north Lake county. My Father wanted something permanent and after a good bit of searching he found it. I would go with him on some of his searches. I realized, later, if he didn't walk in the door and find a view of the Lake through the house he would cross it off the list

The new Lake house was on a couple lakefront acres across the lake from the Yacht Club.

The shingle style house was built in 1892. Originally, before automobiles, it was reached by a

steam powered excursion boat that went from the train station, a couple of miles away, to the house's boat dock. The boat also sold boat rides to city people out for a ride around the lakes.

Beyond the pillared iron gates there was a three hundred foot, red maple lined, concrete, circular drive to the main house. It also had huge oak trees, a rose garden, a perennial garden, a vegetable garden, and rolling lawns. The house had been renovated, which meant it now had indoor plumbing and electricity. In addition the dark oak beadboard paneled walls & ceilings had been covered over and were now painted in soft pastels. The house was furnished in new, maple, "early American" furniture, then just becoming popular. Quickly a new St Charles white steel kitchen, with black countertops was installed and several new bay windows were added to lighten the interior. A terrace was added. This was only the beginning of almost yearly additions. Years were spent trying to find the right historic colors for the white painted house. Flower gardens were changed almost every year. Most of all Uncle Mike, aunt Martha's husband, said he liked it better that their center hall colonial. The summers soon became a five month stay

One of the best parts was the coach house where a teenage boy could go to live. (Although he always showed up for meals.) This provided the first project for a budding architect. Walls were removed, a white floor and some primary colored wall panels defined the open interior. A great place to bring friends in teen desired privacy. Of course teenage drinking took place but this was before drug use. Summer weekend dances at the Yacht Club provided opportunities for young love.

Unfortunately my Dad didn't return from the Woodstock hospital and he left a great void in our lives. My Mother said we should sell and move back to the Chicago bungalow for the whole year, including the summer. She thought life would be much simpler. Indeed it was and noisy and boring as well. The small park across the street which was a peaceful place of beauty in the winter, was filled in the summer with boys playing baseball and making all sorts of noise. (This was in the days when air conditioners were only in the bedrooms.)

While I had been away on business (College and the Army.) The bungalow had been redecorated in Dorothy Draper style ( a well published decorator at the time.) Large cabbage rose slipcovers, dark green walls and bright white woodwork were installed. It was than up to the current fashion.

After about three or four months of summer in the bungalow, my Mother decided she couldn't stand it and wanted to move to a quiet suburb. Thus began a search for a building site. After a few months we found a possible site but it turned out to be not one but two lots both at almost double the budget, next a beautiful ravine lot near Lake Michigan but it was a subdivision of a large estate and the three story estate house sat on a hill loaming over what would be a single story flat roofed house.

Of course parents don't spend what today is about one hundred and fifty thousand on their kid's education without wanting at least some payback. So the architect was selected. We found two wooded acres in Bannockburn after about a year of searching. I went out to survey the new property after signing the contract I was greeted by my future next door neighbor. A

nice looking guy about six years older than me. He had built his red brick ranch house four years earlier. He explained that he originally had bought a lot to build on in another town and went out to see it before construction began on his house. He found that a "flat top" (his name for optimistic, Bauhaus influenced, mid century modernism) was under construction

next door, so he immediately sold the lot and bought and built on the lot next door to mine.

Only to find a few months later, to his despair, that a flattop was being built on the other side of him., and was a blight to the neighborhood. He didn't find any comfort in that ~~the~~ a well known architect designed the house, & cost about twice what his ranch house did. I ~~told~~ him, I considered it a gem. I asked him what he thought of the Frank Lloyd Wright designed house, then under construction, two blocks away. (The last house built while Wright was alive.) He said it was probably alright since it was at the end of a private lane, secluded, treed, and probably few people would see it. This was my welcome to the conservative views of some of the North Shore. Having recently studied with Mies van der Rohe and at the University of Chicago this really did not sit very well.

