CAXTONIAN

JOURNAL OF THE CAXTON CLUB OF CHICAGO VOLUME VIII. NO 5 MAY 2000

Personal Glimpses of Nelson Algren

Art Shay

Nelson Algren, seemingly isolated in a crowd outside his favorite baseball field, Comisky Park, Chicago, in 1949.

Heading south on the Kennedy Expressway in Chicago, my photographer's eye delights in the last gold of the sunset striking the Hancock Building in the east, scans the teeming city to the Sears Tower in the west, down the purlieus of Division Street and Maxwell, Milwaukee Avenue, and Daleyland beyond. All Algren's turf. My eye blinks in sad recollection just before North Avenue, as I pass through the air space that once was the 10-buck-a-month apartment that served as play-house for one of the great literary tragi-comedies of the last century: the love affair between my old pal Nelson Algren and his beloved Simone deBeauvior.

To build the confidence in his own writing that Simone's other man, Jean-Paul Sartre, had developed under her attentions, Simone liked to quote another of her lovers, albeit a fleeting, unsatisfactory one – Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway had blurbed that Nelson was right up there with Dostoevski, even capable of lasting a few rounds with Papa himself.

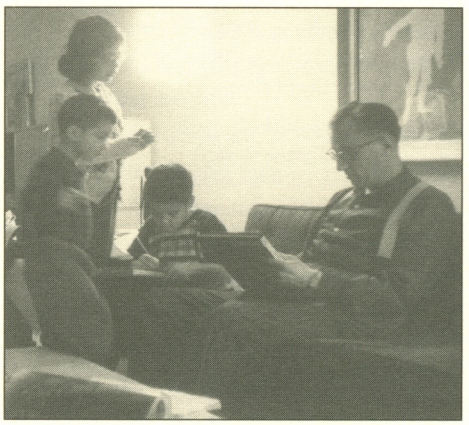
Papa, a wartime acquaintance of mine in England, had, like me, been impressed with Nelson's improvements on Whitman *yawp* and Sandburg *woof*, in getting his Chicago down for keeps: "It's hard to love a town for its greater and lesser towers," Algren wrote, "its pleasant parks or its flashing ballet. Or for its broad and bending boulevards, where the continuous headlights follow, one dark driver after the next, one swift car after another, all night all night and all night. But you never truly love it till you can love its alleys too. Where the bright and morning faces of old familiar friends now wear the anxious mid-night eyes of strangers a long way from home. A midnight bounded by the bright carnival of the boulevards and the dark girders of the El.

"Where once the marshland came to flower.

"Where once the deer came down to water."

"The Pottawattomies," Nelson once bitterly pointed out from the Wells Street bridge, waving his arm past the footings of the Merchandise Mart, "used to camp on Wolf's Point over here, and drink the white man's vermilion whisky – the stuff for which they squandered their Chicago tribal lands."

From the late 1940s until the deep 1970s, I wandered around Chicago with Nelson, becoming his friend, documenting his world with my camera. He was the godfather of our oldest son Harmon, who disappeared into the wild side forever in 1972. ❖



Algren teaches his godson Harmon Shay to draw a cat while sister Jan and brother Richard watch in the Shay's Deerfield home (1959).

CAXTONIAN

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Musings...

You may think it a strange comparison, but, it seems to me, Nelson Algren was to mid-20th Century Chicago what the prophet Jeremiah was to ancient Jerusalem. Both writers wrote with fervent passion about the cities they loved; both knew their cities had failed to fulfill early high ideals; both, in their respective ways, assumed the role of judge and became alienated for it, and both wrote elegantly their own *lamentations*. Jeremiah's was called *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* (*circa* 597 B.C.), which appears in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures as one of the sacred books. Algren's was his remarkable prose-poem, *Chicago - City on the Make* (1951, 1961, 1987).

