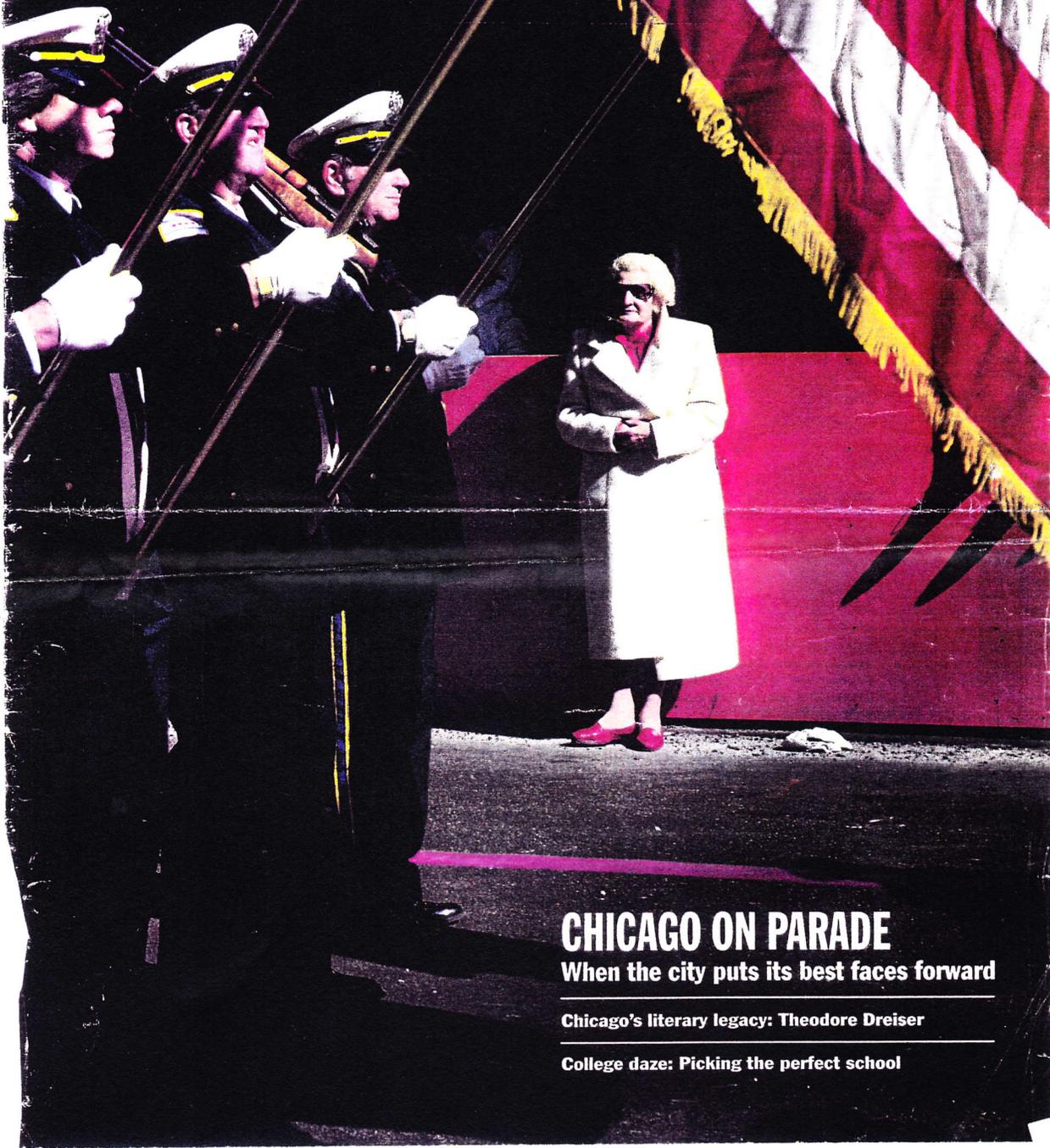


# Chicago Tribune Magazine

OCTOBER 9, 1994 • SECTION 10



## CHICAGO ON PARADE

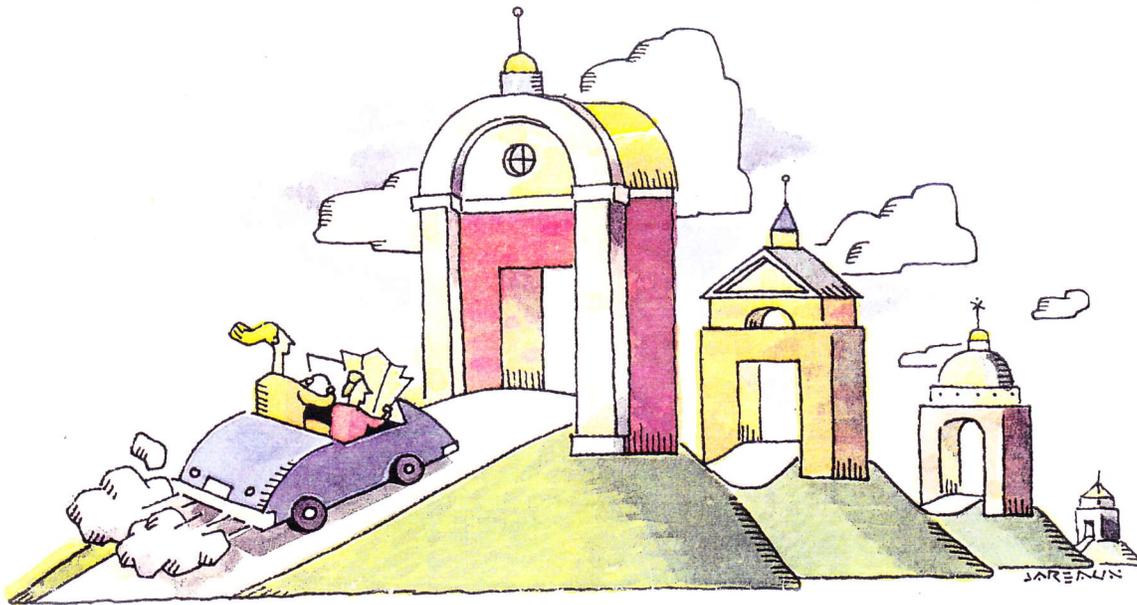
When the city puts its best faces forward

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Chicago's literary legacy: Theodore Dreiser

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College daze: Picking the perfect school



# DEGREES OF INFLUENCE

Perhaps the campus tour  
is simply the only  
vacation tolerable  
for families  
with older teenagers

Essay by **Marya Smith**

**T**he Grand Tour of colleges has become as routine as braces for the caring middle-class family. Last year, as I walked with my daughter, across the groomed acres of academe, I found myself wondering when the campus visit changed from optional to required.

I sometimes picture the change happening in one clear, clean stroke of resolve, a Magna Carta sort of memo appearing at 3:15 one July afternoon, some time in the early '80s, simultaneously on campuses across the country. I imagine a crisp, official document instantly demarcating the casual past of "Sure, feel-free-to-look-around-we-might-have-an-extra-course-book-somewhere" from the structured present of info session/campus tour/interview/sleek brochure. Such whimsical thoughts swept over me as I tried to listen respectfully to yet another earnest admissions director tell me about

*Marya Smith is a free-lance writer.*

her college's unique mission.

Of course, I realize that the sometimes visits of a wandering tribe or two grew into a steady, predictable pattern slowly, indecipherably, with the college admissions people adjusting haltingly, gradually, until the frequency of the visits merged with the realities of the colleges' own declining enrollments and endowments. The Grand Tour simply evolved, benefiting

both colleges and visitors, and the Tour itself is just a component of today's full-fledged college marketing effort.

On these requisite college visits, the sellers show their wares, the buyers look them over. The intriguing twist to all this is that the chill of January brings a significant shift in roles, with the colleges becoming the arbitrary buyers, the students the groveling sellers.

But on a fall day on a pretty quad, January is light years away, the application form still a tabula rasa, and family units are busy shopping the college circuit. The parents are all roughly my age, by all appearances college graduates from the mid-'60s to mid-'70s. A generic group. We are the same folks who conquered Europe with backpacks and Michelin Guides. At campus after campus, we meander together, our offspring walking as far ahead of us as possible, behind student tour guides (all of whom can walk backwards and talk to a group at the same time; I cannot easily perform either task even separately).

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBIN JAREAUX

We parents often make small talk. A common refrain: "I never saw my alma mater until I showed up for orientation." The generation that didn't visit is dutifully taking its offspring to college campuses from Swarthmore to Stanford, Dartmouth to Duke, and onward to Oberlin and Northwestern. Is it the age-old tale of giving the kids what we never had—in this case, more choices? Of course, the idea of choice is largely illusory, since the colleges—at least the status ones—most often do the final choosing.

