

History of the Pickle (our family outing)
a **TRUE** story, by Mergel Funsky

So, there we were one morning, sitting around the breakfast table (I'm drinking juice), when all of a sudden eagle-eyed Ginny shouts, "Merg, look at this!" And there, buried deep in the Chicago Tribune, she spots the following story:

Chicago Tribune **Food**

By Elizabeth Schiele, Special to the Tribune
May 12, 2010

In a pickle: David Leider of the Norwood Park Historical Society will share the history of the pickle, with its 1800s origins at Squire Dingee Co. of Wilmette to other Chicago firms such as Clausen, Libbey, Budlong and Reid Murdoch which played a role before the pickle blight of 1911. Free. 7 p.m. Wednesday, May 26. Noble-Seymour-Crippen House, 5624 N. Newark Ave. Information, 773-631-4633 or info@norwoodparkhistoricalsociety.org.

So immediately I tell Simon to save the date, so he can take me to the lecture so I can learn even more about pickles. Simon tells me to go take a bus.

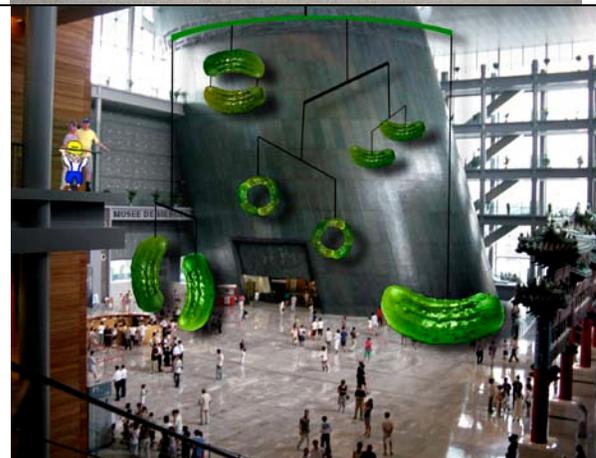
But there is no bus to Norwood Park. In fact, none of us even knows where Norwood Park is, or whether it exists. Sort of like Oz. Or Brigadoon, and maybe it appears only for one day and then the history of the pickle fades into the brine, not to reappear for a hundred years. So now Simon *has* to take me.

I immediately shot off an email to this so-called pickle expert, so he could prepare for our arrival:

Dear David Leider (and the rest of you in the Historical Society):

Hey, I'm Mergel Funsky, and you don't know me, but I don't know you either!

I'm really excited, because my friend Simon (he's the guy who imagines me) is going to bring me to hear your lecture on Pickles, that we just read about in the Tribune. Pickles are my favorite food (but only half sour and crunchy ones, like they serve at the Carnegie Deli in New York). I'm a big fan of pickles so now I will learn even more at your lecture. I hope you can tell us some sources for the crunchy half-sour ones, because they're hard to find here in Chicago.



I'm attaching some of my pickle pictures, just so you know I'm not some novice who can't tell a gherkin from a dill. I have a lot more pictures that don't have anything to do with pickles, so if you want, just write and ask, and I will send you about 6,827 of them.

For one of my birthdays Simon gave me Dilly (that's my giant pickle) and maybe I'll bring Dilly to your lecture (don't worry, he's very quiet). Will your lecture have pictures of famous pickles? Like, Simon imagined my Pickle Mobile for me, and there aren't too many of them around.

But, at any rate I'll see you at your lecture. You won't see me, because I'm imaginary, but that way you'll recognize me, because I'll probably be the only imaginary guy there.

Mergel Funsky

For some strange reason, this David guy didn't write back; probably too busy working on his lecture.

So for the next two weeks I made a list of questions that I wanted Simon to ask David the pickle guy. Simon helped me think of some good ones:

Me: How's this: How many pickles are there in the entire world?

Simon: This guy's a historian, and that's not a question about history. History is what happened a long time ago.

Me: OK, try this: How many pickles were there in the entire world a long time ago?

Simon: Yeah, that should be right up his alley.

Finally the big day arrived. Simon called up the Norwood Park Historical Society, just to make sure the lecture was still on. Susan, a volunteer, said yes, but first there would be the annual election of officers. I got all excited, because maybe I could get elected; I lost when I ran for President in 2004. But Simon told me if I won, I'd have to attend every monthly meeting, and he doubted there'd be many more lectures on pickles.