As prophet, Algren raged at those of Chicago who "hustled the land, they hustled the Indian, they hustled by night and they hustled by day. They hustled guns and furs and peltries, grog and the blood-red whiskey-dye; they hustled with dice or a deck or a derringer." Chicago, at mid-century, in spite of the do-gooders' work and promises, "In good times or hard, it's still an infidel's capital six days a week."

His greatest grief was the diminished stature of the arts in a city that at one time drew national renown and praise for her writers and artists. "Out of the Twisted Twenties," he wrote, "flowered the promise of Chicago as the homeland and heartland of an American renaissance, a place of poets and sculptors to come, of singers and painters, dancers, actors and actresses of golden decades yet to be." Writing far ahead of his time — for an era when a tragic war in Southeast Asia divided people, destroyed politicians, and took more than 55,000 Americans lives — Algren wrote: "You can't make an arsenal of a nation and yet expect its great cities to produce artists."

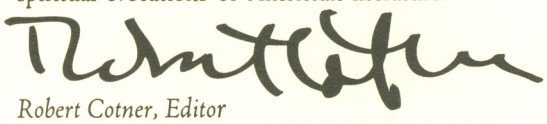
In a brilliant "Introduction" to the 1987 edition of Algren's lament, Studs Terkel called Algren a "street-corner comic as well as a poet." Terkel wrote, "He may have been the funniest man around. Which is another way of saying he may have been the most serious." The biting irony of Algren's lament makes his writing so powerful, so readable, and so important even nearly 50 years after it was first written.

Algren, like good prophets in all times and from all cultures, was simultaneously both right and wrong. Prophets are right, for they speak from an impassioned integrity with a loving conscience about circumstances affecting all people. They are wrong, in part because they look through the prism of provincialism, and, in part because they write as if what is, always shall be.

In an "Afterword," written a decade after the original essay was published, Algren called upon the memory of "Old Brown of Osawatomie," the consummate spirit invoked by all who demand transformation in American society. In a current essay on John Brown, "The Father of American Terrorism" (*American Heritage*, Feb-Mar. 2000), Ken Chowder encores Algren's theme: "A society where slavery exists is by nature one where human values are skewed."

Skewed human values: placing economic interests above artistic and spiritual priorities, the rewarding of mediocrity in every sphere of life, permitting race to be a qualifier in matters American, the honoring of what Thomas Jefferson called "artificial aristocracy." Concentration on these skewed human values gave to Algren's prose the power of poetry.

Because we yet live with the legacy of skewed human values, his lamentation remains our lamentation, and it stands as one of the great spiritual evocations of American literature.



Robert Cotner, Editor

Important Notice

The Nominating Committee, composed of Jim Tomes, Chair, Ed Quattrocchi, and Susan Rossen, has created the slate of Council members for the Class of 2003. These are: Sherman Beverly, Jr., Kim Coventry, Matthew Doherty, David L. Easterbrook, and Robert W. Karrow. Additional nominations will be accepted from the floor at the Annual Meeting of The Caxton Club.

President C. Frederick Kittle has called an Annual Meeting of the membership for 5:45 until 6:15 p.m., May 17, 2000. All members are urged to attend this meeting. The dinner will be delayed until 6:15 p.m.

The Biblical Jeremiah

Robert Cotner

Amidst the confusion and mounting disaster of the crumbling Hebrew state toward the end of the 7th Century B.C., one figure stands out above all others — the man whom Jews of later generations accounted so great that they referred to him as **The Prophet.** *In bold defiance he attacked kings and national policy; in unrestrained language he condemned the complacency of prophet and priest; in response to the voice within him he marked out firmer and wider paths for Israel's faith.*

Thus the editors of *The Dartmouth Bible* (1950) described Jeremiah, whom they called the "ominous voice of the dark years." The book of *Jeremiah*, the longest of the Bible's prophetic books, tells of the stormy times that pre-staged so much turmoil, which has become current news in the Middle East. But Jeremiah's vision embodied not just history — it was preeminently about the faith of the Hebrew people. Through the circumstances of his time, Jeremiah redefined Judaism as a world religion, enlarging in "terms of time and place" the role of Yahweh as "Lord of the universe." Jeremiah wrote in words poetic of a "new covenant with the house of Israel" (31:33), and promised that Yahweh "will put my law in their inward parts,/and write it in their hearts;/and will be their God,/and they shall be my people." (31:33)

