Jefferson Park Neighborhood Association est.2001
Newsletter for Spring 2026

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Meetings

You are all invited to JPNA meetings at 7pm Congregational Church of Jefferson Park, 5320 W. Giddings.
March 26, 2026 — 45th Ward Alderman Jim Gardiner to discuss information regarding the ward.
April 29, 2026 — Bob Glaves, Executive Director of the Chicago Bar Foundation since 1999. He will provide information about free and affordable resources; and, how one can get assistance for legal problems residents commonly run across.
May 27, 2026 TBD Free parking is available at the Hoyne drive-up Bank, Milwaukee & Giddings. Refreshments will be served.

Need a paddle partner for a 12 hour canoe trip down the North Branch of the Chicago River from the Skokie Lagoons to River Park, or someone to ride bicycles with from Jefferson Park up to the Evanston Lighthouse and back or maybe something less exerting like taking in a Turkish movie at the Music Box Theater, the movie was titled, “Kedi” and it was a very fun movie about cats. These are all things I did with people that I first met at the Jefferson Park Neighborhood Association. Come to the monthly meetings and meet some new neighbors to hang out with and have an adventure or two. . ***By Bob Bank***

The canoe trip began with renting a canoe at the late and legendary Ralph Freese’s Canoe Base which was on east side of Narragansett Avenue just north of Irving Park Road, sadly the Canoe Base and the blacksmith shop that was inside are gone, replaced by condos, but you can still rent canoes elsewhere. Ralph Freese was a legendary promoter of canoeing and of our rivers. He told me he began canoeing while he was a student at Steinmetz High School, towing his canoe by bicycle to the river and he never lost his enthusiasm for canoeing for the rest of his life. Now, back to the canoe trip, when I stopped in to see Ralph at his Canoe Base store and told Ralph of Ron Ernst and my plan to canoe the North Branch from the Skokie Lagoons down to River Park just south of Foster Avenue, he invited me to sit down and watch a few minutes of a video of movie he was in, that was about a historic reenactment of French fur trappers canoeing the river back in the late 1600’s. After some discussion about canoeing the North Branch, Ralph pulled out a map of the river and asked me to mark it anywhere I encountered fallen trees blocking our path on our trip, so that he could get the County to remove those trees. This should have been my first clue that this trip was going to take some time. After the guys at the Canoe Base tied down the canoe to the top of my vehicle, I asked one of them how long he thought it would take us to canoe the distance, he put his hand on his chin and looked up in the air and said, “Umm maybe 8 hours.” That would be the obvious second clue that this trip was going to take a while. With that I said good-bye to Ralph and his team and drove home with the canoe on top of my car.

Early the next morning our friend and also a JPNA member, Frank Suerth followed us over to River Park to leave his van and then rode with us up to the Skokie Lagoons just south of the Botanic Gardens. Once there, we put the canoe in at the boat launch and Frank drove my car back to River Park, so that we could put the canoe on the car and drive back home after our trip. This was not a good time to check if I had my second set of car keys with me, but luckily I checked and of course I had the keys.. Well, we paddled along and quickly came upon our first dam, at Willow Road. We pulled the canoe out of the water and over a little hill then down a stair like revetment and put in the water once again. It wasn’t long before we came to our second dam at Winnetka Road, here we met a fisherman on a pier explicitly built for canoes to portage around the dam and not coincidentally built by Ralph Freese in his blacksmith shop. After the Winnetka Road dam the river heads west under the Edens Expressway, just south of the New Trier West High School campus then under Happ Rd. and an old wooden railroad trestle that used to serve the Chicago & North Shore Railway which last ran in 1963. Here is where the East Fork (Skokie River) meets the Middle Fork of the Chicago River and here it can get very shallow. It was at these shallow points that our canoe began bottoming out and I was forced to get out and tow the canoe and Ron until we got back into deeper water. I brought some boots with that I could easily slip over my shoes, since Ron didn’t have any boots, it was better for me to get out and pull the canoe into deeper water. **(Note: make sure your partner brings some boots).** Really though, the muddy river bottom would suck your shoes right off, some kind of boot is highly recommended. Pulling the canoe, even with Ron in it was effortless and it was easier for me to get the boots on and off and to get in and out of the canoe, as I was in the stern of the canoe, than for Ron who was in the bow, besides, Ron’s knee was somewhat questionable. Still, we laughed to think what a sight we would be, to anyone who might see me pulling Ron in the canoe; the only thing that would have been funnier is if Ron was holding a parasol. I would have to repeat this feat many times throughout our trip.

