

The GOLD COAST
AND THE SLUM

A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY *of* CHICAGO'S
NEAR NORTH SIDE

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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HARVEY WARREN ZORBAUGH

CHAPTER I

THE SHADOW OF THE SKYSCRAPER

..... It is a veritable Babel, in which some thirty or more tongues are spoken. Gunmen haunt its streets, and a murder is committed in them nearly every day in the year. It is smoke-ridden and disfigured by factories and railway yards, and many of its streets are ill-paved. Moreover, the people who throng them are more carelessly dressed than those in Fifth Avenue, and their voices not so well modulated as those of the inhabitants of Boston. Their manners, too, are of the kind the New Yorker defines as western.—CHARLESD-TAYLOR, *Chicago*

The Chicago River, its waters stained by industry, flows back upon itself, branching to divide the city into the South Side, the North Side, and "the great West Side." In the river's southward bend lies the Loop, its skyline looming toward Lake Michigan. The Loop is the heart of Chicago, the knot in the steel arteries of elevated structure which pump in a ceaseless stream the three millions of population of the city into and out of its central business district. The canyon-like streets of the Loop rumble with the traffic of commerce. On its sidewalks throng people of every nation, pushing unseeing past one another, into and out of office buildings, shops, theaters, hotels, and ultimately back to the north, south, and west "sides" from which they came. For miles over what once was prairie now sprawls in endless blocks the city.

The city's conquest of the prairie has proceeded stride for stride with the development of transportation. The outskirts of the city have always been about forty-five minutes from the heart of the Loop. In the days of the horse-drawn

car they were not beyond Twenty-second Street on the South Side. With the coming of the cable car they were extended to the vicinity of Thirty-sixth Street. The electric car—surface and elevated—again extended the city's outskirts, this time well past Seventieth Street. How far "rapid transit" will take them, no one can predict.

Apace with the expansion of the city has gone the ascendancy of the Loop. Every development in transportation, drawing increasing throngs of people into the central business district, has tended to centralize there not only commerce and finance, but all the vital activities of the city's life. The development of communication has further tightened the Loop's grip on the life of the city. The telephone has at once enormously increased the area over which the central business district can exert control and centralized that control. The newspaper, through the medium of advertising, has firmly established the supremacy of the Loop and, through the news, focused the attention of the city upon the Loop. The skyscraper is the visible symbol of the Loop's domination of the city's life. The central business district of the old city—like that of modern London—with its six- and eight-story buildings, sprawled over an unwieldy area. But the skyscraper, thrusting the Loop skyward thirty, forty, fifty stories, has made possible an extraordinary centralization and articulation of the central business district of the modern city. Drawing thousands daily into the heart of the city, where the old type of building drew hundreds, the cluster of skyscrapers within the Loop has become the city's vortex.

As the Loop expands it literally submerges the areas about it with the traffic of its commerce. Business and industry encroach upon residential neighborhoods. As the

roar of traffic swells, and the smoke of industry begrimes buildings, land values rise. The old population moves slowly out, to be replaced by a mobile, shifting, anonymous population bringing with it transitional forms of social life. Within the looming shadow of the skyscraper, in Chicago as in every great city, is found a zone of instability and change—the tidelands of city life.

A part of these tidelands, within ten minutes' walk of the Loop and the central business district, within five minutes by street car or bus, just across the Chicago River, lies the Near North Side, sometimes called "North Town." Within this area, a mile and a half long and scarcely a mile wide, bounded by lake Michigan on the east and by the Chicago River on the south and west, under the shadow of the Tribune Tower, a part of the inner city, live ninety thousand people, a population representing all the types and contrasts that lend to the great city its glamor and romance.

The first settlers of Chicago built upon the north bank of the Chicago River, and Chicago's first business house and first railroad were on Kinzie street. But early in Chicago's history destiny took its great commercial and industrial development southward, and for several decades the North Side was a residential district, well-to-do and fashionable. The story of early Chicago society centers about homes on Ohio, Erie, Cass, and Rush streets; and street after street of old stone fronts, curious streets some of them, still breathe an air of respectability reminiscent of earlier and better days and belying the slow conquest of the slum.

