

Heard any good Chicago jokes lately?

THE CHICAGO WAY | Laughing at itself is the mark of a big city

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BY **TOM McNAMEE** Sun-Times Columnist

I know only two Chicago jokes, not counting anything I might spot in the mirror.

One joke is very crude, and I find it distasteful. I tell it only when I'm sure it'll get a laugh.

The other one goes like this:

A man gets on a bus and asks the driver, "Does dis bus go to da Loop?" The driver says, "No, it goes 'beep beep.'"

Did you laugh? Yes? Thank you. No, really, thank you. You're a wonderful audience.

The only other Chicago joke I know -- other than the crude one -- is more of a serious sociological observation:

North Siders say streets on the South Side are numbered because South Siders can't read. South Siders say streets on the North Side have names because North Siders can't count.

Not bad, huh? I think I hear you North Siders laughing. Now be good sports and read it to your South Side friends.

But you can see my problem: Every week, I write a column called "The Chicago Way," but I know almost no Chicago jokes. I need more and better material, and I'm hoping you can help.

Got a good Chicago joke? Send it to me at tmcnamee@suntimes.com, and I'll try to run it in a future column.

We're not Cleveland

As it happens, you can't go to a comedy club in town -- stand-up or improv -- without hearing a lot of Chicago jokes, a healthy sign we're not Cleveland.

"One of the great things about Chicago is that you get the feeling the city can take a joke -- like taking a good punch and getting back up," said Gary Rudoren, of the Annoyance Theatre Company, who co-wrote a book on jokes called *Comedy by the Numbers*. "It's like sitting in the audience for a Don Rickles show and being insulted, but laughing even harder because Don made fun of you for being fat. It's the mark of a big city."

Last week, I called around to about a dozen comedians with Chicago connections to hear their best Chicago jokes. Here's some of what I got:

- "I always tell people I'm from Chicago," said Tim Walkoe, "where men are men and police take Visa."
- "The other day the City of Chicago stuck a sign in my parkway that says 'Watch Out for Schoolchildren,' " said Paul Frisbie. "Well, heck, no kidding. Those little stinkers carry guns."
- "My father was a Chicago cabdriver for 50 years," said Patti Vasquez. "I could never ask him for directions because he only knew the longest way to get there."
- "Chicago is the only place where a Palestinian can easily be mistaken for a Puerto Rican, and where the mayor can declare unequivocal support for a 'Pakistnian State' and still have everyone immediately understand what he really means," said Ray Hanania.
- "Chicago's Greektown is one of the best," said Scott Derenger. "I'm actually Greek and German. So I eat a gyro on my way to anger management."
- "I read that the city has 25 mounted police officers and 29 horses," said Greg Schwem. "That means right now there are four horses running around Chicago arresting people all by themselves."

And Sally Edwards e-mailed to me a smart top-10 list of "Things You Never Want To Do In Chicago," including (No. 10) "Drive behind Wisconsin plates," and (No. 8) "Shop for tools at the Sears Tower."

"A good Chicago joke includes a sense of camaraderie," Edwards explained. "Chicagoans can tease one another about their city but are very sensitive to outside criticism."

Big hat day at Wrigley

Just about every comic I talked to gave me a Cubs or a weather joke, and many of them e-mailed to me some funny riffs that are just too long to quote here. John Caponera, for example, does a brilliant take on Harry Caray that includes lines like this: "Coming up in the bottom of the . . . Hey! There's the pope . . . it must be big hat day here at Wrigley."

Chicago's a great town to make jokes about because it has a strong personality, Paul Frisbie reminded me, but a smart comedian pokes fun at whatever town he is in -- because that's what the audience knows.

"In Sioux Falls, I do a routine about the South Dakota Battleship Memorial," he said. "In Grand Rapids, I make fun of their zoo. We build our acts around the information that's already in the average person's head."

With that wisdom in mind -- know your audience -- I'm not going to repeat most of the edgier jokes I heard. They might go over in a comedy club at midnight but be misunderstood in a family newspaper at breakfast.

And in closing . . .

But here's an edgier one from Jeff Libman, which I hope you'll see as sad but true, not a knock on a neighborhood:

A resident of New York visiting Chicago has just missed the last flight out at O'Hare and desperately needs to get back to New York. Money is no object, so he hails a cab.

"Where you going?" the cabbie asks.

"New York," the customer replies.

"What?" the driver asks.

"Yeah," says the New Yorker. "How much to take me to Manhattan?"

The taxi driver pauses. He's never been to New York, so he quickly calculates a figure that will give him enough money to cover his time and gas, and enough to spend some time enjoying the city. He finally says, "\$3,000."

"You got it!" says the New Yorker.

The trip goes well. The cabbie loves New York -- Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, Radio City Music Hall. The day before he's ready to leave, he figures he'll make a couple of bucks in New York by getting a few fares. A gentleman on a corner hails his cab and slides in.

"How much to take me to Chicago?" the gentleman asks.

The cabbie is shocked. An amazing twist of fate. "Chicago?" he says. "You want to go to Chicago?"

"Yes, sir," says the passenger. "How much?"

"One thousand dollars," says the cabbie. "But where exactly?"

The customer chimes up, "I want to go to the West Side."

Suddenly, the cabbie's joy turns to disappointment.

"Sorry, sir," he says. "You'll have to find another cab. I don't go to the West Side."

Tom McNamee's "The Chicago Way" column runs Mondays.