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Over course of 130 years, area comes full circle

By Simone Orendain
Correspondant

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Chicago's original Gold Coast was not where it is now on the city's north side. It was located in what is currently known as the near south side that includes the South Loop, where Columbia's campus is located.

The past 130 years in the South Loop have seen affluent living, the flight of the rich, slum living, perpetual vice, a railroad boom, abandonment, eventual development and another economic boom all set in a climate of racial tension.

The development of Chicago started in the city's near south side.

In 1836, the year before Chicago was incorporated as a city, the Clarke House was built in the area of 16th Street and Michigan Avenue.

Henry B. Clarke, a New York contractor who came to Chicago, built the city's oldest house for his family of five. Set in a patch of log cabin homes, the Clarke House was unique for its Greek Revival structure. It was a precursor to the mansions that would be built in the Prairie Avenue district following the Chicago Fire of 1871. The Clarke House was untouched by the fire.

John Chimes bought Clarke House in 1872 and moved it to the 4500 block of south Wabash Avenue. One hundred and five years later, the house was bought by the city and moved, via an involved engineering maneuver that made it appear to float above the "L" tracks, to 1827 S. Indiana Ave. where it stands today.

In the 1870s, prominent businessmen including Marshall Field, George Pullman and John Glessner lived along Prairie Avenue near 18th Street. This area was Chicago's original Gold Coast.

But these families began to leave their tree-lined, well-maintained avenue when the railroad and the industrial boom began in the late 1800s. By the 1920s there were no wealthy white families on Prairie.

Rooming houses, and later tenements, occupied by immigrants sprung up near the Prairie district.

Printing House Row, known today as Printer's Row, became a booming center for printing and publishing in the 1880s. These presses spanned three blocks along south Dearborn Street. The Row was conveniently located near the Dearborn Railroad Station.

While the old Gold Coast housed affluent white families in the late 1800's, the area immediately northwest and west of 18th Street was home to some of Chicago's most unsavory characters.

"It was the vice district of the city," said Dominic Pacyga, professor of urban history at Columbia and author of Chicago City of Neighborhoods, and Chicago: A Historical Guide to the Neighborhoods, the Loop and the South.

See what others have said.

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The First Ward stretched south of the Loop from Van Buren to 22nd Streets west of Michigan Avenue to the Chicago River. This area, known as the Levee, was Chicago's center for vice. The Levee was home to saloons, gambling houses, brothels and opium dens.

Pacyga attributes the seedy district's long-lasting effects to two crooked Chicago politicians of Irish decent. John "Bathhouse" Coughlin, a reputed gambler and grafter, joined forces with Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna, a saloon owner and vice-businessman. The two were aldermen of the First Ward.

As the city became more industrial, the two men ensured the South Loop's reputation as a center for corrupt politics.

Aldermen were more powerful than the mayor at the time. They received "boodles," which were bribes offered by businessmen to put up rail tracks throughout the city. Four lines were built in the South Loop: Dearborn Station in 1885, Grand Central in 1890, Central Station in 1893, and LaSalle in 1903.

Coughlin and Kenna ran an efficient boodle and graft operation until 1905, when the vice district was scoured by then Mayor Carter Harrison II.

But the red light district only moved farther south to 22nd and State streets, where the tenements grew in number.

After the second World War, the area was made up of slums that were occupied by poor African-American families (recent transplants from the South) who worked in the city's factories, steel mills and stockyards. These families were not offered housing anywhere else in the city.

Michael Reese Hospital and the Illinois Institute of Technology, both located on the near south side, spurred the city to tear down the tenements in the late 1940's.

Ferdinand Kramer, a south side real estate developer, manager and mortgage banker, had a vision of creating fair, affordable and mixed-race housing on the south side.

With the support of the New York Life Insurance Company, Kramer was able to develop 70 acres of land along the lakefront. The Lake Meadow Apartments and Prairie Shores Apartments were born in the late '50s.

The apartments and condominiums are east of Martin Luther King Drive, between 29th and 33rd Streets.

Initially there was a fair mix of races in these apartments, but by the 1960s the residents were mostly black. Today, these complexes "have become pretty solid middle class black residential housing," said Thom Clark, community media professor at Columbia and president of the Community Media Workshop.

In the '50s and '60s the railroads stopped operating, with the advent of interstate trucking. The South Loop was made

up of miles of unused tracks from Polk Street southward and abandoned presses north of Polk, that have been deserted since World War II.

The African-American communities lost their commercial areas to Mayor Richard J. Daley's expressways, and had to come downtown for goods and entertainment. In turn, as whites fled downtown as soon as it got dark, restaurants folded and major retailers did business in fear. Police patrols were stepped up.

In reality, downtown, already a low-crime area, had even less crime than before.

In the last three decades, the South Loop has once again redefined itself, this time as a residential area. Hundreds of floors of printing factories and warehouses have been converted into pricey condominiums and lofts.

While the entire South Loop has undergone a major change over the past 30 years, the old Prairie mansion district has also seen change on a smaller scale over the same time period.

John Glessner's mansion, the only surviving house in the Midwest that was designed by architect Henry Hobson Richardson, has been converted into the Glessner House Museum and still stands at 1800 S. Prairie Ave., thanks to the efforts of the Chicago Architecture Foundation. Prairie Avenue was designated a National Historical District in 1972.

The area south of 18th Street still has mansions on the east, but open space on the west, where four mansions once stood. On a park (named The Hillary Rodham Clinton Women's Park in 1997) adjacent to the open space stands Chicago's oldest house, Clarke House.



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