Here change has followed fast upon change. With the growth of the city commerce has encroached upon residential property, relentlessly pushing it northward or crowding it along the lake shore, until now the Near North Side

is chequered with business streets. Into this area, where commerce is competing the conquest of the community, has crept the slum. Meantime great industries have sprung up along the river, and peoples speaking foreign tongues have come to labor in them. The slum has offered these alien peoples a place to live cheaply and to themselves; and wave upon wave of immigrants has swept over the area—Irish, Swedish, German, Italian, Persian, Greek, and Negro—forming colonies, staying for a while, then giving way to others. But each has left its impress and its stragglers, and today there live on the Near North Side twenty-nine or more nationalities, many of them with their Old World tongues and customs.

The city's streets can be read as can the geological record in the rock. The old stone fronts of the houses on the side streets; old residences along lower Rush and State, crowded between new business blocks, or with shops built along the street in front of them; a garage with "Riding Academy" in faded letters above its doors; the many old churches along La Salle and Dearborn streets; an office building growing out of a block of rooming-houses; "Deutsche Apotheke" on the window of a store in a neighborhood long since Italian—these are signs that record the changes brought about by the passing decades, changes still taking place today.

The Near North Side is an area of high light and shadow, of vivid contrasts—contrasts not only between the old and the new, between the native and the foreign, but between wealth and poverty, vice and respectability, the conventional and the bohemian, luxury and toil.

Variety is the spice of life, as depicted in the books of the Board of Assessors; autocracy and democracy mingle on the same pages;

aphorisms are borne out; and "art for art's sake" remains the slogan of the twentieth century.

On one page of North District Book 18, the record of the worldly holdings of James C. Ewell, artist, 4 Ohio Street, is set down as "Total personal property, \$19." So-and-so, artists, are reported thruout the district with this notation: "Attic room, ill-furnished, many paintings; unable to estimate."

The art colony is located in this section, as is the colony of the rich and the nearly rich. And on the same page are the following three entries which span the stream of life:

Cyrus H. McCormick, 50 E. Huron St., \$895,000; taxable assessment, \$147,500.

Mary V. McCormick, 678 Rush St., \$480,000; taxable assessment, \$240,000.

And then—as another contrast—the following entry appears on record:

United States Senator Medill McCormick, guest at the Drake Hotel, \$_____,000,000,000.¹

At the corner of Division Street and the Lake Shore Drive stands a tall apartment building in which seven-teen-room apartments rent at one thousand dollars a month. One mile west, near Division Street and the river, Italian families are living in squalid basement rooms for which they pay six dollars a month. The greatest wealth in Chicago is concentrated along the Lake Shore Drive, in what is called the "Gold Coast." Almost at its back door, in "Little Hell," is the greatest concentration of poverty in Chicago. Respectability, it would seem, is measured by rentals and land values.²

The Near North Side is not merely an area of contrasts; it is an area of extremes. All the phenomena characteristic

¹ *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, July, 1923.

² United Charities of Chicago: *Sixty Years of Service*. In 1920-21 there were 90 contributors to the United Charities in less than a square mile on the Gold Coast, and 460 poverty cases in the square mile behind it.

of the city are clearly segregated and appear in exaggerated form. Not only are there extremes of wealth and poverty. The Near North Side has the highest residential land values in the city, and among the lowest; it has more professional men, more politicians, more suicides, more persons in *Who's Who*, than any other "community" in Chicago.¹

The turgid stream of the Chicago River, which bounds the Near North Side on the south and the west, has played a prominent part in its history. A great deal of shipping once went up the river, and tugs, coal barges, tramp freighters, and occasional ore boats still whistle at its bridges and steam slowly around its bends. This shipping caused commerce and industry to locate along the river, and today wharves, lumber and coal yards, iron works, gas works, sheet metal works, light manufacturing plants and storage plants, wholesale houses for spices, furs, groceries, butter, and imported oils line both sides of the river for miles, and with the noise and smoke of the railroads make a great barrier that half encircles the Near North Side, renders the part of it along the river undesirable to live in, and slowly encroaches northward and eastward.