Perhaps the campus tour is simply the only vacation tolerable for families with older teenagers, those restless young so fearful and so eager to burst the womb of the homestead. At least this kind of trip keeps the conversation focused, the disputes ("No one else is wearing a shirt and tie") confined.

Competitive parenting should not be ruled out as a strong motivator for the Grand Tour. If Susan's parents took her to four campuses, we'll go to seven. So what if this leads to the if-it's-Tuesday-it-must-be-Wesleyan syndrome. This numbing of the senses is nothing compared to the satisfaction the male parent gains from mapping out a route that covers the maximum number of prime campuses in the space of seven days. (Woe to the family that has two weeks to devote to this.)

Parental one-upmanship has certainly been known to spill over into the casual chats among the parent/strangers sharing the campus pilgrimage. "We're going to Amherst, Williams and Wellesley next" is matched with "We're on to Yale, Princeton and Cornell." Almost as if visiting assumes acceptance and enrollment. But no one really assumes that. The point of the parental volley is to reveal savvy. An awareness of the status schools.

For it is the status schools that have the clout. They are not as busy wooing prospective customers with slick brochures, traveling salespersons and the other paraphernalia of the recruitment effort. These schools receive thousands of applications. Oh sure, they put in some effort for "hot" prospects—athletic or academic superstars—but in general a status school holds all the cards.

Thus knowledge of the pecking order of colleges is critical. A great part of the challenge of the college tour is understanding the ins and outs of each college's acceptance profile, and determining whether a son or daughter can make the cut. This may go a long way to explaining why the college application process tends to appeal to the parent with the most testosterone: It's a competitive venture.

In fact, the entire birth canal from adolescence to adulthood via college is a distinctly male enterprise, far removed from the tedium of day-in, day-out child-rearing. This is the play-off, a world of lists, maps, schedules and above all, score cards.

Rating is integral to the entire game plan. We rate the schools. From long shot to fall-back. We rate our children in the process. Yet that's exactly what we were determined we would never do. Oh, well, it can't hurt, this one time, can it? It's for their own good.

Part of the fascination with studying, ana-

lyzing, sizing up the colleges and taking charge of the whole process may come down to the need to show mastery over a past experience that was overwhelming. (The old, "If I knew then what I know now...") Most people have vivid memories of their first semester away from home, the shock of being out in the world. No matter that it was a sheltered campus world—a shock is a shock is a shock.

So when our children approach this rite of passage, perhaps it reawakens that old scared freshman self, and our mature, more masterly self wants to step in and slay the old demons. (Of course, we're slaying them for ourselves. Our children will always have their own demons to face down.) Still, we move around these campuses as if we own them now, each and every one under the sway of our judgment.

And then we're back in the car, with the map out, figuring out how many hours until the next campus, when to eat, where to stop to buy the compulsory T-shirt, which is, of course, the hallmark of our children's generation. The T-shirt is essential to the experience; without it, it may as well not have happened.

And who knows? Maybe the T-shirts help them keep all the campuses straight after they've returned home. How else does anyone remember which college had the air-conditioned freshman dorms, which served ice cream at every meal, including breakfast, and other distinguishing features? For alas, although each

college's academic and social mission was stated clearly and with feeling, they have all blurred into one. Perhaps I should have bought a few T-shirts myself.

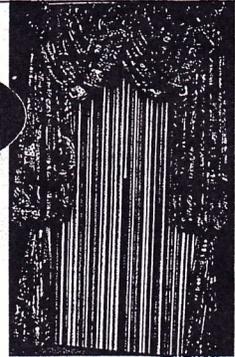
There is work to be done after the Grand Tour. We parents have reviewed the prizes: now the children must win them for us. Of course, we mean, for themselves. We just want the best for them. We don't pretend we aren't aware of the status element of the college rating system. After all, we aren't 17. We know how the world works.

Which gives me pause. How did we get from our own 17-year-old idealism to this worldliness we claim in the present, and what have we lost along the way?

Despite the mind-deadening similarities among all these hallowed institutions, my brain and heart manage to send out a few faint questions. I find myself wondering when colleges became a commodity, and what it means. Or were they always a product to acquire on the way to something else? Perhaps they were always primarily a status label.

