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Back in that time – Chicago 1948

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 10/28/2009 –9:66 am.

If you're at all a fan of Chicago history, I'm sure you know the frustration.

You read about Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette arriving in this area in 1674, and you wonder how it looked, how the landscape rolled, where there were trees and where prairies --- the feel of the scene.

Or you look at the Plan of Chicago and ruminate about walking down the city's sidewalks back in 1909 before any of that document's proposals became reality.

Sure, there are photos, but they're isolated shots --- a corner, a bridge, a building. But what would it have been like, for instance, to stroll with Daniel Burnham, the principal author of the Plan, from Michigan Avenue to Wells Street along Randolph Street?

That's why a quaint 10-minute video that popped up recently on YouTube is so delightful.



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ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick T. Reardon is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

It's called "Chicago, the Beautiful," and it was made in 1948 as one of a series of travelogues, "James A. FitzPatrick's Traveltalks, 'The Voice of the Globe.'" (Lest anyone miss the point, the title is followed by a statement that the film is "Produced and Narrated by James A. FitzPatrick, 'The Voice of the Globe.'")

Sixty-one years later

Through FitzPatrick's camera, we're able today --- 61 years later --- to ride through the 1948 Loop, and up and down Lake Shore Drive, and along the Chicago River. We can live for a few minutes back in that time when men wore fedoras and thick-bodied autos plied the roads.



We can look across Grant Park at the wall of buildings along Michigan Avenue. It's a scene that's at once familiar and strange. There's the 40-story Carbide and Carbon Building at 230 N. Michigan, now the home of the Hard Rock Hotel Chicago. And the needle-like, 42-story Mather Tower at 75 E. Wacker Dr. And Tribune Tower (34 stories) and the Wrigley Building (27 stories).

But there are gaps in the skyline that we know will later be filled in by soaring Trump Tower Chicago, the column-like Aon Center, Two Prudential Plaza, the NBC Tower and the red CNA Plaza.

Still, the LaSalle Street canyon with the looming Board of Trade building looks pretty much the same in the film as it does today. So do the el stations at each end of Randolph Street.

Soldier Field is just as it is now --- except for the spaceship that's been parked inside the stadium bowl since 2003.

The film shows us a city we know --- sort of. It's like looking at the photo of a teenaged John McCain or Barack Obama.

Wide-eyed

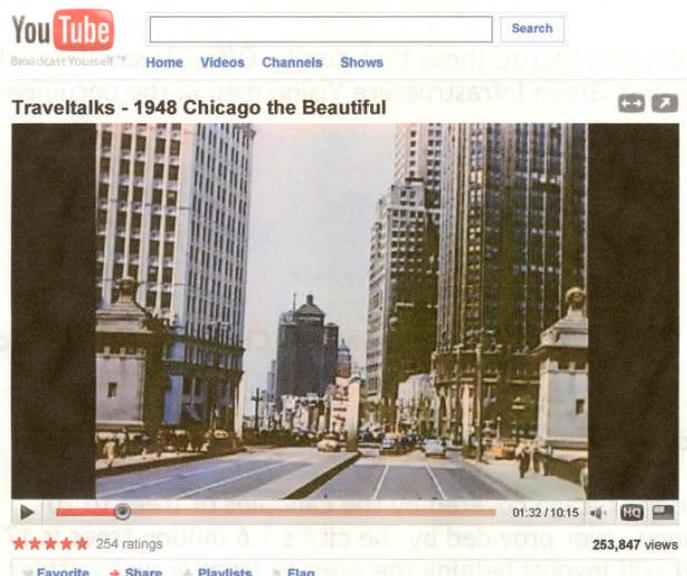
Compared to the slick, meaty documentaries of today, "Chicago, the Beautiful" is terribly quaint. It's wide-eyed and boosterish. FitzPatrick is no Michael Moore.

Yet, that's part of its allure. It captures the feel of the optimistic late 1940s when no one felt much need to mutter discouraging words. There'd been enough of those during the Depression and World War II.

So the travelogue opens:

"This is Chicago, queen of the Great Lakes and wonder city of the Middle West where American enterprise and progressive people have combined to build, in less than a century, the second largest metropolis in North America. A panorama of its picturesque skyline fronting Michigan Avenue reveals that the city fathers built with an eye for practical stability as well as for beauty and design."

This is a fascinating film to watch during the 100th anniversary of the Plan of Chicago because so much of what FitzPatrick shows and talks about is the result of that document --- one that surely had "an eye for practical stability as well as for beauty and design."



Here's his camera crossing over the Michigan Avenue bridge heading into the Near North Side --- a bridge that was proposed in the Plan and that made possible development of the city's modern shopping mecca, the Magnificent Mile.

Here he's showing us the North Side lakefront and beaches, looking as elegant and inviting as a Caribbean resort.

Here, again and again, are scenes of Grant Park.

The Plan's impact

In less than four decades, the Burnham Plan had put its imprint on the downtown and lakefront. And, although not shown in the film, far beyond as well --- in the widening of many city streets, in the creation of the Cook County Forest Preserve District.

And we still live with those results of the Plan, enjoying them, benefiting from them.

Yet, the world has moved on since FitzPatrick made his film.

At one point, he rhapsodizes about State Street, noting that it "is regarded as the world's most concentrated shopping center." Of course, the words "shopping center" bring up another image today --- of suburban malls where scores of stores are grouped together, surrounded by acres of parking.

Those malls killed State Street as a major shopping area, and that's a reminder that modern life evolves. And that we have a hand in that evolution.

Those malls were able to work so well, in large part, because the highway system was planned and built, permitting the growth of the car culture. The decision to create these new roadways made possible the explosion of suburban subdivisions and sprawl.

Our decisions and plans

The plans that Burnham and his colleagues made in 1909 helped create the world of 1948 and 2009.



In like manner, the plans that the leaders of post-war America and Chicago made helped create the world of today and tomorrow.

The plans we make today will help create the future.

Perhaps, in 2050, some Chicagoans will watch a travelogue of Chicago in 2009. They'll see how we live today. And they'll know how their world is similar and different.

In many ways, they'll be living with the results of our decisions and plans.