

Sweet Home Shelby-Co

by Andria K. Brown

A recent spate of travel found me in two very different destinations: Chicago and the Florida panhandle. The Chicago trip was for business, as I was attending an international conference of my technical writer peers, but I'd looked forward to it for a year as a chance to reunite with my former hometown. I went to college outside Chicago, worked there after graduation, and telecommuted between here and there for four years after moving to Memphis. It had been nearly five years since my last visit, though, and I was eager to reconnect with old friends. Like Lake Michigan and deep-dish pizza.

I wasn't expecting, then, to feel as touristy as the eight people in front of me in line for El tickets at the O'Hare CTA station. Standing with my rolling suitcase to buy a three-day pass, I knew I looked for all the world like some out-of-town yokel off for a few days in the big city. I figured the feeling would pass as I got on the train and showed my public transit acumen, but it turns out that five years is long enough to forget which stops are where, and I found myself peeking over a German couples' shoulders to check their handheld route map.

My sudden foreignness felt even more pronounced when both friends and new acquaintances commented on my Southern accent. It surprised me to realize that, despite my very Midwestern upbringing and nearly a decade working in that very city, I appeared to everyone I met as a Memphis girl.

Once I made that realization, though, I tried to make the best of it. Southerners have the advantage of people assuming they're naturally charming, so even when surrounded by groups of strangers, I mined a vein of confidence I'd never struck as a pure Yankee. I even spoke up during conference sessions, hoping that even if what I said made no sense, at least it was made more pleasant by my modest twang.

By the time I left, I felt I had my Chicago bearings back (although was consistently thrown by having the landmark body of water to the east of me), but I knew I could probably never be confused as a native again.

A week later, my family made our annual trip to the beaches of the Gulf shore. As a northerner, my awareness of this area was once limited to John Mellencamp's reference in "Pink Houses," but as a Memphian, it has become a preferred destination. Preferred by so many Memphians, in fact, that most of our neighbors along 30A had Shelby County license plates. We drove 500 miles and ended up in a duplex shared by a family from Germantown.

In about the same time it took to get to Santa Rosa Beach, we could have been in Chicago, but instead of feeling completely out of place, it was like an extension of home. The Southern identity, as I'm increasingly reminded, permeates a vast geographical swath, and it's an area I can now travel without feeling completely out of my element. Well, until I make a gaffe like assuming the "everyone in Memphis wears jeans" rule applies to lawn parties in Chickasaw Gardens. I'm clearly not 100% Southern, but I have come to love, respect, and associate myself with the South in ways I never expected, and never fully realized until I revisited my old home.

But really, y'all, can we work on the pizza?