¹ Taking figures for five widely differing "communities" in Chicago, this fact is clearly brought out:

Community	Population	<i>Who's Who</i>	Physicians	Politicians	Poverty Cases	Suicides
Back of the Yards*	39,908	1	28	4	185	8
Bridgeport†	64,873	0	44	12	180	6
Lawndale‡	105,819	1	212	14	251	6
Woodlawn	69,594	31	185	14	48	8
Near North.....	83,819	151	212	30	555	28

* Immigrant community back of the Stockyards.

† Polish "area of first settlement" on the Southwest Side.

‡ Jewish "area of second settlement" on the West Side.

§ South Side residential community surrounding the University of Chicago, containing many professional men and women.

"North Town" is divided into east and west by State Street. East of State Street lies the Gold Coast, Chicago's most exclusive residential district, turning its face to the lake and its back upon what may lie west toward the river. West of State Street lies a nondescript area of furnished rooms: Clark Street, the Rialto of the half-world; "Little Sicily," the slum.

The Lake Shore Drive is the Mayfair of the Gold Coast. It runs north and south along Lake Michigan, with a wide parkway, bridle path, and promenade. On its western side rise the imposing stone mansions, with their green lawns and wrought-iron-grilled doorways, of Chicago's wealthy aristocracy and her industrial and financial kings. South of these is Streeterville a "restricted" district of tall apartments and hotels. Here are the Drake Hotel and the Lake Shore Drive hotel, Chicago's most exclusive. And here apartments rent for from three hundred fifty to a thousand dollars a month. Indeed, the Lake Shore Drive is a street more of wealth than of aristocracy; for in this midwest metropolis money counts for more than does family, and the aristocracy is largely that of the financially successful.

South of Oak Street the Lake Shore Drive, as it turns, becomes North Michigan Avenue, an avenue of fashionable hotels and restaurants, of smart clubs and shops. North Michigan Avenue is the Fifth Avenue of the Middle West; and already it looks forward to the day when Fifth Avenue will be the North Michigan Avenue of the East.

On a warm spring Sunday "Vanity Fair" glides along "the Drive" in motor cars of expensive mark, makes colorful the bridle-paths, or saunters up the promenade between "the Drake" and Lincoln Park. The tops of the tan motor busses are crowded with those who live farther out, going home

from church—those of a different world who look at “Yanity Fair” with curious or envious eyes. Even here the element of contrast is not lacking, for a mother from back west, with a shawl over her head, waits for a pause in the stream of motors to lead her eager child across to the beach, while beside her stand a collarless man in a brown derby and his girl in Sunday gingham, from some rooming-house back on La Salle Street.

For a few blocks back of “the Drive”—on Bellevue Place, East Division Street, Stone, Astor, Banks, and North State Parkway, streets less pretentious but equally aristocratic—live more than a third of the people in Chicago’s social register, “of good family and not employed.” Here are the families that lived on the once fashionable Prairie Avenue, and later Ashland Boulevard, on the South and West sides. These streets, with the Lake Shore Drive, constitute Chicago’s much vaunted Gold Coast, a little world to itself, which the city, failing to dislodge, has grown around and passed by.

At the back door of the Gold Coast, on Dearborn, Clark, and La Salle streets, and on the side streets extending south to the business and industrial area, is a strange world, painfully plain by contrast, a world that lives in houses with neatly lettered cards in the window: “Furnished Rooms.” In these houses, from midnight to dawn, sleep some twenty-five thousand people. But by day houses and streets are practically deserted. For early in the morning this population hurries from its houses and down its streets, boarding cars and busses, to work in the Loop. It is a childless area, an area of young men and young women, most of whom are single, though some are married, and others are living together unmarried. It is a world of constant comings and

goings, of dull routine and little romance, a world of unsatisfied longings.

The Near North Side shades from light to shadow, and from shadow to dark. The Gold Coast gives way to the world of furnished rooms; and the rooming-house area, to the west again, imperceptibly becomes the slum. The common denominator of the slum is its submerged aspect and its detachment from the city as a whole. The slum is a bleak area of segregation of the sediment of society; an area of extreme poverty, tenements, ramshackle buildings, of evictions and evaded rents; an area of working mothers and children, of high rates of birth, infant mortality, illegitimacy, and death; an area of pawnshops and second-hand stores, of gangs, of “flaps” where every bed is a vote. As distinguished from the vice area, the disintegrating neighborhood, the slum is an area which has reached the limit of decay and is on the verge of reorganization as missions, settlements, playgrounds, and business come in.

