

Historic Hotels!

XXIV: Chicago's *Palmer House*

We've been to Chicago several times already in this series, but here's yet another grand old hotel in the Windy City. This is a deluxe, classic, Beaux-Arts style hotel (1871) located downtown in the financial district near the Art Institute. The hotel is an historic landmark with an impressive high dome ceiling lobby with hand painted Renaissance-style mural, and is North America's longest continuously operating hotel.

Over the last 130+ years, there have actually been four Palmer Houses in Chicago. The third was, with the Grand Pacific and the Sherman House, one of the fanciest hotels in post-fire Chicago. Its amenities included oversized rooms, luxurious decor, and sumptuous meals served in grand style. The floor of the Palmer House barber shop was tiled with silver dollars, and its staff consisted largely of Chicago's small black community, which comprised a little more than one percent of the population of the city.

Rudyard Kipling, who described Chicago as "inhabited by savages," was equally scornful of this showplace: "They told me to go to the Palmer House, which is a gilded and mirrored rabbit-warren, and there I found a huge hall of tessellated marble, crammed with people talking about money and spitting about everywhere. Other barbarians charged in and out of this inferno with letters and telegrams in their hands, and yet others shouted at each other. A man

who had drunk quite as much as was good for him told me that this was 'the finest hotel in the finest city on God Almighty's earth.'" Note that the Palmer House advertised itself as the "only thoroughly fireproof hotel in the United States."

Today's Palmer House (the fourth), on Monroe Street between State and Wabash, in Chicago's Loop, was built in the twenties. It was renovated in 1993, keeping all the classic architecture and feel of one of the great old hotels in the country, while keeping up with all the cutting-edge innovations of our technical age.

