

June 2008: Family Vacation - South and Midwest

9. Wisconsin

Thursday July 3: Kenosha: We intended to visit Wisconsin, to get our full ten states in, but the question is, the 3rd or the 4th? Per my research on Chicago, it seems the City celebrates Independence Day with fireworks on July 3, and remarks by our water tour guide yesterday warn that up to a million (! hyperbole?) people will be downtown, especially in the Park, to watch. Well, it would be cool to see the fireworks in Chicago (like it would have been cool to take in an Opry show, or a Reds game), but I don't think we want to wade through that many people afterwards back to Union Station. So we decide to visit Wisconsin today.

Plus, it's a dry-run for getting to O'Hare International Airport on Saturday. The highways between Oakbrook and O'Hare are all toll roads, so we want to see where to go and how much the tolls are. Well, the roads are fairly straightforward, and the tolls aren't bad, but the system is geared to commuters with RFID tags to automatically pay as they drive through the tollgates. Only one tollgate had a human attendant to give change; all the rest were coin-operated, so we had to scramble a bit to get the right mix. And borrow from our children. But we eventually made it out through the City on the north side, in spite of heavy construction, and crossed the state line.

Right across the line is the harbour city of Kenosha, and one of the most interesting things of the trip was a tour of the Jelly Belly Candy warehouse.



Excitement! Actually, we think we are going to tour the factory. Turns out Jelly Belly *does* have a factory tour at their plant in Los Angeles. Here, it is a "train" ride around the inner perimeter of their warehouse, with videos and static displays of candy making machinery.

The tours are free, and they just fill up their "train" (electric "locomotive" pulling a chain of cars with seat belts and speakers) with visitors, do the tour, dump them at the outlet store, and load up another batch. The tour guide was really good, obviously enjoying her job (unlike the Ruby Falls guide). We learn that the Herman Goelitz Candy Factory was started way back in the late 1800s by two German immigrant brothers, and they made it big with Candy Corn. After some ups and downs, they started making gourmet jelly beans (traditional jelly beans have flavour shells only; Jelly Bellies are flavoured all the way through). Thanks to the endorsement by Ronald Reagan, the company really broke out. It is privately held and family operated to this day (although they changed the name), and they make chocolates and Gummi candies in addition to beans.



Oh, yes, FDA rules require everyone in food processing factories and warehouses to have head coverings (hair? vermin?). We get candy-makers caps.



The tour ends with the guide handing out free sample bags of Jelly Bellies, and admitting us to the outlet store. There we find dispensers of all their flavours and their other candies. We load up on our favorite kinds of Jelly Belly beans. Mom gets some sugar-free beans for her mom, and an assortment for her dad. I get a bag of Malted Milk-Balls - yum!

After our visit to the Jelly Belly factory, we go on into Kenosha proper after our other spectacle - a lighthouse. Once again, not open to the public. Not very tall, simple, marked "1866" (the War was just ending). Jerri went into the Kenosha historical museum nearby and gets sold a Lighthouse Passport book, which she can get stamped at participating lighthouses. What a pity we didn't hear about that until the very end of our tour! Now we have another Passport book to search for places to get stamped.



The Lighthouse still functions, but the real navigation aids to Kenosha harbour are this beacon and a pair of markers at the mouth of the channel. There doesn't seem to be anything here but pleasure boats and the Coast Guard (a Coast Guard patrol boat enters the harbour while we watch, towing a sailboat). But anything that looks like a lighthouse attracts the lady's camera.

Also while we are here, girls who are not interested in lighthouses (or, rather, harbour beacons) try out the Lake Michigan shore. The surf is quite active here for some reason, and the water is co-co-co-cold!!



Lake Geneva: Kenosha is a very pretty little waterfront town, but now it is time to leave and see our actual planned destination - Lake Geneva, playground for Chicago's wealthiest at the turn of the century (1900s, that is) and an enduring tourist and resort location.



The lake seems to be more of a boating place than a bathing place, but there are a few public beaches - if you can call them beaches. It's a freshwater lake with very little water action (other than boat wakes), so the shore is grassy, then muddy, then stony, then weedy. Algae, I guess. Still, the weedy part is out a ways, the stony part isn't too bad, and the mud is fairly firm, so

it isn't bad. The water is rather cold - not as bad as Lake Michigan, my girls admit, and we've been in hotel swimming pools colder than this. It is still some time before I can coax the daughters out past their shoulders.



I have to set the example.

Okay, it's been interesting, and we can say we did it, but it isn't *that* interesting, it's cold, it's getting late, and it's time to go.

