

About

Seinfeld and Me. The Vintage Chicago map came about because there is truth in comedian Jerry Seinfeld's observation, "Take your obsessive-compulsive disorder and make it work for you."

I retired in 2014 with a hard drive containing more than 70,000 photographs and no plan for what to do with them. Most photos were the ordinary residue of a family and working life — vacations, business trips for United Press International and later Encyclopaedia Britannica, family visits here and in France — basically the accumulated clutter that comes from always having a camera at hand. After retirement, with even more time on my hands, I turned my attention to collecting from online public sources old Chicago photographs, postcards, lithographs, maps, and artwork, and then geotagging and captioning them. By 2025, I had a substantial, well-organized collection of vintage Chicago pictures and absolutely no way for anyone else to see them.

I didn't like the idea of taking therapeutic advice from an unlicensed physician like Seinfeld, but I was wary that Seinfeld's words of a disorder might apply to me. So, I directly confronted the question: Was I now just an older person with a camera taking a lot of pictures while out on a walk or had I declined into a shuffling senior, serial shutter shooter, showing serious psychological symptoms while strutting his stuff in public? What if people were whispering behind my back in tones suggesting I was a hoarder, "Psst! You know, that guy collects old photographs for no reason." Afraid that I might be cracking up and going nuts, I was rescued from this descent into oblivion when I finally cracked the nut of what to do with all those gigabytes of historic Chicago photos laying fallow on my hard drive. My savior was the arrival in 2025 of AI and its computer code-writing progeny, Anthropic's Claude. By writing some 50,000 lines of code gobbledygook that I couldn't, Claude enabled me to give all those vintage photos a utilitarian home by making them widely available on the map platform of Vintage Chicago, A Cliff Dweller's History.

The Vintage Chicago Map Legend. This interactive map had more than 2,400 photographs at the outset. It has grown since then, and now covers Chicago's visual record from 1688, when the Italian Franciscan friar Vincenzo Coronelli drew the first printed map to carry the name "Chekagou," down to the present. Layered onto the map are galleries for 100 Famous Buildings and 50 Famous Architects, Famous Writer Locations, a filter for exploring each of Chicago's 78 neighborhoods, aerial photos, historic maps and artwork. The map legend has been designed to offer a variety of ways to view Chicago's history. You can zoom down to a neighborhood street corner, take a closer at one of the city's famous buildings or read about how the city evolved from a muddy trading post into the global metropolis of today. You can also begin to understand how it was that Chicago arrived in its current role as the architectural design capital for distant megatall structures all over the world.

The Cliff Dwellers. There is also a filter devoted to notable architects, writers, artists, and photographers of The Cliff Dwellers, the small downtown arts club that I've belonged to for decades and once served as president. This connection is why I refer to the Vintage Chicago map as "A Cliff Dweller's History." It's a personal label as much as a descriptive one, and the map permits me to celebrate the role of some of the club members who have left their mark on Chicago's cultural plane following the club's founding in 1907.

A Cliff Dweller's History of Chicago. Complementing the map's visual focus on Chicago's past is the textual narrative, *A Cliff Dweller's History of Chicago*, also accessed from the map's legend. Its chapters cover six chronological eras of the city: Chicago's Native and colonial beginnings; its early settlement and the arrival of the railroads; the Great Chicago Fire and the following rebuilding and industrial boom; the Jazz Age; the second half of the twentieth century; and the city as it stands today. Each chapter is illustrated with historic photographs from the map and concludes with a hot linked bibliography to encourage further reading.

Interest in Chicago History. My original interest in Chicago history goes back to a single spring school vacation when I was a teenager. My mother, eager to keep me both educated and out from underfoot, suggested I spend some days at the Newberry Library, where we had a family connection. My cousin John Bowe's wife was the daughter of Stanley Pargellis, Newberry's Director and Librarian from 1942-1962. I imagine I must have asked the reference desk clerk whether they had anything on Chicago history that I might read. Did they ever. Before long I was poking through A. T. Andreas's three-volume History of Chicago. This grand story of the city's early history begins with LaSalle's 1679 expedition, and carries through to the 1812 Fort Dearborn massacre, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, the railroads, the Great Fire of 1871, and Chicago's immediate and astounding recovery right up to the year 1884, when Andreas published his first volume. I didn't appreciate it fully at the time, but that week at a Newberry reading table set something afoot that took another 70 years or so to fully develop.

