



Rivalry, Resignation, and Regionalization

The Relationship of Milwaukee to Chicago Over Time

by John Gurda

When you fly into Milwaukee from the south—say, from Atlanta or perhaps Charlotte—the prescribed route takes you straight up the spine of Lake Michigan. If you're flying at night and lucky enough to have a window seat, the leading edge of Chicagoland appears long before you reach the lake. Somewhere over Indiana, the small towns and scattered farmsteads give way to the continuous Halloween glare of sodium-vapor lights shining up from subdivisions, shopping malls, and highways.

The glare intensifies through the Loop, which from 30,000 feet bears an odd resemblance to Legoland, and extends well into Lake County. Then a distinctive rhythm emerges: bands of relative darkness broken by pools of orange light in Kenosha, Racine, and the sprawling terminal cluster of Milwaukee. Beyond are only the randomly placed lights of rural Wisconsin set against the absolute darkness of the lake.

What you don't see from your window seat is borders. The foot of Lake Michigan appears as a gently curving necklace of four or five major settlements—grossly unequal in size but all distinct and each projecting its particular presence to the heavens.

If you had been able to take the same flight a century ago, in the early decades of electric lighting, the glare would have been a soft incandescent glow, barely perceptible from cruising altitude. The settlements would have been more distinct and the gaps between them much more pronounced.

If you could take the same flight a century from now, the gaps, I'm sure, would be all but gone. Our region would appear as one undifferentiated pool of light from north of Milwaukee down the broad bowl of Lake Michigan to South Bend and beyond.

My purpose here is to explore the region's progression from many to one, from individual clusters to a continuous corridor, with particular attention to the relationship between Chicago and Milwaukee. It's a story I'll tell largely from Milwaukee's point of view (I am, after all, a native son), and it's a story in three parts: rivalry, resignation, and regionalization. >>

John Gurda is the author of *The Making of Milwaukee* and numerous other books. This reflection is an edited version of his presentation at the conference held on July 17, 2012, by the Law School and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.



Bird's-eye view of Chicago, looking west from Lake Michigan, 1853. Created by George Robertson. Chicago History Museum (ICHi-38871).

It all begins with the lake, of course. Chicago and Milwaukee both came to life at the mouths of rivers with superior port potential at a time when everything traveled by water. Both settlements dreamed of prosperity as centers of commerce, exporting the farm products of their rich hinterlands and importing finished goods from the settled East. Both became, over the decades, strongholds of heavy industry as well, and they attracted a United Nations of industrial workers, from Germans and Poles in the nineteenth century to African Americans and Latinos in the twentieth. The two cities are peas of dissimilar size in the same regional pod.

Chicago and Milwaukee grew up as siblings, and they were locked in a fierce sibling rivalry that lasted for years. Both of these hopeful little settlements were after

settlers—the more the better—and whatever hindered one was believed to help the other. Chicago promoters lampooned their northern neighbor as a slow-growing, swamp-ridden outpost, and Milwaukeeans portrayed Chicago as a capital of cholera ruled by “swindlers and sharpers.”

Milwaukee had the early geographic advantage, thanks to its broader bay, deeper river, and a location 90 miles closer to the East Coast by water. For fifteen years, from 1835 to 1850, the lakeshore cities were roughly equal in size. When Byron Kilbourn became mayor in 1848, he declared that regional dominance was Milwaukee’s manifest destiny: “If New York has her Boston, so Milwaukee has her Chicago, in competition for the rich prize which nature awarded and designed to be hers.”

“Chicago and Milwaukee grew up as siblings, and they were locked in a fierce sibling rivalry that lasted for years.”



Bird's-eye view of Milwaukee, looking east toward Lake Michigan from a bluff, long since graded into a slope, at about 6th Street between Wisconsin Avenue and Michigan Street (modern-day names), ca. 1853. Created by George Robertson. Wisconsin Historical Society (WHI-6554).

Chicago begged to differ, naturally—and Chicago, soon enough, had railroads. As Lake Michigan forced overland traffic to its foot, the Windy City's marginal disadvantage in the Age of Sail became a huge advantage in the Age of Rail. The first train chugged into town from the east in 1852, and Chicago was on its way to becoming the rail hub of the entire continent.

Milwaukee was not about to cede Chicago's primacy—not yet, at least. There were repeated attempts to establish a line of “ferry steamers” between Milwaukee and Grand Haven, Michigan, a cross-lake service designed to bypass Chicago and put Milwaukee on the main-traveled route from east to west.

