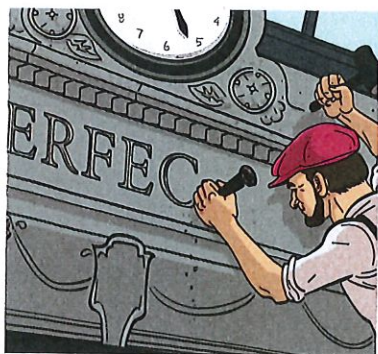


MYSTERIES ETCHED IN STONE

"Perfection." The cryptic word, inscribed above the entry of a stately, Corinthian-columned building on Fullerton Avenue near my old apartment, always perplexed me. Whose "perfection" was this? Who put the word there, and why? I eventually did some digging and found out that the building had been home to a Depression-era lender, Fullerton State Bank, before being sold in the 1930s to—who would ever have guessed?—the Perfection Burial Garment Company, which emblazoned its name on the archway above the front door. There are dozens of similar riddles waiting to be solved all over Chicago—single words engraved above the entrance of prewar buildings, meant to preserve a legacy now all but forgotten: "Essanay" on Argyle Street, "Leroy" on Reta Avenue, "Overton" on State Street. Sometimes the mystery is easy enough to crack: The building on Argyle, for one, was named for Essanay Studios, a production company that made more than 2,000 films between 1907 and 1917, including 15 starring Charlie Chaplin. The origins of others seem to have been lost in the mists of time. —BRIAN GOLDEN



A Great Place to Skin a Knee

Thrills can be found in a patch of woods by the river.

BY JOE MENO

It's hard for city kids to get lost these days, to find a hidden place where they can become who they are meant to be, test their courage on their own. But it's not impossible.

One day a few years back, I took my 5-year-old son for a walk by the river. Alongside the narrow, dense span of woods south of the WMS Boathouse at Clark Park in Roscoe Village, we discovered a dirt bike track hidden behind a stand of tall trees. It was like we had stepped into some kind of 1980s childhood fantasy: The track—maintained by the Chicago Area Mountain Bikers, I later learned—had fearsome jumps and hairpin turns. Several teenagers were hurtling themselves over the

course, doing impressive aerials. My son gazed at them in wonder. Walking farther, we found a second, smaller course, which had shorter jumps and a less steep ramp. My son looked up at me and said, "I want to do it."

He'd barely taken off his training wheels, much less gone off-road, but the next day we went back to Clark Park. Part of me was proud, part of me was pretty sure he was going to break his neck as I helped him up the ramp and watched as he came speeding down and made it through the first turn, then up and over a small jump, before wiping out. When he got up, he was covered in dirt, and he was grinning.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF THE GARDEN JUMPS