

# The Teen Streets of John Hughes's Chicago

DEC. 17, 2014

Footsteps

International New York Times

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It was a luminous late-summer day, but I was stuck in a police station in the northern Chicago suburb of Des Plaines, a 1970s-era concrete behemoth that had the cool sterility of a hospital. Speed walking ahead of me were two officers, middle-aged men with buzz cuts, Smokey Bear hats and shiny black patent leather belts. They were on the hunt and I was racing to keep up. I had never been in this maze of hallways, linoleum floors and dreary courtyards before, yet the building was as familiar to me as any deeply embossed memory from childhood. Which, in a way, it was. I was raised on John Hughes movies, and this was the setting of one of his most beloved films, "The Breakfast Club," from 1985.

It has been five years since Mr. Hughes, the writer, director and producer who helped define '80s pop culture, died of a heart attack at 59. Best known for his high school trilogy ("Sixteen Candles," "The Breakfast Club" and "Ferris Bueller's Day Off"), Mr. Hughes was responsible for creating a new kind of teenage movie, one that has become so ingrained in our popular culture that we now take it for granted. His work included more than two dozen movies during his 15 years as one of Hollywood's go-to filmmakers, including "Pretty in Pink," "Some Kind of Wonderful" and three holiday classics, "Planes, Trains and Automobiles," "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation" and "Home Alone." And though style and tone varied from slapstick to sentimental, one character turned up again and again: his adopted hometown, Chicago.

Like many Chicagoans, Mr. Hughes — who moved from the Detroit area to the northern suburb of Northbrook, Ill., when he was in junior high school — was deeply loyal to his city. As a rising star, he insisted that Universal Pictures let him shoot his movies there. In an early interview with Roger Ebert, Mr. Hughes complained about the local news media referring to him as a former Chicagoan. "As if, to do anything, I had to leave Chicago," he told Mr. Ebert. "I never left. I worked until I was 29 at the Leo Burnett advertising agency, and then I quit to do this." For him, it seemed, the city's main appeal was its lack of pretension. "This is a working city," he said, "where people go to their jobs and raise their kids and live their lives."

There is something counterintuitive, then, in that his films are set on the North Shore, the collection of coastal (and coastal adjacent, in real-estate speak) towns along Lake Michigan — places like Evanston, Glencoe, Highland Park and Des Plaines — that are often dismissed as affluent and culturally homogeneous. But Mr. Hughes, whose father was a roofing salesman, used these communities to explore issues of class, status and consumerism as well as the tension and attraction between suburb and city in '80s America.

I had come to the North Shore looking for Mr. Hughes, for traces of what fed his filmmaking and for hints of how his hometown had changed in the 30 years since he painted it as an American Every Town. Online, I had found fan sites listing his many Chicago-area shooting locations: Glenbrook North High School, where Judd Nelson triumphantly raises his fist on the football field at the end of “The Breakfast Club” (and from which Mr. Hughes graduated); the college town of Evanston, where Anthony Michael Hall cruises in a Rolls-Royce down Central Street in “Sixteen Candles”; the glass house in “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” from which Cameron’s father’s 1961 Ferrari explodes. I could have wandered aimlessly around these touchstones, but on a whim, I reached out to Mr. Hughes’s oldest son, John Hughes III, hoping he might also point me to some of his father’s off-camera hangouts. The Hughes family is famously private, but to my surprise, he offered to give me a tour. (Look back at highlights from the Hughes filmography with this list of selected locations.)

And that is how I ended up in the basement of a police station with John Hughes III and two state police officers. The building’s facade, imposing in a Soviet sort of way, looked exactly as I remember it from “The Breakfast Club,” when it

played the role of Shermer High (it had been Maine North High, which closed in 1981). Mr. Hughes parked, and we walked around the back, curious if its football field was still there. A squad car slowed beside us. “Can we help you,” one officer asked, in the way that officers do when they mean “What are you doing here?”

It might have been all the John Hughes movies I had been watching, movies that I had seen over and over growing up, but I was suddenly struck by the impulse to run, like one of the filmmaker’s teenage characters up to no good. Instead, I froze. So Mr. Hughes’s son took over, bending his long frame to talk through the window. His dad had filmed a movie here years ago, he explained. Maybe they had heard of it? Immediately, everything changed. “Do you want to see the inside?” one officer asked, clearly excited. “I’m obsessed with that movie.”

As we sped through the empty corridors, no longer lined with lockers, I didn't know what we were looking for. The officers wanted to show us something, but even in their own station, they were lost. I flashed to the Brain, the Athlete, the Basket Case, the Princess and the Criminal, racing through these halls, sliding on the linoleum, nearly getting caught by Principal Vernon. "You didn't get the smartest, but we're definitely the nicest," one of the officers said. "And the most handsome," the other added. Finally, they found it, a modest shrine to the building's previous life as one of the most famous high schools in American film: a handful of generic artifacts in an old trophy case.