And Byron Kilbourn was determined to win a Wisconsin land grant for his Milwaukee-based railroad, a prize that rival rail magnates south of the border wanted every bit as badly. “Chicago has always looked upon our prosperity and progress with a sinister eye,” wrote the promoter in 1857, “and she cannot bear to see us hold such equal success with her in the contest for supremacy.” It's worth pointing out that Kilbourn, the most ethically flexible of Milwaukee's founders, was explaining why he had bribed the entire Wisconsin legislature in his quest for the grant.

Ferries did cross the lake, and Kilbourn did win the land grant, but Milwaukee finished second anyway. As

Chicago grew into its role as “Freight Handler to the Nation,” the community's population soared accordingly. Chicago was twice its early rival's size in 1860 and five times larger in 1890—roughly the same proportion that has prevailed ever since.

Although Milwaukee came in second, the would-be metropolis refused to wither in the deep shade of its neighbor. Expanding its own rail network and resisting links with Chicago's, the Cream City became the primary funnel for the agricultural wealth of Wisconsin and the farm districts near its borders. By the early 1860s, Milwaukee was the largest shipper of wheat on earth, surpassing, for a time, even Chicago.

The grain trade provided a platform for growth, a critical mass of capital and population that fueled Milwaukee's continuing economic evolution. Shipping farm products gave way to processing them—wheat into flour, barley into beer, hogs and cattle into meat and leather—and processing eventually yielded to manufacturing as the city's economic engine. Homegrown giants such as Allis-Chalmers, Harnischfeger, A. O. Smith, Allen-Bradley, Falk, Chain Belt, Kearney & Trecker, Nordberg, and Harley-Davidson made Milwaukee the self-styled “Machine Shop of the World.” As workers poured in from across the ocean to keep those factories humming, Milwaukee climbed through the ranks to

become America's sixteenth-largest city in 1890, with a population of just over 200,000.

As fast as Milwaukee was growing, Chicago was growing even faster. The Windy City's 1890 population was 1.1 million—enough people to overtake Philadelphia as the second-largest city in the country. America's "Second City" was obviously first in the Midwest, and realistic Milwaukeeans had already resigned themselves to the fact. "Milwaukee is not Chicago," wrote banker John Johnston in 1872, "but there are few cities like Chicago. Still, if Milwaukee be not Chicago, Milwaukee has grown at a rate surpassed by but a very limited number of cities in this whole Union."

As resignation replaced rivalry, Milwaukee became to Chicago what Canada was, and is, to the United States: a distinct and cohesive world of its own, but a world forever overshadowed by its gigantic neighbor to the south. Pierre Trudeau, the colorful French-Canadian who led his country in the 1970s, offered an analogy that could just as easily apply to the Chicago–Milwaukee corridor. Trudeau said that sharing a border with the United States was like "sleeping with an elephant." The beast is only vaguely aware of his smaller neighbor's presence, and when he turns over, there go the covers.

The real wonder, when you think about it, is that Milwaukee could share covers with the elephant at all. It seems surprising, even improbable, that one major

city could develop so close to an even larger metropolis. Traveling west from Chicago, there's no city of any size until you reach Des Moines, more than 300 miles away. Milwaukee lies only 90 miles north of Chicago but has three times the population of Des Moines. One looks in vain for comparable pairings anywhere in North America. Tampa–St. Petersburg, Minneapolis–St. Paul, and Dallas–Fort Worth are all conjoined twins that began under different historical conditions but function as single organisms with linked labor markets. Philadelphia–New York, Washington–Baltimore, and Boston–Providence are better comparisons, but those paired cities are located on different bodies of water and play different economic roles. Milwaukee and Chicago evolved at the same time, on the same lake, with similar ethnic groups and similar industries. Three infinitely arguable factors—the independent rail network of the mid-1800s, the explosive growth of manufacturing later in the century, and the simple fact that it was the commercial capital of a different state—enabled Milwaukee to thrive despite Chicago's proximity.

Milwaukee's relative independence should not be mistaken for autonomy. Sleeping with the elephant has had multiple impacts on the Cream City—some obvious and others less so, some positive and others not. Chicago was, first of all, an enormous market. Just as the United States has always been Canada's best customer, the Windy City absorbed a great deal of what Milwaukee



had to sell—industrial products, primarily, but also beer. Chicago had breweries as early as Milwaukee. Why did they fail to develop a national following? Because their productive capacity was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1871, and Milwaukee’s beer barons were only too happy to step into the breach. By 1887 those barons were producing five times more beer per capita than their Chicago counterparts. An average of 25 railroad cars filled with Milwaukee’s finest pulled up to Chicago’s loading docks every day of the week, and the city’s neighborhoods were dotted with saloons bearing the names of Schlitz, Miller, Pabst, and Blatz.

