

Collected Columns of 2010 by Mike Bryson

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Let's Quit Carping at Each Other and Just Solve the Problem

14 January 2010

(Published as "Can We Find End to this Fish Tale?" in the *Herald News*, p14)

Talk about a fish story!

The great Asian carp controversy quickly has morphed from a somewhat obscure local ecological problem into a national headline-grabbing legal battle among the Great Lakes states, and is right now burning up the docket of the United States Supreme Court.

In one corner is Michigan, which along with five other Great Lakes states has asked the esteemed justices to shut down the water control structures at the mouths of the Chicago and Calumet Rivers and thus seal off Lake Michigan from Illinois' carp-infested inland waterways.

In the other corner is Illinois. We don't like the Asian Carp either, the nasty things; after all, they're well on their way to ruining our rivers by outcompeting native fish species and posing a very real hazard to boaters by virtue of their spectacular but dangerous leaping ability.

But slamming shut the Lake Michigan gates would bring barge traffic along the Illinois Waterway system to a halt, and that would have significant economic impacts upon the Chicago region -- especially the river-hugging industries right here in Will County.

Thus it would seem that all this interstate carping is yet another tired example of jobs versus the environment. If only it were that simple.

In fact, there are compelling economic arguments for keeping the Asian carp at bay for as long as possible, starting with the \$7 billion sport fishing industry throughout the Great Lakes. These fish are voracious feeders that make hogs look downright dainty by comparison, and are more than capable of displacing key species treasured by fishermen.

On the other hand, cutting off shipping access between the Mississippi River and Great Lakes systems has profound and complex ecological consequences. If, for example, water engineers cannot easily accommodate excess storm run-off by diverting wastewater into Lake Michigan, severe regional flooding could occur, and the carp might end up entering the lake via another unforeseen path.

More positively, re-separating the two great watersheds could provide the impetus for developing more sustainable and effective wastewater management and flood control systems than we have now, and might move us toward improving the ecological health of our inland rivers and streams.

Finally, only this is clear: the carp are coming, and time is short. We need action that keeps the long-term sustainability of the entire Great Lakes region in mind, not just the limited economic perspective or political interest of any particular locale.

Send any brilliant ideas about the Asian carp controversy to Joliet resident Mike Bryson at mbry22@sbcglobal.net, and he'll be happy to forward them to the Supreme Court.

Note: As of Jan. 1st, 2011, no decisive action has been taken to prevent the Asian Carp from entering the Great Lakes watershed, though several agencies (including the US Army Corps of Engineers) are studying the impact of closing the locks between the IL Waterway and Lake Michigan. The US District Court and the US Supreme Court have thus far denied injunctions by Michigan and other GLs states to close the locks.

A Bold Vision for Joliet's Future

18 February 2010

(Published as "Reviving Joliet from the Center" in the *Herald News*, p12)

By the time this newspaper has reached your breakfast table, Joliet should know the fiscal fate of a bold plan to reshape its downtown landscape and make it a nationally significant model of urban sustainability.

With billions of federal stimulus dollars up for competitive bid, the city has applied for a \$55 million Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant to build a modern transportation center just south of the landmark, but woefully outdated, Union Station.

The new Joliet Multi-modal Transportation Center would efficiently integrate all types of transportation -- train, bus, taxi, car, bicycle, and pedestrian -- within a facility that would anchor Joliet's long-term redevelopment plans for the downtown area.

This larger vision includes a new courthouse complex and a major emphasis on New Urbanist residential, retail, and commercial development. The projected result would be a thriving and reinvigorated City Center, with many people living and working within easy walking distance of stores, services, restaurants, and various transportation options.

Despite my inherent skepticism about big development projects, I'm extremely impressed by the details and the overall vision of the proposed Transportation Center. First and foremost, it reinvests in the city's core, something desperately needed given the persistent challenges in bringing back downtown Joliet to its former glory as a vital urban center.

The project also would stimulate a renaissance in the use of existing public transportation -- Amtrak, Metra, and Pace -- as well as make Joliet a key destination along the future high speed rail corridor between Chicago and St. Louis.

Third, it represents a new era of sustainable planning and design for the city's infrastructure. Energy-conservation elements, such as solar panels and a green rooftop, are key features of the LEED-certified Center, along with modern and secure bike-parking facilities. (One can hope the bathrooms will be more pleasant, as well.)

