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LET'S GO TO CHICAGO

After Wrigley Field, beyond the Sears Tower and off Michigan Avenue ...

120 Windy City neighborhoods are waiting to be discovered

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tom Uhlenbrock ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May 6, 2007 Section: Explore | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Edition: Fourth Edition Page T1 |
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Al Walavich saved the best for last on a walking tour of Graceland Cemetery, where Chicago's royalty is buried.

"You want to see my favorite inscription?" he asked, leading the way to a modest flat monument in a crowded piece of ground.

The man beneath was a mere 50 years old when he passed away in 2005. Neatly carved in his granite marker was this:

"Couldn't wait for the Cubs to win it."

Big cities like Chicago are full of such gems, but a visitor can't find them unless a friendly native leads the way.

That's the gist behind Chicago Neighborhood Tours, a creation of the city's tourism division. Visitors sign up and take a guided visit by bus and on foot to neighborhoods like Historic Bronzeville, Hyde Park, Little Italy or Ukrainian Village.

A companion program offers special interest tours. You can visit the city's magnificent churches, eat your way through ethnic communities



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or follow Walavich through the tombstones and see where the McCormicks and the Medills, the Palmers and the Pullmans were entombed in digs worthy of the pharaohs.

Not everybody resting in peace in Graceland was famous. Walavich takes visitors to see the markers of Zoroaster Culver and Thusnelda Wagner Reubold just because he likes their names. "Sounds like some wild Valkyrie," he said of Thusnelda.

"Does that design look familiar?" he asked of a triangular shape engraved on a marker for two men. "Yep, the Star Trek symbol. These guys were Trekkies."

Patricia Sullivan, manager of the tours program, said it started a decade ago with four tours, and now has 23. Last year, some 3,500 people took the tours. Neighborhood tours last four hours, with a stop for refreshments. It costs \$25 for an adult, \$20 for seniors and children 8 through 18. Special interest tours are a little longer with lunch and are \$50 and \$45.

The tours leave at 10 a.m. on Saturdays, year-round, from the Chicago Cultural Center, at Randolph Street and Michigan Avenue. To make reservations, call 1-312-742-1190, or visit www.chicagonighborhoodtours.com. Group tours also are available.

"People are familiar with North Michigan Avenue and The Loop," Sullivan said. "But the city is made up of 77 community areas with 120 neighborhoods. We try to look at the ethnic neighborhoods or those with historical interest."

The most popular tours, like the churches and the "taste of the neighborhoods," fill up fast. The tours had been offered only on Saturdays, but this year the program has added "summertime sampler tours" on Thursdays, May 31 through Aug. 30.

"We do three neighborhoods in three hours on the motor coach for \$20 - no refreshments, no lunch," Sullivan said. She added that the special-interest tours give a more in-depth look than the neighborhood tours.

"We do Greek Chicago, led by a couple active in the Greek community," she said. "We learn how and why the Greeks came to Chicago, visit a Greek church, the Hellenic Museum, have a Greek lunch - it's always a hot meal. For the special interest historic cemeteries tours, we bring a box lunch and have a picnic in the cemetery."

Walavich, who gave me an abbreviated cemetery tour, had one final surprise: "If you like, I'll take you over to my grave," he said.

After a short walk through the monuments, he turned and said, "You're almost standing on my head."

Sure enough, the marker at my feet said "Son, Albert R. Walavich, May 29, 1948." The departing date was blank.

"My mother bought it for me," Walavich said. "Doesn't bother me any. At least I know where I'm going."

Bucktown's for goats

The tours rotate neighborhoods, and the motor coach was heading to the side-by-side historic communities of Bucktown and Wicker Park during my weekend visit. I hopped aboard. **Marshall Jacobson** was the local guide and James was the driver who negotiated the big bus through the little streets.

Jacobson explained that Bucktown was populated by Polish immigrants who flooded into Chicago in the 1830s and settled at the outskirts of the city. "A buck was a male goat, and this was a farming area," he said. "They used to call it the 'goat prairie,' and that's how Bucktown got its name."

There were 63 Polish churches in the city, Jacobson said, and our first stop was at St. Hedwig's Church, which celebrated its first Mass on Dec. 8, 1888. The church's congregation was split, literally, by an expressway that cut through the neighborhood in 1960.

"The building of that highway cut off a lot of the Poles, who decided to move," Jacobson said. "When the church first opened there were 1,400 families, mostly Polish. Now there's a little bit of everything. The whole nature of the church has changed."

Although the Polish influence was evident in names like Pulaski Park and Gogolinsk-Trofimuk Funeral Home, the neighborhood has evolved over the years. By the time we stopped for pizza at a restaurant on funky Damen Avenue, the city blocks were filled by a lively mix of restaurants, nightclubs and young residents in high-top orange tennis shoes and spiked hair the same color.

At Wicker Park, we took a stroll through the shaded streets lined by vintage mansions. "Mike Royko, Studs Terkel, the writer Nelson Algren lived in Wicker Park," Jacobson said. "They called this street 'beer barrel avenue' because a lot of the beer barons lived here."

Many of the homes had new owners who were restoring them to their former glory. Jacobson explained the eclectic mix of architectural elements: "Most of these houses were not designed by architects. The owners used catalogs and put together a house. In the 1970s, you could come down here and buy one of these old mansions for \$25,000."

A speakeasy with a cannon

Jacobson gave us the scoop on another of Chicago's little gems as we walked by a mansion restored to its Victorian elegance - with a huge white canon sitting in the front yard.

"This house was once a speakeasy," he said. "Then it became an American Legion post, and the current owner decided to keep the cannon on the lawn."

ONLINE • Hear and see more about Tom's trip to the Windy City at www.stltoday.com/travel.

PHOTO - A pair of 50-foot-high glass towers that have a revolving display of Chicago faces is among the public art at Millennium Park. Photo by Tom Uhlenbrock Post-Dispatch

PHOTO - The owners of a mansion in Wicker Park have kept the cannon that decorated the lawn when the home was an American Legion post. Photo by Tom Uhlenbrock Post-Dispatch

PHOTO - Garfield Park Conservatory features "Niki in the Garden," a display of

monumental outdoor sculptures by Niki de Saint Phalle. Photo by Tom Uhlenbrock Post-Dispatch

PHOTO - Tour guide Al Walavich shows off one of the unusual grave monuments at

Graceland Cemetery. Photo by Tom Uhlenbrock Post-Dispatch

PHOTO - Although he was a prominent architect, Louis Henri Sullivan was broke when he died. Fellow architects donated money for his marker. Photo by Tom Uhlenbrock Post-Dispatch

MAP - ON TOUR IN THE WINDY CITY

www.chicagoneighborhoodtours.com

PHOTO - Rediscover Chi-Town

There's lots more after Wrigley Field, beyond the Sears Tower and off Michigan Avenue. (News, A1 refer photo.)

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