On the other hand, Chicago’s proximity meant that Milwaukee always came up short in the contest for regional headquarters. Just as the rich seem to get richer, tall cities tend to get taller. When public institutions such as the Federal Reserve Bank or private giants such as Prudential and John Hancock Insurance wanted to establish bases in the heartland, they naturally chose Chicago. Milwaukee didn’t get a first look, much less a second. The same dynamic applied to wholesale houses, notably the Merchandise Mart, and any number of distribution facilities. The lack of regional centers is one of the major reasons that Milwaukee has such an unassuming downtown for a metro area of 1.5 million people.

Chicago played a leading cultural role as well. For generations, Milwaukee’s performing arts scene—particularly in music and theater—was heavily German,

but the city’s reign as the *Deutsch-Athen* of America ended with the anti-German hysteria accompanying World War I. As the singing societies and theatrical troupes left the stage, culture-starved Milwaukeeans had to look south for sustenance. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra played an annual subscription series in Milwaukee that sold out for decades, and local residents flocked to performances by the Chicago Grand Opera and other visiting companies. It was not until the 1950s that Milwaukee developed an independent arts establishment commensurate with its size.

Another Chicago influence, and one that’s far less obvious, was demographic. Between 1910 and 1930, African Americans migrated from the rural South to the urban North by the hundreds of thousands, fleeing Jim Crow laws and seeking jobs. Like a gigantic sponge, Chicago absorbed the major share of the Great Migration to the upper Midwest; Milwaukee, lying squarely in the larger city’s shadow, attracted relatively few newcomers. The numbers are revealing: In 1920, African Americans made up over 4 percent of Chicago’s population and only 0.5 percent of Milwaukee’s. Thirty years later, the contrast was nearly as stark: black residents were 14 percent of Chicago’s population and just 3.4 percent of Milwaukee’s. Rapid growth would lift Milwaukee’s proportion to 14.7 percent by 1970, but its relatively late start helps explain why the city’s African-American community has found it so difficult to make economic headway. >>



“Regionalization, for better or worse, has upset the old relationships and muddied the old lines in recent decades. The evidence is everywhere.”

Of all the influences Chicago has had on Milwaukee—economic, cultural, and demographic—the most profound is probably psychological. The fact that such a huge metropolis lies only 90 miles away has encouraged a modesty bordering on meekness in its northern neighbor. Other metropolitan areas—Denver, St. Louis, and Minneapolis—St. Paul come to mind—stand alone in their regions, unchallenged for supremacy. Milwaukee gave up any dreams of supremacy more than a century ago, and the city’s subordinate status has become ingrained in its collective psyche. In the regional context, Milwaukee, like Canada, has taken on the peculiar invisibility that a younger sibling assumes in the presence of an older brother. Residents experience that status most acutely when they travel abroad. “Where are you from?” they’re asked. “From near Chicago,” they’ve learned to reply.

The result, depending on your point of view, is either an appealing groundedness—no one puts on airs in Brewtown—or a stubborn inferiority complex. Earlier I quoted banker John Johnston on Milwaukee’s secondary status in the region. Here’s the preface to that quote: “There is one thing we are deficient in here. We have not the necessary blow and brag. Not only have we not that, but we daily see men standing with their hands in their pockets whining about Milwaukee being a one-horse town, and such like talk. Such men are not worthy to live here.” In the very next sentence, Johnston identifies what he perceives as the root cause of the local angst: “Milwaukee is not Chicago, but there are few cities like Chicago.” The banker was writing in 1872, but his sentiments could have been expressed yesterday. One hundred and fifty years after Chicago passed Milwaukee by, local residents are still looking down at their shoes.

On the other hand, Chicago has long been the city that Milwaukeeans, and Wisconsinites generally, grow up loving to hate. The rivalry between the Packers and the Bears is only one expression of that attitude, and it’s perhaps the only one that’s truly reciprocal. Feelings north of the border go far beyond football. “They tell me you are wicked and I believe them,” Carl Sandburg

wrote of his adopted hometown. So do Wisconsinites. Consider this quote from the *Milwaukee Sentinel*: “We have frequently noticed that whenever any descent was made upon dens of infamy in Chicago—for the police there are subject to spasmodic action—a number of the routed scoundrels always come to Milwaukee, and crime here receives an impetus from their presence.” One such gang, the *Sentinel* surmised, was behind no fewer than 30 robberies. The article was written in 1857.