Finally, the Center honors and builds upon Joliet's historic legacy as a regional transportation center, the "Crossroads of Mid-America." With so many different transportation networks converging here -- US highways and interstates, the Illinois Waterway and the I&M Canal, multiple freight and passenger railroads, and several regional bike trails -- it's hard to imagine a place better positioned to build a showcase 21st-century public transportation hub.

The only uncertainty is this: will Joliet win the grant money and catch that TIGER by the tail? I hope so, because the ride really could be something special.

Email your comments to Joliet resident Mike Bryson at mbry22@sbcglobal.net.

Note: Joliet did not win this TIGER grant, though the downstate community of Normal, IL, did. However, later on in 2010 the city garnered a significant grant from the State of IL to start work on this re-development project for a new transportation center, despite the state's current budget woes. Time will tell if 2011 will see progress on this front.

The Edwin Way Teale Woods: A Spring Ode to Urban Nature

25 March 2010

(Published as "Teale Woods Hidden Joliet Gem" in the *Herald News*, p20)

The advent of spring last week inspired me to visit one of my favorite quiet corners of Joliet -- a place where time slows down and wild nature flourishes amidst the paved-over, gritty landscape of concrete, traffic noise, and hustling people.

My destination was Teale Woods, a 15-acre woodland along Theodore and Center Streets on Joliet's near northwest side. With only one low-profile sign marking its existence as Will County Forest Preserve property, Teale Woods is still undeveloped and without official public access; but a couple of informal trails cut through the woodland and afford a quiet route away from the tumult of Theodore Street's traffic.

This humble urban sanctuary is emblematic of wild spaces that exist, and sometimes flourish, against all odds within the built landscape of our cities. Homes, businesses, and busy roads are only steps away. The thoughtless litter of humans, newly revealed from the recent melting of winter's snow cover, distracts the eye and disturbs the spirit.

Nevertheless, these scrappy, imperfect woods provide a natural haven where one can hear the plaintive tones of a white-throated sparrow and study the rugged form of a downed oak.

I suspect very few people in Joliet today know this place's namesake, Edwin Way Teale. Born in 1899 in Joliet, Teale's love of and fascination with nature were stoked in his formative years during visits to his grandparents' farm near the Indiana Dunes. He later became one of the most celebrated American nature writers and photographers of the 20th century.

One of Teale's most admired books was "North with the Spring" (1951), which chronicles a 17,000-mile journey following and celebrating the season's arrival throughout the eastern US. While Teale visits several famous landscapes along the way, he also describes many virtually unknown spots of no particular significance -- except that they provided a place for him to encounter a lively insect, find a native wildflower, or admire an old tree.

I like to think that Teale Woods in Joliet -- about as low-profile and neglected as a nature preserve can get -- is been one of those places he would've cherished.

The next time I visit the woods, I'll pause a moment to reflect on Edwin Way Teale's immeasurable impact upon Americans' growing interest in preserving wild nature, even in cities. Then, I'll grab my work gloves and trash bag, and get down to work picking up some litter.

Send word of your favorite examples of urban nature to Joliet resident Mike Bryson at mbry22@sbcglobal.net.

Note: A few month's after the publication of this article, the Will County Forest Preserve District held public hearings on planned future developments of Teale Woods. The WCFPD plans to start restoring the woodland in 2011.

Better Lawns through Chemistry? (The Myth of the Perfect Yard)

29 April 2010

(Published as "Dandelions? They'll Tell No Lies" in the *Herald News*, p14)

In the wake of Earth Day, signs of spring abound in my Joliet neighborhood. Migrating birds sing lustily from the treetops; long-dormant flowers burst forth from the soil; children frolic happily in short sleeves; and lawn-maintenance trucks roll up and spray the magical compounds that ensure another season of flawlessly green lawns devoid of dandelions and other "pests."

The chemical industry's carefully couched claims notwithstanding, these substances are far from benign and inconsequential. A substantial amount of the fertilizer spread on lawns washes away as run-off, ending up in our creeks and rivers as what ecologists call non-point-source pollution.

Then there are the health impacts upon humans and animals that come into regular contact with pesticides and herbicides specifically engineered to kill living organisms. Scientific studies have shown that these toxins increase our risk of developing non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, acute leukemia, asthma, and other conditions -- risks disproportionately applied to children, whose immune systems are still developing and who have the inconvenient habit of playing on the grass.

