

FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

Chicago, the Windy City, is one of the most fascinating of places to visit - but my first experience of it was rather unnerving. I and one other journalist had been chosen to represent Great Britain on a fact-finding mission in the United States with, among others, the Ford Motor Company, and we had flown from London to Illinois for the first leg of our odyssey.

We motored from O'Hare International into the city, passing huge roadside placards which declared "Mayor Daley welcomes you to Chicago." Nice touch, I thought. We had two days to take in the sights and sounds of the city beloved by Sinatra- and found ourselves walking along Michigan Avenue, aka the Front. I was keen to visit the legendary State Street - "that great street" - and we stopped to ask a local how we could walk there. He looked at our map and explained a rather convoluted route across to the street which runs parallel to the one we were on. He left us and I looked at the map again. It was perfectly clear to me that our friend's directions were difficult to follow and that there was a much simpler route to our intended destination. My colleague concurred.

Off we went using my supposedly expert guidance when we suddenly realised that where earlier all the faces we had encountered were white now they were all black. Not a problem today of course - but back then in the United States it was time of civil rights unrest. There were riots at a university in Mississippi where some years later I would stay when harmony had been established.

As we walked along we were receiving some puzzled looks - as if we were the first white men they had ever seen. And the buildings looked to be in no great shape. We approached the famous Shubert Theatre just at the moment the performance must have ended because out of its doors streamed at least 2,000 people - again, none of them white.

It's a long walk along State Street but there were no actual problems - until my more confident colleague rather unwisely suggested we buy a coffee in a diner. We entered, took our seats and ordered our drinks with a waiter who was wearing a somewhat perplexed expression on his face. A minute later we were approached by a huge woman bearing a "manager" badge on her ample chest. "Are you crazy?" she screamed. "What are you doing in here? Go! Go now." There was no explanation.

So we did leave - rapidly.

Together we walked no more than 20 yards further along the street and suddenly all the faces changed colour again. And I vowed always to follow the instructions of the locals in future. It was an intriguing, intimidating introduction to what had been the city of Capone, Dillinger and Ness...and I should have recalled the second line of Frank's song..."It's tumbling down."

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