

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

www.ci.norfolk.ne.us

February 12, 2010

"Max Grinnell"

As an urbanologist, Max Grinnell has studied the challenges of city life and as a writer and traveler he does his best to communicate the beauty of that life.



Grinnell will be at the Norfolk Public library March 30 to talk about his travel and writing experiences. Mike Caldarraro, head of the library, said Grinnell will bring a unique perspective to Norfolk.

"Max has written many books and articles that give visitors a way to discover things about a city they wouldn't any other way," Caldarraro said.

Grinnell has taught courses on urban studies, community development, geography, planning and sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Boston University, the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and the University of Chicago. He is most known for authoring a book about the history of Hyde Park- the famous neighborhood in Chicago where President Obama first resided in 1984 and lived at with his family until moving to the White House.

Grinnell's most recent books-all published in 2009- were: "Rough Guide: Chicago" (third edition); the ninth edition of "Rough Guide: USA" which featured his insights into traveling around Chicago and the greater Midwest region; and Frommers' "24 Great Walks in Chicago."

Email interview with Grinnell:

Have you been to Nebraska before? Is so, what were your favorite things to do and see here?

I have been to Nebraska several times, and over the past several summers I've been grading AP exams at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. We all get together for a week and grade thousands of tests. All of the grading happened in a large building on the Nebraska State Fairgrounds (which I've heard has now moved), and on our breaks we got to check out the horses stabled nearby.

I know Lincoln best, and it doesn't get much better than taking one of the fantastic tours of the State Capitol (designed by Bertram Goodhue), walking down O Street, and taking in some live music at the Zoo Bar to cap things off in the evening.

As part of the research for my next book, I also visited the Homestead National Historic Monument in Beatrice this past summer. (there's a profile on my site: <http://www.theurbanologist.com/?p=43>)

What's up next? Well, besides getting around Norfolk here soon, I'm looking forward to floating down the Niobrara River during my visit, weather permitting!

As a longtime resident of Chicago and expert on Hyde Park, have you met the Obamas?

The short answer is "sort of", as I met Michelle Obama several times during my time as a student at the University of Chicago. After President Obama was elected, I sent an autographed copy of my book on Hyde Park to their home, but I have yet to be offered a cabinet-level position. I'm still available for such a position, in case something opens up...

Other recent published articles are "Profile of River North" for the "Not For Tourist's Guide to Chicago" and "Profile of East Boston" for the "Not For Tourist's Guide to Boston". Grinnell has also written about lesser known locations like the Prohibition history in Portland, Maine, the circus history of southern Wisconsin, the peanut culture of Virginia and Polish landmarks in Chicago's Northwest Side.

In his presentations at libraries and conferences, Grinnell talks about the world of travel writing, his own experiences on the road, and how others can get started in travel or narrative writing for fun, pleasure, and profit.

Grinnell received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Chicago and now splits his time between Boston and Chicago. Besides teaching, he is currently working on a new book that will be focused on documenting the legacy of the Federal Writers Guides written in the 1930 and 1940s.

Caldarraro said the presentation by Grinnell is free to the public and will be held at the library at 7:00 March 30.

Email interview with Grinnell (continued):

What was the latest interesting place that you travelled to?

I'm going to split the difference, and throw out one urban one, and one that's not-so urban. I was in Providence, Rhode Island last weekend, and in terms of overall "walkability" and 19th century architecture, it's a true gem. A few weeks back I was in northern Florida, and if you want to just take a trip down a warm, spring-fed river, you can't do much better than the Ichetucknee Springs State Park. It was 45 degrees outside, but the water was warm, and the park was empty. (Rare sight!)

Chicago is still cold in March. Any recommendations for a visitor from Nebraska to see there that time of year? How about in Boston?

A couple of lesser-visited gems in Chicago include Hull House on the University of Illinois at Chicago's campus west of the Loop. It's overlooked by locals, and they have a great museum there. I'd also recommend the International Museum of Surgical Sciences, which provides everything from surgical tool exhibits to materials on the history of nursing. Probably not the best bet for small children, but it's certainly appropriate for teenager and up.

If you're in Boston, make a trip over to the Mapparium at the Mary Baker Eddy Museum (this is also the home of the Christian Science Monitor newspaper). Basically, it's a tremendous three story painted glass globe, and visitors can walk through it on a glass bridge. It's a bit like being in a Bond movie, and you can also look at all the political boundaries from 1935, as that's when the globe was built.

Also, I'd suggest the Harvard Museum of Natural History. It's worth an afternoon visit, and the hand-crafted displays of glass flowers (originally used to teach botany to Harvard students) are truly exquisite.

What advice about travel do you give young people? Advice to any age about travel?

It's a difficult subject, and one that I think concerns many parents. I think travel can be a tremendously eye-opening experience, and it's important to follow a couple of guidelines. I always say "Trust your instincts" and "Be aware of your surroundings". These might sound like obvious suggestions, but I am constantly amazed at how many young people walk around Boston at midnight with their headphones, music turned up, and their heads down. I wouldn't put a hard and fast number on it (14 is okay for young men, 16 for young women, etc.), but as a point of reference, I took a solo trip across the country on Amtrak when I was 15. Learning how to deal with different people on your own (the good people, the bad, the other) is an important part of life, and certain types of travel can do accomplish this, and still be a great deal of fun.

What will you mainly talk about with Norfolk patrons when you come?

There will be stories about my travel, some tips for getting the "local" perspective anywhere you go, and probably a fun quiz and some more "interactive" activities. And of course, plenty of time for questions!