So why do we still use lawn chemicals with such gleeful abandon? The reasons range from blissful ignorance ("Gee, I didn't realize that weed-killers were dangerous.") to denial ("Why would stores sell it if it weren't safe?") to habit ("I've used this stuff for years.") to convenience ("Zap, it's dead. Easy!") to peer pressure ("What would the neighbors think if I didn't maintain my property?").

The real culprit, though, is the Myth of the Perfect Yard, which idealizes a weed-free, crew-cut landscape resembling a putting green. This myth is a complex cultural construction that emerged during the postwar suburbanization of America and has become synonymous with responsible homeownership. It is maintained, in part, by the disingenuous yet brilliant marketing strategies of lawn-chemical companies like TruGreen (formerly known as ChemLawn until its branding executives got hip to a more environmentally friendly-sounding moniker).

A few years back I decided to save money and ratchet down my carbon emissions by using a manual reel push-mower. Last year I stopped spreading petrochemical-based fertilizers and poisons, and went back to pulling weeds by hand.

When a few dandelions show up, as they inevitably will, my yard will be little further away from the seductive standard of mythic perfection. But if it means I'm reducing, even if only slightly, the chemical burden on my property and toxic exposures to my family; well, I think I can live with it.

Send dandelion recipes and other comments to Joliet resident Mike Bryson at mbry22@sbcglobal.net.

Sustainability Goes Mainstream in Joliet

3 June 2010

(Published as " _____ " in the Herald News, p__)*

As my family strolled into the GR2010 Celebrating Sustainability festival on May 22nd at Joliet's Black Road Library, a slightly unreal thought occurred to me: either my hometown was becoming an environmentally progressive community, or sustainability truly was going mainstream.

Come to think of it, perhaps both trends are for real. If so, they bode well for this newly-declared "Cool City," a name which refers primarily to an explicit declaration to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption, but also suggests an environmental hipness heretofore absent in the City of Steel and Stone.

After dropping off some old phones and computer equipment at the Will Country electronics recycling station set up in the Troy Craughwell School parking lot, we took in the sights and sounds of the green scene, and there was no mistaking the festive vibe in the air.

Families wandered happily through a petting zoo, where city kids got to meet and feed goats, llamas, pigs, rabbits, and other farm critters. Bluegrass music played from a stage while an appreciative crowd clapped along and danced among straw bales that formed a down-home grandstand. Under an expansive sky next to the sprawling Rock Run marshlands, folks young and old practiced their casting technique at a fishing clinic.

People mingled cheerfully under open-air tents, which held scores of booths with information about all kinds of green products and services -- from water conservation programs to hazardous waste recycling to local environmental activism to energy-saving technology. We chatted awhile with Jody Osmund, from Cedar Valley Sustainable Farm in Ottawa, about the grass-fed beef and free-range chickens available from his organic CSA operation; then got on a waiting list for a free rain barrel courtesy of the City of Joliet.

Collectively, all this energy and activity represented what sustainability is really about: economic vitality and innovation, environmental stewardship, and community building.

The setting of this extraordinary event deserves special mention. Joliet's Black Road Library is located just to the east of the Rock Run forest preserve and marsh, an expansive region of woods, ponds, wetlands, and prairie that is laced with biking and walking trails. Here the values of sustainability are literally embodied within the natural and built environment, for the forest preserve, the library, and the adjacent school are mutually dedicated to the preservation of both nature and culture.

That's something really worth celebrating -- so here's to the prospect of GR2011!

Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) lives in Joliet and co-founded the new Sustainability Studies program at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

* Publication data unavailable at this time. The Herald News website does not have an easily accessible archive search tool, and my efforts to track down this citation on two academic search databases were fruitless. I'll have to go to the Joliet Public Library and find an old-fashioned hard copy! I'm glad to report, though, that as of Dec. 2010, planning is well underway for GR2011.

The Airport that Just Won't Die

8 July 2010

(Published as "Ethics Gone in Airport Land Grab" in the *Herald News*, p14)

Like a cold sore or a nasty case of bronchitis, the Great Imaginary Airport near Peotone just won't go away. Not even with a prescription.

After many months of keeping a low profile, the Illinois Department of Transportation made a news splash by releasing a 194-page report about its pet project to the FAA. It contains numerous rosy projections about future passenger and freight traffic demands meant to justify the airport's construction.

Buried within its reams of statistics and turgid technical prose, however, was this telling passage on page 10: "The current economic downturn, the most serious since the Great Depression, is a challenge to the aviation industry. . . . This forecast environment is precarious and it justifies caution in revisiting the assumptions and forecasts for an airport, particularly a new one." No kidding!