I had met John Hughes III — a tall, thoughtful 38-year-old music producer — at a Starbucks near his studio, and we drove past the Skokie Lagoons, where kayaks traced lines in the placid water. It was the first week of school, and he had just dropped off his children. The leaves were still thick on the trees, and the air was warm and clean, with barely a hint that fall was on the horizon. This is the same season "Ferris" would have been shot; Mr. Hughes commented on our flawless late-summer day.

Mr. Hughes would repeatedly track down film locations, and then remember a place nearby tied to his family's history. In Glencoe, we drove past the Metra station where Kevin Bacon's character in "She's Having a Baby" waits for the commuter train to a soul-sucking office job; Mr. Hughes pointed to his parents' first apartment, just across the road. The scene in "Sixteen Candles" in which Anthony Michael Hall knocks on a friend's window in the middle of the night was a half-block from the house that his parents lived in when Mr. Hughes was born. The street was almost within eyeshot of the "Save Ferris" water tower — still there, but sadly no longer tagged with its pro-Ferris slogan — which itself is just a few blocks from the modest midcentury home where the director lived as a teenager. And his high school, Glenbrook North, wasn't far away, on Shermer Road — the inspiration for the fictional Chicago suburb where so many of his movies took place: Shermer, Ill.

Mr. Hughes parked his S.U.V. in front of Glencoe's stately brick church, which appeared in the final scene of "Sixteen Candles."

"We can sneak in, right?" he said, opening the old wooden door with a reverberating clang. Inside, it smelled like cats and, incongruously, there was a sign for a morning yoga class. Leaving, I flashed to a classic Hughes film moment: Jake Ryan, leaning against his red Porsche, waiting for Samantha (Molly Ringwald) as she leaves her sister's wedding. Of course, as we crossed the street, a red Porsche cruised by.

I had seen a nearly identical sports car the day before, in downtown Chicago, while on the trail of Ferris. My husband and I had driven south along Lake Michigan's shore, where the water was turquoise and the beaches were crowded with end-of-summer sunshine revelers, to seek out Chez Quis, the fine French restaurant where Ferris took Sloan on their big downtown date and where, to secure a table, he impersonated Abe Froman, "the Sausage King of Chicago." But the Gold Coast restaurant was fictional, so we went for white tablecloth French-Vietnamese at Le Colonial, where a table of ladies-who-lunch were speaking French and celebrating a birthday with copious amounts of Champagne. Close enough.

Ferris's trail also took me to Wrigley Field, though the Cubs were away that week, and north to Highland Park, where Cameron's house was recently sold after several years on the market. At the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower), another stop on Ferris's day-off itinerary, the line for the observation deck was hours long, a wait that wily Ferris would surely have found a way to circumvent.

On Mr. Hughes's suggestion, my husband and I went to Coalfire Pizza on Grand Avenue, a family favorite in the years just before his father died, when they would drop by en route to a baseball game or hockey match. The pizza was

Neapolitan, and wonderful. Mr. Hughes said his dad loved it so much he had a pizza oven built in his house. After we ate, I asked for the owner, Dave Bonomi, who remembered the filmmaker and his culinary questions. "Before we knew who he was, he would sneak one in — a question about flour or San Marzano tomatoes," said Mr. Bonomi, his hair slicked back 1950s greaser-style. "As a restaurant, you're paranoid about industry secrets." Then, he recalled, he learned who the patron was. "We'd tell him anything," he said.

It was a warm Friday night and the White Sox were in town, so after dinner we bought the cheapest seats we could find to see them at their new stadium. Fittingly, they were playing the Detroit Tigers, the director's first baseball love. "Everyone always assumes my dad was a Cubs fan because of Ferris," Mr. Hughes said during our tour. But Wrigley "is where Ferris would have gone — my dad would have gone to Comiskey."

A version of this article appears in print on December 21, 2014, on page TR1 of the New York edition.

# 13 Chicago Locations From John Hughes Movies

DEC. 17, 2014

*The filmmaker John Hughes shot most of his films in and around his adopted hometown of Chicago. Freda Moon went on an exhaustive tour of those locations. Here is a selection for travelers wanting to follow in the footsteps of Ferris Bueller and other classic Hughes characters.*

## **"Ferris Bueller's Day Off"**

1. Glencoe Beach
2. "Save Ferris" water tower in Northbrook
3. Wrigley Field
4. The Art Institute of Chicago

## **"The Breakfast Club"**

5. Former Maine North High (now a Des Plaines state agency building)

## **"Sixteen Candles"**

6. Niles East High School
7. Central Street (Rolls-Royce scene)
8. Glencoe Union Church

## **"She's Having a Baby"**

9. The Field Museum

## **"Home Alone"**

10. Trinity United Methodist Church
11. Hubbard Place (Santa scene)

## **"Uncle Buck"**

12. New Trier Township High School, Winnetka

## **"Weird Science"**

13. Northbrook Court (mall scenes)