College, particularly the right college, seems to be one clear-cut way a classless society like ours confers a class position. It appears to be a truly democratic process: If you are bright enough and hard-working enough, you can go to Harvard, despite the exorbitant expense. The college admissions process purports to be one that selects, winnows out the cream of the crop

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across the land, solely on the basis of merit. (No matter that many a capable student isn't even guided to apply to brand-name schools. Or that many others are accepted and, even with loans and other financial assistance, cannot afford to attend. Our faith that it is the ultimate system of equality provides a large measure of its power.) Is it any wonder, then, that most dutiful middle-class parents are willing to do whatever it takes to confer on their children that indisputable mark of being among the chosen? The Grand Tour is just part of the quest to attain the Status College, Class of the Best.

So we survey the possibilities and advise our children in order to assure them a place in the upper ranks of our status-conscious world. I think of aspiring families in past centuries who jockeyed for court positions for their promising young men and women, to confer honor on the family and procure a chance for worldly attainment for the young people. The parental urge repeats itself: Give them the chance so they can make something of themselves in this world.

**W**hen I started college I was largely ignorant of all of this, although my parents weren't. Because they understood what the right college degree means, I attended and graduated from a status, or brand-name, school. My children, too, have attained the prize and both attend status-conferring schools. I admit this, knowing it can cut both ways. A reader might think, with the golden ring in hand, she can well afford to muse on the shallowness of the whole endeavor. On the other hand, if I don't admit it, another reader might dismiss my musings as sour grapes.

But back to my own college days, before I fully understood the implications of the where of my diploma. My classmates and I were the earnest young our children are today. We had an idea of college as a place apart. We had this sense that we were there to learn and question, and learn how to question—an idea that we should at least try to be open to startling ideas and new people.

Were these notions merely youthful illusions? Did this higher place ever exist? If not, why did we believe in it for at least four years, and often, much longer?

No, I haven't forgotten that college was also a place where many of us tried on a variety of more earthy "grownup" roles, including drinking and mooning and sex. We were earnest in our play as well. But there was always a tension between the partying and the work, always the sense that there was never enough time to grasp all that was available to us, that there was always something more we should be stretching toward.

We were challenged and we were humbled, and the idea, as I recall, was to open us up to learning for the rest of our lives, and to searching for truth.

As I took the stacks of glossy brochures out of my suitcase after our final Grand

Tour, I felt a little embarrassed to think that one of the things I've learned in what is so far the rest of my life, is the hierarchy of colleges. I'm a little ashamed that this knowledge has such importance that I have gone to great lengths to pass it on to my children, that I have made a pilgrimage with them to the hallowed places.

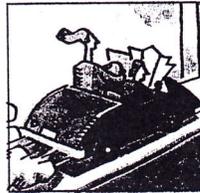
Now, in the reflective months following, and as I watch the Grand Tours continue for other families, I ponder my own intent. I find myself wondering why the college acceptance process took on such importance in our family life, why my husband and I took such pains to pass on our canon of knowledge with its litany of acceptable schools.

For when I search myself and the world—and my own honest experience in it—probing for the truth of the matter, I see clearly that the college rating system (complete with the U.S. News & World Report annual scoreboard) is a marketing competition, a contest unworthy of the participants. I know, and have worked with, far too many talented, productive people without a designer-label diploma to believe in the imprimiture of an elite school.

What I know in my heart is that almost any liberal arts college will do. Certainly it helps to have a pool of bright, motivated students and a group of committed professors. But many, many colleges that are not household names have both these components. What I think needs to be said out loud more often is that rating colleges—and thereby rating the people who attend them—is largely an arbitrary game. In real life, there are a host of winners, and a college education is not a competition, not a commodity, but a very special experience, wherever it takes place.

Any place where young people and qualified teachers are allowed to spend time together exploring what we trust is our culture, divorced from the mundane worries of life, any place apart like this fosters intellectual and emotional development and encourages the next generation to become more fully human.

The teenagers we send to college grow up more aware, more open, acquiring values and the knack for testing them throughout their lives. No matter which liberal arts institution they attend.



The truth is that college is what it always has been in this century, in this country—a wonderful place to grow up. That has certainly been a privilege, and although I wish it were a universal right, I still value the privilege. I only regret that we have crafted it into a status product and are marketing it with such vigor on both sides. And I am dismayed at my own eager participation in the entire process.

I remember being taught to step back and question and reflect. I remember being shown the wisdom of letting in even a conclusion that challenges some of my most comfortable beliefs. I hope my children learn those lessons better than I did. I hope they love their four years of college, and I hope they go on to live lives that do not include measuring one another by degrees. ■