The Near North Side, west of Clark Street from North Avenue to the river, and east of Clark Street from Chicago Avenue to the river, we may describe as a slum, without fear of contradiction. For this area, cut off by the barrier of river and industry, and for years without adequate transportation, has long been a backwater in the life of the city. This slum district is drab and mean. In ten months the United Charities here had 460 relief cases. Poverty is extreme. Many families are living in one or two basement rooms for which they pay less than ten dollars a month. These rooms are stove heated, and wood is sold on the streets in bundles, and coal in small sacks. The majority of houses, back toward the river, are of wood, and not a few have windows broken out. Smoke, the odor from the gas

works, and the smell of dirty alleys is in the air. Both rooms and lots are overcrowded. Back tenements, especially north of Division Street, are common.¹

Life in the slum is strenuous and precarious. One reads in the paper of a mother on North Avenue giving away her baby that the rest of her children may live. Frequently babies are found in alleyways. A nurse at the Passavant Hospital on North La Salle tells of a dirty little gammin, brought in from Wells Street, whose toe had been bitten off by a rat while he slept. Many women from this neighborhood are in the maternity ward four times in three years. A girl, a waitress, living at the Albany Hotel on lower Rush Street, recently committed suicide leaving the brief note, "I am tired of everything. I have seen too much. That is all."²

Clark Street is the Rialto of the slum. Deteriorated store buildings, cheap dance halls and movies, cabarets and doubt-

¹ A five-room house on Hill Street, the rooms in which are 9X12X10 feet high, has thirty occupants. Another nurse told the writer of being called on a case on Sedgewick Street and finding two couples living in one room. One couple worked days, the other nights; one couple went to bed when the other couple got up. Mrs. Louise De Kowen Bowen (*Growing Up with a City*), reminiscing of her United Charities experiences, tells of a woman who for three years existed on the food she procured from garbage cans and from the samples of department store demonstration counters. She adds:

"Sometimes fate seems to be relentless to the point of absurdity, as in one case I remember of an Italian family. . . . The man was riding on a street car and was suddenly assaulted by an irate passenger. . . . His nose was broken and he was badly disfigured. . . . A few days later, on his way home from a dispensary where he had gone to have his wound dressed, he fell off a sidewalk and broke his leg. The mother gave birth to a child the same day. Another child died the following day, and the eldest girl, only fourteen years old, who had been sent out to look for work, was foully assaulted on the street." Such is the life of the slum!

² *Chicago Evening American*, December 21, 1923.

ful hotels, missions, "flops," pawnshops and second-hand stores, innumerable restaurants, soft-drink parlors and "fellowship" saloons, where men sit about and talk, and which are hangouts for criminal gangs that live back in the slum, fence at the pawnshops, and consort with the transient prostitutes so characteristic of the North Side—such is "the Street." It is an all-night street, a street upon which one meets all the varied types that go to make up the slum.

The slum harbors many sorts of people: the criminal, the radical, the bohemian, the migratory worker, the immigrant, the unsuccessful, the queer and unadjusted. The migratory worker is attracted by the cheap hotels on State, Clark, Wells, and the streets along the river. The criminal and underworld find anonymity in the transient life of the cheaper rooming-houses such as exist on North La Salle Street. The bohemian and the unsuccessful are attracted by cheap attic or basement rooms. The radical is sure of a sympathetic audience in Washington Square. The foreign colony, on the other hand, is found in the slum, not because the immigrant seeks the slum, nor because he makes a slum of the area in which he settles, but merely because he finds there cheap quarters in which to live, and relatively little opposition to his coming. From Sedgewick Street west to the river is a colony of some fifteen thousand Italians, familiarly known as "Little Hell." Here the immigrant has settled blocks by villages, bringing with him his language, his customs, and his traditions, many of which persist.

