

History comes alive in the West Loop

It's a neighborhood that has given us businesses. It has given us beauty. And it has given us one bad guy.



Rick Kogan

There are charms and revelations to each of Chicago's neighborhoods and many of them stay hidden in the past, barely a whisper. The West Loop with its buildings (small and tall) and its stories (touching and terrifying) and the thousands of people (good and evil) who have lived and loved and prowled there do more than whisper to Connie Fairbanks. They shout.

"There is just so much to learn, to explore, to hear," she says.

She has spent years exploring and listening. The result is a deeply researched, artfully written and marvelously illustrated new book, "Chicago's West Loop, Then and Now: People, Businesses, Buildings." It is much larger and grander than many of the books published about specific neighborhoods but Fairbanks understands this and advises readers to "discover your own neighborhood's stories."

When she was young, she was far from the seasoned city dweller she is today, having been born and raised in the tiny Kansas town of Wheaton. "Population about 90," Fairbanks told me. "And that included the dogs and cats."

Her father sold tractors and she was talented enough on the piano that she initially majored in music at Emporia State University before switching to business sales and marketing. Working in the health care industry, she traveled extensively, and took great pride in being part of the team that launched the first nicotine patch and helped ban smoking on airplanes.



Connie Fairbanks with her new book, "Chicago's West Loop, Then and Now: People, Businesses, Buildings," on Oct. 24 at Ground Up Coffee & Bites. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

She had lived in seven other places before falling hard for our city when moving here in 1990. She lived first in the Gold Coast and then, after marrying health care executive Kirk Twiss, in the West Loop.

"We really did think of ourselves as pioneers in the area at the time, parts of which were pretty sketchy," she said. "But I loved to walk around."

She's a curious sort and those walks led to talking to strangers, some of them longtime neighborhood residents, who were eager to tell stories. "There really was a story to every street, every building," she said. "The more I heard, the more I began to think that there was a book in this."

She had written a book before. But her cookbook, "Scratch That: Seasonal Menus and Perfect Pairings," had not prepared her for this historical journey.

Four years ago she energetically began this book. "I thought it was important to flesh out the details, give depth to the stories I was hearing," she said. "As a kid, our town had no library, just a bookmobile, but I was always there. Here there are so many fine librar-

ies, allowing for so much digging and knowledge."

She did that and more, formally interviewing more than 100 of her neighbors.

Fueled by "the espressos my husband kept making for me" she wrote about how the Chicago Fire of 1871 left the area relatively unscathed, and it then became a favored area for prominent business figures such as Cyrus McCormick and Mayor Carter Harrison Sr. (who was assassinated there in 1893). And the area spawned such future stars as impresario Florenz Ziegfeld who lived with his family in a home at 1448 W. Adams Street and "enjoyed the neighborhood's social life and went to many parties on nearby Ashland." He got his showbiz start presenting events at the 1893 World's Fair.

Fairbanks also introduces readers to characters from various eras who may not have been well-known but should be. There is, as one example, a man named Bill Lavicka, who died in 1912. I knew him and Fairbanks neatly captures him, writing that he was "a real guy with dirt under his fingernail who could schmooze with aldermen, lay shin-

gles and quote Faulkner... Throughout his life, Lavicka kept battling the city to recycle homes instead of tearing them down. He didn't give up!"

For many Chicagoans of a gray-haired vintage, the West Loop will evoke memories of its skid row. Primarily along Madison Street, this was an area of cheap hotels, saloons and sad souls clinging to what was left of life. In this world was Monsignor Ignatius D. McDermott, "Father Mac" to most and the "Angel of Sid Row" to others. Fairbanks writes that few others "left as great a mark on humanity during their lifetimes." She charts his efforts to help people in the area, crusading "for the decriminalization of inebriation" and founding the Haymarket Center, a substance abuse facility that is still in operation.

Throughout the book, there are heroes and innovators. And also monsters.

The West Loop was where Richard Speck fled after slaughtering eight nurses in their South Side home in 1966. After a short stay at the Raleigh Hotel on the North Side, he checked into the Starr Hotel, near



A skid row resident talks with policemen in a squad truck on West Madison Street on June 15, 1972. **QUENTIN DODD/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Skid row on West Madison Street near Halsted Street on Sept. 19, 1963. **CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO**

Madison and Des Plaines streets.

"A five-by-seven-foot-barbed-wire cage there set him back 85 to 90 cents a day," Fairbanks writes.

The book is neatly and effectively arranged in people, businesses, buildings, public facilities and public art sections, with each containing short profiles of dozens of companies and characters. Some, of course, are gone (do read the section of Star and Garter, a burlesque house that raucously existed from 1908 to 1971) and many encouragingly remain, like hip and happening restaurants and entertainments that draw people from across the area.

Conventional wisdom has it, and Fairbanks agrees, that Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Studios at 1058 W. Washington Boulevard in 1990 was "the corner-

stone of the neighborhood's revival." But in any neighborhood people come and go, and as we all know, Oprah eventually left for sunnier climes.

The neighborhood remains, ever-changing, and Fairbanks has captured that colorful history, the ups and downs. She volunteers at many local organizations, gives architectural tours and, echoing her small-town childhood, even occasionally plays piano at a local school.

She is an ebullient person and is bullish for the future of her neighborhood, saying, "It is lively and bustling and it really encourages me to see so many people out and about, people walking their dogs, parents taking their kids hand-in-hand to school."

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