What's really "precarious," though, is the state's ethical position in using any means necessary to acquire private property for the initial build-out of an airport that may never be approved, let alone completed. And with Illinois billions of dollars in the red, it makes zero sense to throw hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars away on such a pathetically misguided boondoggle.

Yet that's precisely what we're doing. Ever since IDOT was given the power of eminent domain by the state in 2002, it's been buying up land in the imaginary airport's footprint as fast as an Illinois hog gulping his slops. To date, nearly \$33 million have been spent acquiring 2,429 acres of land from (mostly) willing sellers.

Now, with the price of land bottoming out, IDOT is flexing its muscles to begin eminent domain proceedings against citizens with no interest in selling, like Willis and Vivian Bramstaedt, an elderly couple who had intended to retire on their Beecher property.

The Bramstaedts and others are in a real pickle: if they cave in to IDOT's pressure to sell, they're going to get far less for their property than they would've a few years ago. If they refuse to deal, they'll have to wage a hopelessly expensive court fight against the state's condemnation proceedings .

This situation is beyond grotesque. Surely the naked exercise of power in wresting land from law-abiding rural citizens against their will for a project of dubious merit is unjust. The fact that it is permissible under state law does not make it right.

Let's call it for what it is, then: highway robbery.

Mike Bryson of Joliet (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) urges you to contact Gov. Quinn and your state legislators and let them know what you think of the South Suburban Airport fiasco.

Note: As of Dec. 31, 2010, the State continues to earmark millions of dollars for the purchase of land in the Peotone area, and IDOT has submitted more documents to the FAA for that agency's review. The latter still has not approved the airport project.

Blockson Workers Hope for Recognition, at Long Last

12 Aug 2010

(Published as "Many Blockson Suits Unresolved" in the Joliet Herald-News, p10)

At long last, former workers at Joliet's Blockson Chemical company and their families might end their quest to be justly compensated for years of exposure to dangerous radioactive materials during the Cold War.

But don't hold your breath.

In the frantic race to produce atomic weapons material in the 1950s and 60s, private companies like Blockson took on fat government contracts for things like extracting uranium from phosphorus ore without implementing proper safety procedures for workers, adequately assessing their health, or even informing them of what kind of work they were doing. Such were the secrecy and hubris of the times.

Ten years ago, these dark actions finally came to light. In response, Congress passed the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act on behalf of thousands of chemical and industrial workers across the US. Subsequently, though, no stone has been left unturned in the official effort to delay action and deny compensation for ordinary citizens who made the mistake of working hard for a living and getting exposed to dangerous radiation without adequate knowledge of the risks they were taking.

According to a recent report in the Chicago Tribune, less than a third of the 363 claims filed by Blockson workers or their families have been paid after the complex and time-consuming "radiation dose reconstruction" procedure managed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

Now Blockson workers have a petition pending before the Department of Health and Human Services which will make it easier for them to document their compensation claims. Instead of attempting the extremely problematic task of dose reconstruction, NIOSH instead would approve compensation for claimants who demonstrate they subsequently suffered from one of several radiation-linked cancers.

The fact is, if all 363 claimants from Blockson got full compensation -- the mandated \$150,000 plus, say, another \$150,000 in medical expenses -- it would add up to 54.5 million dollars. That's a miniscule drop in the bucket, though, compared to the trillions taxpayers have spent funding foreign wars and bailing out corrupt banking institutions that are "too big to fail."

Despite the hope engendered by this recent news, no definite endpoint is in sight. After decades of secrecy and delay, the greatest injustice of this Cold War environmental fiasco is still ahead of us. By the time the compensation claims are finally processed, if ever, all the original workers might well be gone from this earth.

Contact Joliet resident Mike Bryson at mbry22@sbcglobal.net.

A welcome note of good news: On Sept. 10, 2010, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius approved a petition to include Blockson workers in a "special exposure cohort" -- ensuring that workers and their families receive compensation.

JJC's Big Plans for Downtown

16 Sept 2010

(Published as "JJC, City Show Downtown Vision" in the *Joliet Herald-News*, p10)

Joliet Junior College's plans for a ten-story facility in downtown Joliet to house its culinary arts and adult education programs undeniably ruffled a few feathers when it was rolled out. From my perspective, though, this project's a breath of fresh air.