Interest in Chicago Architecture. The Vintage Chicago map's special focus on Chicago's architectural history reflects a lifelong interest in architecture engendered by my uncle, my father's brother Judge Augustine J. Bowe. Mayor Richard J. Daley had appointed him in 1957 as the first chairman of Chicago's new Commission on Chicago Architectural Landmarks. Gus had been a prominent attorney and a past President of the Chicago Bar Association. Daley's commission was established by a city ordinance that year, making it the first official municipal body in Chicago dedicated to identifying and preserving the city's architectural heritage. The commission Gus headed was the direct precursor to today's Commission on Chicago Landmarks, created with a stronger preservation ordinance in 1968, two years after my uncle's death in 1966.

As the Commission's inaugural chairman, Gus led it during its formative years, including the significant 1960 initiative that designated the first 38 buildings as official landmarks. These buildings included the Glessner House, in which I was once married (I've never blamed the landmark), and the Rookery. He was also centrally involved in the high-profile, and ultimately unsuccessful, battle to save Louis Sullivan's Garrick Theater. (See [The Demolition of Louis Sullivan's Garrick Theater](#)). After 1960, Gus was also serving the city as its newly elected Chief Justice of the Municipal Court of Chicago. Also being a poet as much as a jurist, the evenings I spent with Gus and his equally accomplished wife Julia while in law school amounted to a second education for me, not just in architecture, but in literature, politics, the city's past, and life.

AI Slop? In this early period of AI adoption, it is worth noting that Anthropic's Claude platform not only was engaged in the computer code-writing function involved in creating the interactive map. It also followed my detailed guidance in tracking down sources of what I wanted to include in the narrative history, and then it generated the bulk of the final narrative's text. Merriam-Webster, the Britannica dictionary subsidiary I briefly headed in the 1990s, named "slop" (as in AI slop) its Word of the Year in 2025. Merriam defined "slop" as now including, "digital content of low quality that is produced usually in quantity by means of artificial intelligence." Formerly, "slop" was generally used to describe, "product of little value" or "food waste fed to animals."

I believe the text of Vintage Chicago's historical narrative, which incorporates my personal subject matter selections, independent research, and editorial engagements, lifts my chronicle out of the abyss of soulless AI slop. But that's just my opinion. Make your own judgement. But pedestrian or not, while this informal history breaks no new ground in historical research, I believe it is worthy of your attention as a readable, useful, and succinct illustrated guide to many of the important developments in Chicago's fascinating past.

Acknowledgements. A work like the Vintage Chicago map would not exist without the institutions and people who do the difficult, patient work of keeping Chicago's past alive for later generations. To name a few: the Ryerson and Burnham Library at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Newberry Library, the Chicago History Museum, the University of Chicago Library, the Chicago Architecture Center, those who built the Chicagology resource, Erik Nordstrom, with his architectural scholarship and his Building 51 museum and gallery, and the generous members of half a dozen Facebook Chicago history groups who kept turning up photographs I'd never have found on my own. I owe all of them a debt I can only repay in general terms, as the Vintage Chicago map arrived well after most individual photo credits that once existed had been lost. I didn't see the AI-assisted future coming far enough in advance to capture earlier available provenance.

Seinfeld Revisited. Today, I look back on the Vintage Chicago map with some satisfaction. While I'm still taking pictures like crazy, I think I'm on my way to being cured of any incipient Seinfeldian obsessive-compulsive or paranoid tendencies triggered by the disease of mindlessly collecting things for which you have no apparent use.

Errors and Assigning Blame. This map and its history I'm sure have their quotient of gaps, misstatements, and errors. This may be particularly true where I was trying to assign an accurate geotag location to a map or the place from which an aerial photo was taken. If you stumble across any of these embarrassments, leave Claude out of it and blame me. I'll deal with Claude myself if necessary.

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