The second book of the sacred canon attributed to Jeremiah is *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*, an elegant series of poems written as acrostics. These poems form four laments envisioning the catastrophes that lay ahead for the people of Israel and a petition for deliverance. The *Dartmouth* editors say that a "small grotto near the Damascus Gate, just north of the city walls, is pointed out even to this day as the spot where the prophet, hiding after the final disaster, wrote the poems."

These poems "of tragedy and faith" shape the thinking — even to this day — of many faithful people. They are duly regarded, therefore, as *sacred*, a testament to the vital force of the printed word in human life. ❖

Jeremiah, from a panel of the Sistine Chapel ceiling by Michelangelo. According to many observers, Jeremiah's face bears a striking resemblance to that of Michelangelo's.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah

How lonely sits the city
That was full of people!
She has become like a widow
Who was once great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
Has become a forced laborer!
She weeps bitterly in the night,
And her tears are on her cheeks;
She has none to comfort her
Among all her lovers.
All her friends have dealt
treacherously with her;
They have become her enemies.

Lamentations 1:1-2
New American Standard Bible (1977)

The Jeremiah Syndrome

Michael Braver

The spirit of the biblical Jeremiah lives on in the works of many 20th Century writers. Nelson Algren, as discussed in this issue of the *Caxtonian*, is but one. Joining the list of those who saw the sins of their world and times through a crystal of unusually sharp clarity — a view hidden to, or unwilling to be looked at by others — are Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*), Ayn Rand (*The Fountainhead*), and Rachel Carson (*The Silent Spring*).

The true Jeremiah does not "foresee" the future. Rather, the true Jeremiah clearly sees, in his or her terms, society and then attempts to alert fellow citizens — through railing, prodding, and, even, ranting — to the perilous path we are on. Jeremiah holds up the mirror, which reflects darkly the things we wish best unseen. In so doing, all Jeremiahs generally are vilified during their lifetimes, often driven from the societies they love and want to save. It is not until much later, after their lamentations become the cornerstone for reform, that they are raised to a place of honor.

The central message of lament often is one of personal responsibility — a message so in need today, for we live in a time when personal responsibility is becoming an anachronism. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,..." cried Jeremiah. If society is but the sum total of the actions of individuals in consort for better or worse, what does that tell us about the times in which we live? These are times when someone else is to blame. Drop a cup of coffee, burn yourself, and blame the restaurant because the coffee was too hot!

Each generation needs its Jeremiahs, not to make life better in this time — but for future generations. Unfortunately the image reflected in the mirror of lamentations does not travel at the speed of light. But it does, eventually, arrive, accepted as truth — and, if we're lucky, acted upon. A Jeremiah must arise from time-to-time to remind us, as a frequent subject of these pages wrote, "the fault lies not in our stars, but in ourselves."

O Jeremiah, if we ever forget thee.... ❖

Nelson Algren — through a photographer's eye

Art Shay has kindly shared some of his most treasured memories and a few remarkable photographs of Nelson Algren. They are herein presented through his courtesy. Shay, a former B-24 navigator in World War II, a *Life* magazine photographer, and author of *Nelson Algren's Chicago* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), is currently writing a play based on the relationship of Algren and deBeauvoir. He will be the Caxton dinner speaker on May 17 (see p. 8). All Algren photographs in this issue are from Shay's collection. ❖

Algren, standing outside his apartment on Wabansia Street, Chicago.