True, the failure of JJC to seriously consider restoring the historic but deteriorating White Store building is disappointing, especially to those of us nostalgic for downtown Joliet's glory days. And the city's kicking in \$70,000 to grease the skids of the White Store property sale to the college is hard to swallow in times of fiscal austerity.

Nevertheless, JJC's prospective \$42 million investment in the cultural, architectural, and economic landscape of Joliet's City Center comes in an era when most major commercial and industrial developments have occurred on the sprawling edges of the Joliet region. This new commitment to downtown is a welcome departure from that trend.

Give credit, as well, to the University of Saint Francis, which in 2009 renovated space in the Rialto Square building for its visual arts and design department. USF's move has gotten students and faculty out of the protective bubble of the sleepy Cathedral Area campus, added some vitality to the downtown arts district, and symbolically paved the way for JJC to expand and upgrade its own downtown facilities.

If this momentum continues, Joliet could be on its way to creating a vibrant higher education hub downtown -- a vision that echoes the now-thriving "educational acropolis" of Chicago's South Loop area, where several schools (including my own institution, Roosevelt University) draw in tens of thousands of students every weekday.

Chicago offers another example to consider. Remember that night in March of 2003 when Mayor Daley called out the backhoes and bulldozers to rip up the runways of Meigs Field? That harsh move raised some hackles at the time, but Da Mare's larger vision was right on target. In place of a tiny airport that for decades catered to a privileged few is now a superb public parkland open to everyone.

So while JJC needs to produce the best design possible for this development -- one that makes a bold architectural statement while harmonizing with the historic downtown landscape -- the bigger picture is even more important. This isn't just about replacing a decrepit old structure with a shiny new one; it's about defining Joliet's future and crafting a new vision for downtown.

Mike Bryson (mbry22@roosevelt.edu) is a Joliet resident and professor at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

A New Vision for Hickory Creek's Watershed

21 October 2010

(Published as "No Boundaries in Protecting Creek" in the *Joliet Herald-News*, p14)

Do you know where water goes after it falls from the sky and hits your property? How about when you drain your sink or flush your toilet? If so, you know a little something about your watershed, or the area of land where all surface water drains to a common point (usually a river).

The watershed concept initially might seem abstract, but it's an extremely practical tool for understanding the relationship between the land's topography and the water cycle. More profoundly, knowing one's watershed inspires an abiding sense of place and an ethic of environmental stewardship.

Here in Will County, the Hickory Creek watershed has captured the attention of planners, environmentalists, resource managers, town officials, and local citizens. The resulting Hickory Creek Watershed Planning Group (HCWPG) is developing restoration and conservation strategies for the Creek and its surrounding lands.

Despite rapid urbanization within its 107-square-mile watershed, Hickory Creek remains biologically rich and reasonably clean by Chicago-area river standards, qualities that make it a nearly priceless natural and recreational resource.

Yet the future of Hickory Creek is uncertain, as illustrated by this watershed truism: whatever happens to the land ultimately impacts our rivers and, by extension, us.

Just ask anyone who's lived through a flood on Joliet's East Side. The more roads and parking lots we pave, the more water runs off the land's surface and into our rivers. In Hickory Creek's case, those increased flows heighten flood risks in densely populated areas downstream.

Then there's pollution. Any wastes dumped into a backwater stream, down a sewer drain, or onto the ground within the watershed eventually wash into Hickory Creek and degrade its water quality.

More positively, though, a watershed-based perspective transcends the political factionalism that so often divides us from our neighbors. Hickory Creek is the tie that binds the otherwise disparate communities of Joliet, New Lenox, Mokena, Homer Glen, Tinley Park, Frankfort, and Orland Park.

This holistic regional view is embodied in the extraordinary Hickory Creek Watershed map, which highlights the region's many natural features, recreation facilities, cultural amenities, and observation points. The resulting representation of place is based not on roads or political boundaries, but on something far more fundamental and enduring: the connection between land and water.

So visit the Hickory Creek Watershed website. Get the map and go exploring. I assure you that you'll see that corner of the world -- perhaps even yourself -- a little differently.

Contact Mike Bryson of Joliet at mbry22@sbcglobal.net. Pick up a map at your local library, and visit <http://www.hickorycreekwatershed.org> to learn more about the Hickory Creek Watershed.