Even though they know better, even though many of them have friends or relatives living across the line, Wisconsinites tend to harbor a stereotype of Chicagoans as fast-driving, lane-changing marauders who clog the state’s highways every weekend and take over the beauty spots. If you throw in the occasional environmental lawsuit—over Chicago’s diversion of Lake Michigan water or the smog that wafts across the state line every summer—you have the makings of a durable resentment. “Flatlander” is one name Wisconsinites have for their neighbors to the south. “FIB” is a cruder epithet, and I need only mention that the “I” in the acronym stands for “Illinois.” It’s convenient, of course, to have a moral foil so close at hand. Anyone living north of the border has license to feel, by contrast with Chicago, more genuine, less tightly wound, and infinitely more honest—whatever the truth may or may not be.

The truth is that all comparisons, invidious and other, have become increasingly moot. Regionalization, for better or worse, has upset the old relationships and muddied the old lines in recent decades. The evidence is everywhere. Amtrak’s Hiawatha service has made the Milwaukee–Chicago route the sixth-busiest passenger rail corridor in the country, and the trains, with seven roundtrips daily, are busy in both directions. My wife competed for a few years in the Chicagoland Triathlon, which was held in Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin. The lakefront marinas in Kenosha and Racine depend heavily on boaters from northern Illinois, and more than a few condos in downtown Milwaukee are owned by Chicagoans. The fact that Milwaukee lies

closer to Chicago's affluent North Shore than its grittier South Shore makes a significant difference. For Chicago residents with disposable income, Milwaukee offers a user-friendly airport, convenient access to Cubs games, and great festivals without the hassle of getting to Grant Park. Milwaukee's Irish Fest is able to bill itself as the world's largest Irish festival in part because roughly a third of its patrons come from Illinois.

But Interstate 94 is definitely a two-way corridor. Chicagoans drive up to Mitchell Field for domestic flights, and Milwaukeeans drive down to O'Hare to fly overseas. Chicagoans come to Summerfest, and Milwaukeeans go to Taste of Chicago and Ravinia Park. Chicagoans head north for a more leisurely pace and relief from congestion, while Milwaukeeans head south to experience a genuine big-city buzz. For 30 years, first as young parents and now as empty-nesters, my wife and I have taken the train south for an annual weekend in the Loop. For almost as long, I've pedaled on my own through a different section of the city every summer, using a wonderful book by Dominic Pacyga called *Chicago: City of Neighborhoods*. Chicago really is a great town to live 90 miles away from.

What I've learned from my excursions is that Chicago can be understood as Milwaukee times five. The successes are on a different scale, and so are the problems. The Loop is one of the grandest human creations on the planet, but you'll find sprawling tracts of derelict industrial land within sight of its gleaming towers. The lakefront is magnificent, but a few miles inland you'll encounter neighborhoods such as Englewood and Austin and South Chicago that seem to be hanging on by their fingernails. In demographic terms, Chicago is a majority-minority city surrounded by a ring of largely white suburbs. The identical patterns, adjusted for scale, are apparent in Milwaukee.

It is high time for Chicago and Milwaukee to recognize their similarities. It's time for the two cities to start acting more like siblings and less like strangers. Chicago needs to do a better job of acknowledging its little brother's existence, and prideful Milwaukee needs to acknowledge Chicago's place as head of the regional family. That does not mean that Brewtown has to surrender its cultural sovereignty. It does not mean installing a one-fifth replica of the Millennium Park "Bean" on the lakefront or giving Rahm Emanuel an office in city hall. It does mean taking strategic advantage of Milwaukee's location. It means, at a

minimum, improving transportation links between the two cities—a cause that was not helped when Wisconsin turned down \$810 million in high-speed rail funds. It means opening the door to new residents who work in Chicago. On a higher level, it means presenting whenever possible a united regional front in competition with other regions for employment and investment.

The relationship between Milwaukee and Chicago is, from Milwaukee's perspective, a story of rivalry, resignation, and regionalization. The cities' parallel histories have produced a family relationship and, like all family relationships, it's complicated. The frictions of the past are not going to vanish overnight, nor is the native human tendency to compete with those closest to



John Gurda

us. Vivid polarities already exist between each city and its own suburbs, and between each metropolis and its own state. How much harder will it be to bridge the gap that circumstance and tradition have created between Milwaukee and Chicago?

The task may be daunting, but the time has come to look beyond borders. Any Milwaukeean who wants to return to the supposed glories of past independence is bound to be disappointed, and so is any Chicagoan who wants to resurrect the City of the Big Shoulders. For better or worse, the old order has ended: The walls are down, the world is flat, communication is instantaneous. Every resident of the Chicago–Milwaukee corridor lives at a particular address, but each also lives in a region that is growing smaller and more interconnected every year. As the bands of darkness between the cities disappear, as the southern end of Lake Michigan glows with a continuous light, it's time for everyone to take the view from 30,000 feet. ■