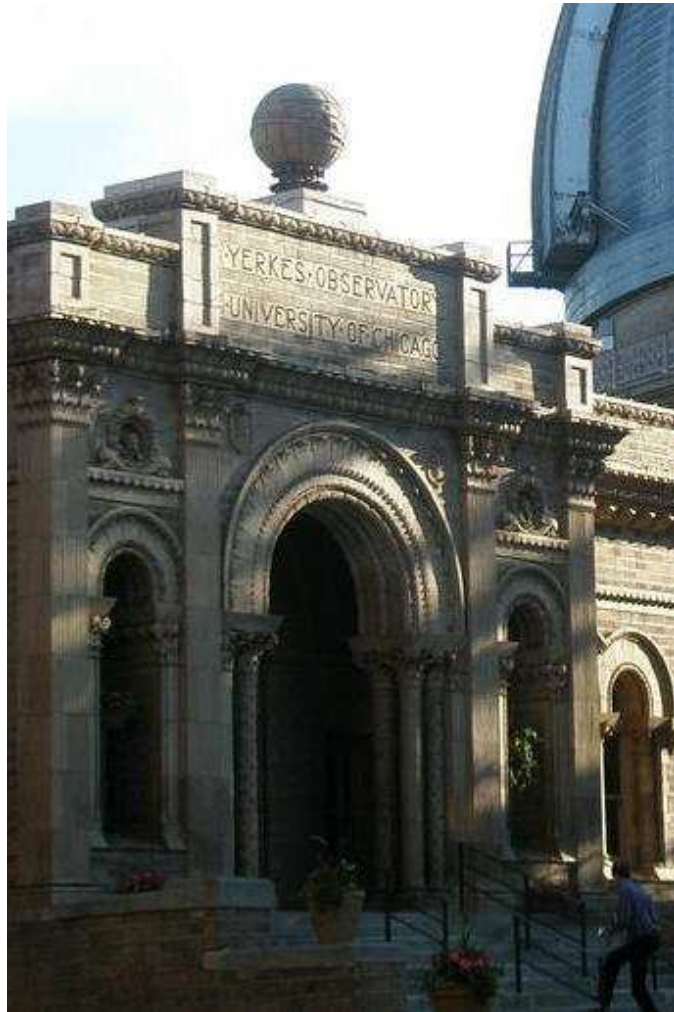


We never saw any big old houses. We *did* see a big house with a gated yard with "Expect A Miracle" on the gate. A wealthy televangelist, I am guessing. With more time and determination, and a visit to the Chamber of Commerce, we might have come up with a map of the historical properties, but we aren't really all that motivated. Instead, I direct our path to an interesting sight I learned from the Net.

Yerkes Observatory, operated by the University of Chicago since it was built in 1895. Here's the huge main dome over their 40-inch refracting telescope, the largest one in the world.



This place is somewhat similar to Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, in that it's a famous old astronomical observatory whose capabilities (in terms of optical instruments and sky quality) has long been superceded by other more remote or higher altitude facilities (like Mauna Kea in Hawaii or Kitt Peak and Mount Hopkins in Arizona, or the Hubble Space Telescope). Unlike Lowell, Yerkes is still *active*, at least used by the University faculty.



The most amazing thing to me about Yerkes is not their instruments, but the architecture of their buildings. The Steward at UofA has nothing on this carved granite.

A closer look. Note the cherub figures over the side arches, and the horse carving over the door. A lot of effort went into the ornamentation of the building in the late 19th Century which we would never see now. More cultural decay, I guess. A sign on the door admits that visitors are welcome for tours, but only by advance notice. Lowell at least has regular tours as part of the attraction. But I guess Flagstaff needs attractions, and Lake Geneva already has plenty.





There are three domes that we can see. Here's one of the smaller ones, enclosing one of two reflecting telescopes. Again, the most beautiful stonemasonry.

After seeing Yerkes, we go back into the town of Lake Geneva and do some curio shopping. We find a store that has cheesehead hats (Wisconsin being the home of the Green Bay Packers), and dispensers of... Jelly Bellies!... at a lower price than the factory outlet store! We were merely amused.

Time to return from our visit to the tenth state. After dealing with the toll roads and the construction on the way up, I form the opinion that it would be faster going down local highways. Bad call. We creep through the coastal towns of Waukegan and North Chicago, then inland through Libertyville (where we have a late dinner), then southward through Vernon Hills and Wheeling, where we consult our wretched little atlas and take another jog westward through Mount Prospect, Des Plaines, Elk Grove, Wood Dale, and many other little towns. Some nicer, some crummier, all fairly small, and lots of them. It takes a LOT longer to work southward through the surface streets than it would have to just stay on the toll road. "Every cloud has a silver lining" - we got a good taste of greater metropolitan Chicago this way. Or at least I did; everyone else in the car was asleep!

Back to Chicago: See Part 8