High School Musical: The Real McCoy

25 November 2010

(Published as "Seeing Stars at Joliet Musical" in the *Joliet Herald-News*, p26)

When I learned a few weeks ago that Joliet Central was mounting a production of *West Side Story*, a flood of memories washed over me.

Back in the early 80s when I was in high school at JT West, musical productions at the city's three public high schools those days were major community events that drew packed houses.

My participation in speech team, choir, fall plays, and the annual spring musicals were the touchstones of my high school experience. That fine arts education, and the friendships I forged in the process, have had a lasting and profound influence upon me.

So I simply had to go see Central do *West Side Story*, and I knew exactly who to take with me: my eight-year-old daughter, Lily.

"I know you love the *High School Musical* movies," I told her. "But this is the real McCoy -- an actual show put on by everyday Joliet kids, just like you."

We entered the vast and lovely auditorium of Central's grand old building, and took seats near the front; just ahead of us, a full orchestra of student musicians tuned up. The look of enrapturement on Lily's face validated my long-held conviction that a school's auditorium is its true cathedral of learning.

Then the curtain opened and the orchestra began. Bernstein's immortal score filled that glorious performance space. The players commanded the stage with energy and unwavering focus. And for two hours that Saturday evening, a few hundred people were transported from downtown Joliet to the streets of New York City, circa 1957.

I cannot do justice here to Central's impressive production. To say that the music and choreography of *West Side Story* are challenging to tackle at the high school level is ludicrous understatement. But after twelve weeks of arduous rehearsal, the cast, crew, and orchestra pulled off a stunning, soulful performance -- they had the audience laughing, gasping, weeping . . . and in the end, cheering.

Afterward, Lily and I milled about in the lobby, drinking in the happy scene of parents, teachers, and students buzzing with post-production excitement. Then something happened I'll never forget. Lily reached into her purse and pulled out her little diary and a pencil. She approached each of the leading cast members, and sweetly asked them for their autographs. Stunned and delighted, they gladly and graciously obliged.

In her eyes, they were stars. I couldn't have agreed more.

Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) of Joliet urges readers to support the fine arts in our public schools.

Mitchell's Food Mart -- A Thriving Throwback

30 December 2010

(Published as "Mitchell's Still Has Magic for Me" in the *Joliet Herald-News*, p14)

Normally I utterly detest shopping. But a few days before Christmas when my wife noted we were running low on some staple food items, I seized the opportunity with gusto: "Great, honey! I'll run to Mitchell's."

A small, nondescript building with a friendly 1950s-vintage lighted sign, Mitchell's Food Mart on Raynor Avenue in Joliet is the epitome of the small neighborhood grocery store, one run by the same family since opening sixty years ago.

Walking inside is like a journey back in time. Customers carefully guide half-size shopping carts down four or five narrow aisles packed full with meticulously arranged inventory. Each item features a little orange price tag that has been applied by hand (no UPC scanning here). The one register for checkout features a friendly and efficient employee who actually knows how to bag groceries and make proper change, both of which are lost arts.

The utterly delightful candy section, strategically placed alongside the checkout line, reminds me of every corner drugstore's sweets aisle from my childhood days. It's got a little bit of everything, much of which (in keeping with the store's small-is-beautiful theme) is available in minute quantities. My two girls go gaga picking out five-cent Tootsies as rewards for being cooperative sidekicks.

The heart and soul of Mitchell's, though, is the butcher counter in the back, a supremely wonderful meat-eater's paradise (vegetarians stop reading now). The first thing I do here is grab a number, because Mitchell's has the wisdom to use this time-honored system that is sadly neglected at most supermarket delis.

Above the lunchmeat slicers are posted the current won-loss records of Chicago's sports teams, adjusted seasonally and updated daily. I always check the scores, then pause to regard the squadron of white-aproned butchers expertly plying their trade behind the counter, a sight I find endlessly fascinating.

Here in the queue is where one best experiences the singular magic of Mitchell's. As folks stand waiting for their portions of hand-cut bacon or tender rump roast to be wrapped up in neat white paper, they inevitably start chatting. Time and again, I've had wonderfully entertaining conversations there with total strangers, or mini-reunions with old acquaintances.

From the outside, it's hard to imagine how a small-scale operation like Mitchell's survives, even thrives, in this era of cavernous supermarkets with their national supply-chain economics and over-the-top product selection.

But from the inside, it's easy to see how.

Mike Bryson lives, shops, and eats in Joliet. Send him word about your favorite neighborhood establishment at mbry22@sbcglobal.net.