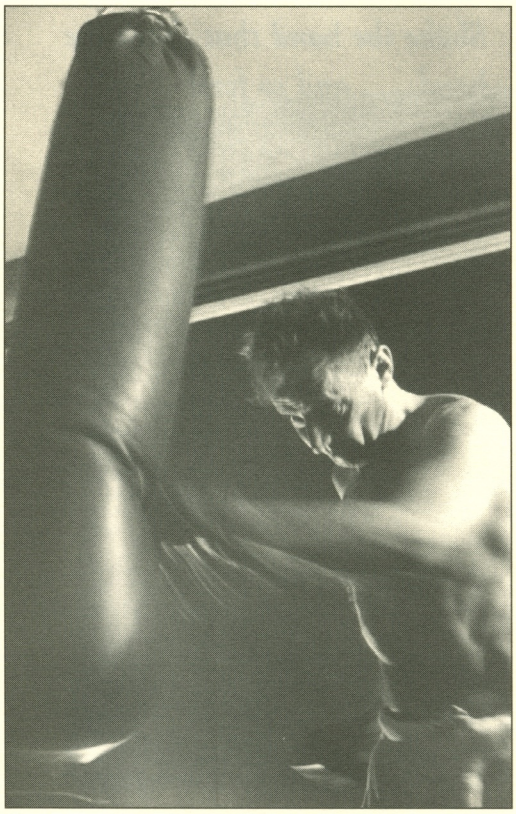
Algren at a microphone of the Waldorf in New York City (1950), with Eleanor Roosevelt at his right, accepts the very first National Book Award for Man with the Golden Arm. *In his inscription in this book to Art Shay, Algren wrote: the "champion bugle-blower of the East Bronx,... Greatest all-round Athlete of All-time, the World's Very Worst Poker Player of the Western Hemisphere, the Champion Harmonica Player of Boxdale Avenue (between Howard St. & Devon Ave., Chicago) – and, by some chance – one hell of a fine photographer."*

Algren playing poker in a Division St. joint. The original "dealer," who became Frankie Machine, played by Frank Sinatra in the motion picture, The Man With a Golden Arm, *sits with his back to the camera.*

Algren (with cigarette) listening to a woman preacher in Bug House Square, Chicago.

Through a photographer's wife's eye

Florence Shay



Algren working out at one of his favorite pastimes – an extension of his love of boxing – in 1950, when he was 37 years old.

Can a reader and a collector share the same books? Are you kidding?

The Nelson Algren books on our shelves were bought because the guy hung out at the house, and we liked his stories. He signed them all to "Art and Florence," whimsically. All of a sudden, I realized he was *Somebody*, so I searched out the scattered books and, reverently, put them, in their many varieties (*Golden Arm*, in Japanese), all on their own two shelves.

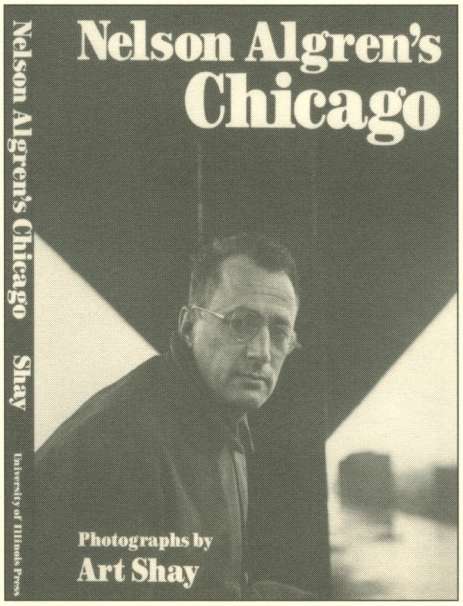
Then Art started on his own book, *Nelson Algren's Chicago*, and the books were scattered again — on his desk, on the floor, or on any free surface in the office — dust jackets askew, books opened randomly.

When I realized this, I sputtered, "You're not supposed to *use* these books!" And Art, equally bewildered, said, "I have to read them again." And they stayed there, scattered, while he used them still again, for reference for his play-in-progress. Projects accomplished, they are now back on their shelves, disheveled.