Well life went on. After a busy five months of models, drawing, renderings and construction drawings, and construction estimates, a building permit was obtained after pleas and threats of litigation. A permit was issued because the Village Board said the house site was heavily treed, with a promise of front screening, and at the end of the road, so hopefully few would see it. Again a welcome to the neighborhood.

Thus ended a forty year chapter of in, around, and about Chicago bungalow life

## **Part two**

### **The Chicago Bungalow**

The Chicago Bungalow and its companion two flat cover about a third of Chicago's residential area. This "bungalow belt" provides safe, comfortable, housing to a large part of the city's middle class. There one can live in an individual house were one is his own landlord. One can enjoy the privacy and even cut his own grass. Built from about 1900 to 1940, the bungalow belt stretches from Lake Michigan on the South in a wide arch around the early city, almost to the west city limits, and continues, to reach Lake Michigan on the north side of the city. But in many ways it is a poor use of land, has dark, narrow 50 foot long spaces between each dwelling, dark rooms on the sides, and is only six feet from the next house. The low ceilings on the second floor bedrooms are second rate.. The backyard is small because a one story house occupies twice the land that a two story house would. Almost 10% of the lot area is lost to unusable space To see how it came about we should look back how cities were planned and grew in the nineteenth century and how people lived

In London, the stone trimmed, red brick Georgian row house provided housing for the middle and upper classes in a row house between two common party walls. The row houses were typically twenty feet wide and four stories high with a basement halfway above



the ground. The kitchen was reached by a narrow outside stair parallel to the front of the house. The first floor had a small parlor and the dinning room. The second, main floor, typically had a fourteen by eighteen foot drawing or living room with a ten foot two inch high ceiling and a smaller study. The third floor had the master bedroom and a second bedroom. Children slept in the dormered attic. Servants, parents, young and older children all had privacy on their individual floors. They would only meet on the stairway. The privacy so desired by proper British was assured. Every room including the dinning room had only one door, The door had the door knob closest to the corner of the room and was hinged away from the corner. This meant a door would have to be opened more than ninety degrees before you could see into the room.

This was not at all the way the Parisian French lived in their spacious, flowing one floor apartments. There were pairs of doors between the living room, master bedroom and dining room. (The master bedroom was sometime used as a ladies sitting room.) The double bed was parallel to the wall so it could be used as a couch. Typically there were four floors of apartment above a commercial first floor and the servants, bohemians and Mimi (from Puccini's *La Boheme*) lived in the dormered sixth floor under the eaves.. No wonder the Parisians liked to go out for walks along the grand boulevards after dinner. But then they were French and not Anglo Saxon.

New York's Manhattan island was laid out in the early nineteenth century for row houses, typical of eighteenth century London. From just north of the City Hall, 60 foot wide east-

west streets were laid out 264 feet apart (1/20th of a mile.) This extended to the northern top of the island. 264 feet minus a 60 foot street divided by a lot on each side of the block gives a lot depth of 102 feet. The individual lots were 20' by 102'. This easily accommodated a city of party wall row houses. There are no alleys for garbage collection (and nowhere to park the cars.) The wider north south streets also had 10 , 20' x 100' lots. The lots on these streets were often developed for grander houses, as on Fifth Avenue, or taller apartment buildings. The great exception was the central park of almost 100 acres. If you wanted a free standing house in Manhattan, you had to buy several lots and be quite rich.

The original layout of Chicago had ten acre blocks (660' x 660', 1/8th of a mile ) divided by a street down the middle. These side streets ran either north-south or east-west and were not as ordered as Manhattan. The Chicago block was thus 330 feet by 660 feet. This followed the grid said to have been laid out by Thomas Jefferson for the settlement of the United States west of the Rockies. (You can see this grid of half mile squares on most of the farmland of the Midwest from an airplane window.) This grid of 1/8 mile blocks holds true for most of the city except in the oldest part of Chicago from Madison to Roosevelt, Roosevelt to 22<sup>nd</sup>, and 22<sup>nd</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>. Thus almost all main streets are 1/2 mile apart and contain four full blocks each way. The Main streets have public transportation on them and no house is more than fifteen hundred feet from public transportation. Several diagonal streets (often original Indian trails) were to provide quicker access throughout the city.