So all four of us got in the car (Simon, Ginny, me and Dilly (he's 3 ½ feet tall, so we packed him into a garbage bag)) and headed off to find Norwood Park. It's at the very end of a long line of traffic.



The Crippen House claims to be the oldest mansion in Illinois, but fortunately they still have bathrooms. There was a table of refreshments in the back, but they said we weren't supposed to eat until after the lecture. I was hungry, so being imaginary, it was easy to nibble, because they couldn't see me. BUT – they all could see my hat! Because Simon put it on top of Dilly, who was sitting with us.

First some lady calls the meeting to order, looks straight at us, and says, "I see we have some visitors. Would you like to introduce yourselves?" (How did she recognize us? I guess she's not used to seeing lawyers). So, Simon says a few words about who we are, including Dilly, and nevertheless, they let us stay.

So first they hold their big election. They already had a slate of proposed officers that had been nominated at the previous meeting (which I missed, not knowing that I might

be eligible) so they just asked everyone to vote by saying “Aye”. So we all voted, and I got to vote too! (This is more than I was allowed to do in the Presidential election, which shows that Norwood Park has a more open, liberal policy toward imaginary people (at least when accompanied by giant pickles)).

And then came the big event – the pickle lecture! Boy, was it boring! Did you know that the Illinois pickle industry began in 1856? Neither did I. Did you know how the Carnegie Deli gets their pickles to crunch so well? Neither did David the lecturer! He had lots of slides of the outsides of giant vats where pickles got their vinegar, but David never fell into one, so he couldn’t tell us what it felt like to be a pickle!

This lecturer really was into railroads and model trains, so he showed hundreds of old black and white slides of ancient industrial buildings (purporting to be pickle factories) sitting besides ancient railroad tracks. But nothing like the way I would imagine it:



He told us a lot more stuff – but you can read about it in the newspaper – because that's the next part of my story.

When the lecture ended we all applauded (because that was the best part). So when everyone headed for the dessert table – which had all sorts of pickle treats, but NO Carnegie pickles – some guy came up to us and said he was from a world famous newspaper, that served the ENTIRE Norwood Park area. (Probably most of its readers were here at the lecture). And he asked Simon and me a whole bunch of questions, mainly because he hadn't seen too many giant pickles before. (Many in Norwood Park lead a sheltered life).

So, then we said goodbye to everyone, who were now our friends (Simon said it was like being at a bake sale) and drove home. On the way home we stopped for big juicy hamburgers at a local pub (but no pickles).

End of story. And they lived happily ever after. NOT.

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So, a week later, the news breaks! The Norwood Times Review publishes its ground-breaking story letting the world know what it missed. And evidently the reporter missed most of it too, because he concentrated most of his article not on me, but on the dumb lecture! A picture is worth a thousand words (there are 1,276 words up to this point), so at least he knew what to choose: the only picture in his article is one of the four of us! You can read the whole article (separate attachment) to learn more than you want to know about the history of pickles in Illinois, but the crucial portion of the article is contained in two important paragraphs:

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The 'dill' of the century: Local pickle biz boomed until experiencing a crunch in 1911

June 3, 2010

By **PATRICK BUTLER** pbutler@pioneerlocal.com



Simon Aronson is accompanied by a 4-foot pickle at a discussion headed by David Leider about the history of pickles and the Great Pickle Blight of 1911 at the Noble-Seymour-Crippen House in Chicago. (Allison Williams/Staff photographer)

... Among them was retired Lincoln Park attorney and magician Simon Aronson, who came with what appeared to be a 4-foot-long plastic pickle named Mergel Funsy -- and indicated he wasn't quite sure whether he created the pickle character or vice versa five years ago.

Aronson said he and Funsy go to as many pickle events as they can, but added there aren't as many as there once were. ...

Did you see that!!! The dumb reporter got ME confused with Dilly (probably because Dilly was wearing my hat), and he left out the six hundred other things Simon told him about me. Clearly not Pulitzer reporting.

So, I hope the rest of the world isn't left with the mistaken impression that I am a giant pickle (I'm only 2 ½ feet tall).

* * *

Moral of my story (what I learned):

1. I don't want to be a historian.
2. I don't want to be a reporter.
3. It's not worth going to Norwood Park for a hamburger.
4. The adage "I don't care what they say, as long as they spell my name right" isn't completely true. You still don't want to be mistaken for a pickle.