Other foreign groups have come into this area. North of "Little Sicily," between Wells and Milton streets, there is a large admixture of Poles with Americans, Irish, and Slavs. The Negro, too, is moving into this area and pushing on into

"Little Hell." There is a small colony of Greeks grouped about West Chicago Avenue, with its picturesque coffee houses on Clark Street. Finally, there has come in within the past few years a considerable colony of Persians, which has also settled in the vicinity of Chicago Avenue. The slum on the Near North Side is truly cosmopolitan.

In the slum, but not of it, is "Towertown," or "the village." South of Chicago Avenue, along east Erie, Ohio, Huron, and Superior streets, is a considerable colony of artists and of would-be artists. The artists have located here because old buildings can be cheaply converted into studios. The would-be artists have followed the artists. And the hangers-on of bohemia have come for atmosphere, and because the old residences in the district have stables. "The village" is full of picturesque people and resorts—tearooms with such names as the Wind Blew Inn, the Blue Mouse, and the Green Mask. And many interesting art stores, antique shops, and stalls with rare books are tucked away among the old buildings. All in all, the picturesque and unconventional life of "the village" is again in striking contrast to the formal and conventional life of the Gold Coast, a few short blocks to the north.

One has but to walk the streets of the Near North Side to sense the cultural isolation beneath these contrasts. Indeed, the color and picturesqueness of the city exists in the intimations of what lies behind the superficial contrasts of its life. How various are the thoughts of the individuals who throng up Michigan Avenue from the Loop at the close of the day—artists, shop girls, immigrants, inventors, men of affairs, women of fashion, waitresses, clerks, entertainers. How many are their vocational interests; how different are their ambitions. How vastly multiplied are the chances of

life in a great city, as compared with those of the American towns and European peasant villages from which most of these individuals have come. What plans, plots, conspiracies, and dreams for taking advantage of these chances different individuals must harbor under their hats. Yet they have little in common beyond the fact that they jostle one another on the same street. Experience has taught them different languages. How far they are from understanding one another, or from being able to communicate save upon the most obvious material matters!

As one walks from the Drake Hotel and the Lake Shore Drive west along Oak Street, through the world of rooming-houses, into the slum and the streets of the Italian Colony one has a sense of distance as between the Gold Coast and Little Hell—distance that is not geographical but social. There are distances of language and custom. There are distances represented by wealth and the luster it adds to human existence. There are distances of horizon—the Gold Coast living throughout the world while Little Hell is still only slowly emerging out of its old Sicilian villages. There are distances represented by the Gold Coast's absorbing professional interests. It is one world that revolves about the Lake Shore Drive, with its mansions, clubs, and motors, its benefits and assemblies. It is another world that revolves about the Dill Pickle Club, the soap boxes of Washington Square, or the shop of Romano the Barber. And each little world is absorbed in its own affairs.

For the great majority of the people on the Gold Coast—excepting those few individuals who remember, or whose parents remember, the immigrant communities out of which they have succeeded in climbing—the district west of State Street exists only in the newspapers. And from the news-

papers they learn nothing reassuring. The metropolitan press pictures this district as a bizarre world of gang wars, of exploding stills, of radical plots, of "lost" girls, of suicides, of bombings, of murder.

The resident of the Lake Shore Drive forms his conception of Little Sicily from such items as these:

"LITTLE ITALY" STORE WRECKED BY BOMBS

For the eighth consecutive Sunday the North Side "Little Italy" was awakened by its usual "alarm clock." The "alarm clock" was a large black powder bomb. The detonation was heard throughout the colony. A part of the grocery store of Mrs. Beatrice Diangello was wrecked, and the eight families living in the adjoining tenement were rudely awakened.

TWO SHOT TO DEATH IN WHISKEY FEUD

Two bullet-ridden bodies were found yesterday near "Death Corner," Cambridge and Oak streets. Police investigation developed the theory that a feud among whiskey runners was responsible for the murders.

KIX'S SILENCE AGAIN HIDES ITALIAN SLAYER

The usual shrugging of shoulders answered detectives who are trying to clear up Chicago's latest Italian murder—that of Frank Mariata, a laborer, who was shot to death as he was leaving his flat, 462 West Division Street, yesterday morning. Three men were seen rushing from the building after the shooting, but relatives of the dead man claim they have no idea who the slayers are. Although three guns were found under Mariata's pillow, his wife insists he had no enemies.