The individual lots in the original part of Chicago were laid out as twenty five feet wide by

one hundred twenty five feet deep. This is more than fifty percent larger than a typical Manhattan lot. A normal block of five acres is 330' x 660' minus a 60' street and minus a 20' alley through the middle. This left a total of two hundred and fifty feet divided by the alley and a 125 feet depth to each lot. The original Chicago block division with a twenty foot alley solved the garbage collection problem, provided stables, and later access to a garage behind each house. This largely solved the later car parking problem. Parking remained unsolved in older cities. In fancy neighborhoods like Jackson Highlands or Saguanash there are no alleys because the lots are wide enough for a side driveway from the street to the garage.

On a twenty five foot lot in the original part of the city, one could build a very elegant party wall house of twelve or more rooms on this sized lot. Dearborn Parkway, State Parkway and Astor Street clearly attest to how handsome a house could be on this sized lot. By the nature of a required fire proof party wall the walls had to be brick and the front and back brick and stone. So this was not an inexpensive house. What if you wanted a individual free standing house? The side yard on a twenty five foot lot is three feet on each side. Minus the thickness of the walls you are left with a width of seventeen feet. It's unreasonable to divide the seventeen foot width into two rooms so a two story house was about the only choice. The house had to be built of brick due to an ordinance passed soon after the 1871 fire calling for the exterior of all houses to be built of incombustible material. When you see wood houses in Chicago they were built before the 1898 annexation of towns surrounding the original city.

In 1898 Chicago annexed the surrounding towns and more than doubled the size of the city. ( Hyde Park, Jefferson, and Lakeview were among them.) From Western Avenue west, lots were laid out with 30 foot wide lots. Thus a free standing one story house was now possible. Although the classic revival begun with the 1893 Columbia Exhibition, the style, (so well seen in the great house we are in tonight) it was eclipsed by the Arts and Craft and Shingle style for more modest homes. This is best seen in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Water Burley Griffin and Purcell and Elmslie and others. So what was envisioned as a low, ground hugging, broad eaved house on a large property was compressed into the Chicago bungalow. The low ground hugging wasn't possible because Chicago sewers are little more than five feet below the street and basements had to be halfway above ground. Thus there are seven steps up to every house. (The sewers are lower in the suburbs and houses can be lower to the ground.)

The typical bungalow is 24 feet wide and has a dining room and bedroom in the 24 feet width as well as a kitchen and second bedroom. Circulation is usually from a small entrance hall through the living room and dining room. The bath room and stair are between the bedrooms. Curiously the pantry is usually behind a bedroom and blocks a bedroom from having light from the backyard. Usually a back porch was enlarged over time into an enclosed room. To keep the appearance of the house low, the second floor often had a low pitched roof no more than six feet high in the center.. There was a small dormer in the front. The overhang was three feet on the front where the house was twenty two feet wide and two feet on the sides and only two feet from the next house.

Some bungalows were larger. My parent's bungalow was on a wider lot and had an octagonal bay in front with art glass windows, bay windows that enlarged the dining room and a bedroom by four feet, a higher tiled roof and two large gables on the sides that provided cross ventilation to the second floor, center room. There was also an oak paneled dining room with a plate rail and built in buffet. The living room had a red brick fireplace with built in book cases alongside and two art glass windows above.

Beginning in the twenties the style changed to a modified English Tudor. This meant a gable on the front with a higher pitched roof and smaller overhangs. This gave more light to the sides of the first floor and a higher ceiling for the second floor bedrooms. Almost Chicago's newer areas after 1898 were filled with iconic Chicago bungalows by 1940.

After the Second World War the suburban ranch house took over as a new favored life style.