As we passed through Chick Evans Golf Course, just south of Golf Road, the West Fork meets the Middle Fork that we were on. This is a very pretty setting with a handsome wooden bridge going over the confluence of the two forks of the river. An amusing thing at this point is that the riverbed is completely lined with lost golf balls. At the south end of the golf course at Beckwith Road, we had to portage around another dam. This is where we took our lunch break. I called my wife from my cell phone and thanked her for making the sandwiches for us, the last thing we would eat until nearly 10:00PM! As we paddled along, we saw a frog, a turtle and old starter motor, a couple of fish, a half dozen shopping carts, a dozen tires, a dozen deer and many, many more golf balls. ***Continued...***

RIVER CONTINUED

We passed two more golf courses, and the water carries the lost golf balls down the river quite a ways.

There was one more dam at Howard Street by Tam O' Shanter Golf Club which we had to portage. At the Bunker Hill Forest Preserve near Devon Avenue we encountered an enormous log jam, the river parted around a small island right in the middle of the river. The river was completely blocked. We decided Ron would get out on the left bank and see what was the best way around the blockage. I watched Ron climb along the ridge and then suddenly, crash! Ron dropped straight down at least 10 feet as the plateau beneath his feet collapsed! Luckily Ron was okay, Ron got back in the canoe, and we were going to paddle over to the other bank to see if it would be any easier to get through on that side. We were both sitting in the canoe, when all of a sudden, we were both in the water soaked before we knew it. The canoe had flipped over, I can only guess that the bow suddenly slid from the embankment and tipped over, depositing us both in the river. Fortunately, my cell phone was in the dry bag and nothing important was ruined. We portaged the canoe a 100 yards or so and had to put-in on a steep bank. We paddled another 100 yards where we had to get past another downed tree. This one Ron climbed on top of the huge fallen tree while the canoe continued underneath, then he climbed back down into the canoe, seconds later it was my turn to do the same. It was now beginning to be dusk, and I used my cell phone to call Frank, to ask him to let the Canoe Base know we wouldn't be bringing the canoe back until tomorrow. Frank offered to pick us up, and as tempting as an offer that was, we refused, determined to finish the trip. Through Gompers Park and south underneath Foster Avenue then back north under Foster Avenue through Bohemian National Cemetery and back south under Foster Avenue again. On our 3rd and last pass under Foster Avenue, Ron decided to test the echo quality under the bridge by yelling, "Hello" but instead of hearing the expected echo, we heard a voice out of the shadows say, BE CAREFUL! Apparently, there was someone in the inky shadows or…maybe not, after all we just passed through a cemetery.

The strange warning was quickly forgotten though, for as soon as we came out from under the bridge, a big bright full moon was standing in front of us, right down the middle of the river, what a beautiful sight. It made me think that it was the same beautiful sight that people canoeing down the river saw a hundred, two, hundred maybe a thousand years ago.

The sight of the moon erased any fatigue that we may have had. As we passed Eugene Field Park, the riverbed becomes a concrete trough that you could hear the paddles scrape against. Here, we bisect the North Park University and Von Steuben High School campuses. Alas, we come to boat ramp just before the spillway (since demolished) drops this section of the North Branch into the confluence of the North Shore Channel and the rest of the North Branch of the Chicago River. As we pulled our canoe out at 8:30PM, a crowd gathered above us. After the shock of seeing two people get out of the river from seemingly nowhere, they peppered us with questions about our trip and expressed interest in trying it for themselves someday.

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Neighborhood Activities

Board Game Day. Second Tuesday of the Month. 11am—12:30pm

Location: Eden UCC, 5051 W. Gunnison St. 60630

Jeff Fest. July 31, August 1, and August 2 at Jefferson Memorial Park

16TH DISTRICT

CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT
5151 N. MILWAUKEE AVE
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