FIFTY-THREE PER CENT OF CHICAGO'S KILLINGS OCCUR IN LITTLE ITALY AND BLACK BELT

More than half of the violent deaths in Chicago in the first ninety days of this year occurred among Negroes or Italians, two groups constituting about 7 per cent of the population. The Italian blackhand zone is on the Near North Side, bounded by Erie, Dearborn, Division, and the river.

Similarly, the "Gold Coaster" concludes from his morning paper that the Persian colony is a place of feuds, flashing knives, flying chairs, and shattering glass:

TWO COPS END WAR OF 200 PERSIANS: THREE MEN STABBED

Three men were stabbed, several badly beaten, and ten arrested during a pitched battle between rival factions of Persians in a coffee shop at 706 North Clark Street early yesterday evening. Police in answering a riot call had to fight their way through more than two hundred fighting men.

For several years there has been an unwritten law that no Syrian Persian was allowed north of Huron Street on Clark Street. Five members of the race wandered into the coffee shop of Titian and Sayad and sat down at a table to play cards. In a short time six Assyrian Persians entered the place and saw them. They walked to the table, it is said, and remarked that the Syrians had better get off the street. At that the five Syrians started to fight.

In a moment other men in the place drew knives and advanced on the battlers. Chairs were overturned and windows broken. The fight led out to the street. Finally more than two hundred had taken up the fight. Then someone sent in a riot call.

Beyond these newspaper reports, little is known of the world west of State Street by the people of the Gold Coast. Their affairs rarely take them into the river district. The reports of social agencies are little read. It is a region remote.

But to the people who live west of State Street the Gold Coast is immediate and real. It is one of the sights of the town. They throng its streets in going down to the lake on hot summer days. From the beach they gaze up at the magnificent hotels and apartments of Streeterville, and at the luxurious and forbidding mansions of the Lake Shore Drive. They watch the streams of costly automobiles and fashionably dressed men and women. The front pages of the newspapers they read as they hang to straps on the street

cars in the evening are filled with pictures of the inhabitants of the Gold Coast, and with accounts of their comings and goings. It all enlists the imagination. Consequently the people from "back west" enormously idealize the Gold Coast's life. They imitate its styles and manners. The imagination of the shop girl, of the immigrant, of the hobo plays with these externals of its life. In the movie they see realistic pictures of "high society." These they take to be the inner, intimate life of which they see the externals along the Lake Shore Drive. As a result the social distance from Death Corner to the Drake Hotel is no less than the distance from the Casino Club to Bughouse Square.

The isolation of the populations crowded together within these few hundred blocks, the superficiality and externality of their contacts, the social distances that separate them, their absorption in the affairs of their own little worlds—these, and not mere size and numbers, constitute the social problem of the inner city. The community, represented by the town or peasant village where everyone knows everyone else clear down to the ground, is gone. Over large areas of the city "community" is little more than a geographical expression. Yet the old tradition of control persists despite changed conditions of life. The inevitable result is cultural disorganization.

CHAPTER II

AN AREA IN TRANSITION

This teeming, shifting area, with its striking high-lights and deep shadows—the Near North Side of today—is to be understood only in its past relation to the growth of the greater city. Its early history, consecutive movements of population, the encroachment of commerce and industry as the city crossed the river and sprawled northward, have all left their impress and have contributed to the establishment of these social distances within this "community" in the inner city.

Within the memory of men still living on the North Side, Indians camped along the river where now great factories smoke and thousands of vehicles clamor at the bridges. Indeed, it is only a little over a hundred years ago, as tradition has it, since a black man from San Domingo, bearing the ornate name of Jean Baptiste Point de Saible, built the first log cabin of what was to be early Chicago, on the north bank of the river, at a spot long marked by the abutments of the old Rush street bridge. This cabin was later acquired by John Kinzie, the first American and the first real settler, who brought his family on in 1804. Kinzie's cabin became the center of a little settlement near the stockade of the long-vanished Fort Dearborn.

After the War of 1812 a village grew up between the northern and southern branches of the river and the lake. With the dredging of the harbor, in 1833, the village became a town. Wharves were built along both banks of the river. Chicago's first packing house was built at this time. Im-