Art, the reader, doesn't understand why Florence, the collector, finds the above a horror story. ❖

Twenty-three-year-old Lt. Art Shay makes a point to visiting war correspondent Ernest Hemingway at 8th AF HQ,, High Wycombe, England (1945). Shay flew 30 combat missions as lead navigator and 22 secret missions in and out of Sweden. On these missions, the plane carried Red Cross supplies in and shot-down airmen out. Shay holds the Distinguished Flying Cross and five air medals. He served in Col. Jimmy Stewart's squadron.

Algren (left) and French mime Marcel Marceau set for a dual at Schuliens on Irving Park Road, Chicago, in 1962.



Dust jacket of Art Shay's book (1988).

Nelson Algren and Simone deBeavoir (early 1950s) in front of 153 Wabansia, Chicago, a site now under the Kennedy Expressway.

Two Reminisences of Nelson Algren ...

A personal and grateful glimpse of Algren

Elmer Gertz

For years some of us who knew Nelson Algren, or simply admired him, would gather in the kind of watering place dear to him and mark his birthday. There might be a formal program or, more likely, something informal. Some, like Art Shay or myself, might reminisce about him.

I will never forget the shock and joy with which I viewed Shay's wonderful pictures of Algren's French lover, Simone, who wore neither clothes nor guile. They were on display recently at the Chicago Cultural Center. This was culture at its starkest, as viewed by Algren, a champion of raw life. Yet he resented Simone's telling of their amour, in her famous book, *The Mandarin*.

I first glimpsed Algren, not in the flesh, but in a movie called *Goldstein*, the initial creation by young Phil Kaufman, later renowned as a film producer-director of classics, like *Henry and June* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. My son was Phil's attorney in this pioneering motion picture. In it Algren played the part of a race track tout or some similarly unfashionable creature, truly characteristic of him. Like his contemporary, Carl Sandburg, he liked to play-act disreputable roles.

My first personal contacts with Algren were in connection with my efforts to save convicted murderers from death, or to obtain parole for them. Invariably, Algren would respond favorably to my requests by sending eloquent letters to the Governor or to the parole board. In a few instances, he actually visited the person for whom we pleaded. It is wrong to refer to anyone as simply a "criminal." To Algren, and to me, they were fellow human beings in need of help.

I felt amply rewarded when Algren inscribed to me in a book called *Nelson Algren's Own Book of Lonely Monsters*: "To Elmer, who knows more about lonely monsters than any of us."

Vivid in my memory is my visit to Algren's modest apartment in a lower middle class part of Chicago. Without being unkempt, it showed a few signs of good housekeeping. I was struck by the huge pile of back issues of *The Police Gazette*, a lurid, once-popular magazine for non-literary persons. Perhaps he drew inspiration from them for his stories of those not respected by polite society.

On that first visit, Algren personally prepared dinner for me. Some of the dishes were out of containers; others were of his own creation. I don't recall that we washed any dishes; nor were we adversely affected by what we ate.

When he was last married, he invited my wife and me to a reception in honor of his young bride. He had become enamored of her because she had expressed admiration for his writings before she had met him. He was eager for such acclaim.

Later he left Chicago and moved to a non-descript spot in the East because he thought he was insufficiently appreciated in Chicago. He died there prematurely, whether or not he was ever sufficiently appreciated. One of his last works was a defense of a social outcast, called, I believe, "Hurricane Carter."

There is one peculiar allegation about him that I recall; I don't know whether or not it is true. I was told that he was related in some remote fashion to a dear friend of mine, Otto Eisenschiml. Otto, a chemist, industrialist, and student of the Civil War, held our vision of the world. He talked incomparably about it. I never heard either man refer to the other, but they both added color to a sometimes dull community and to my life. For this I am grateful. ❖

Editor's Note: We are deeply saddened to report that in the early morning hours of April 27, our good friend, Caxtonian Elmer Gertz, passed away. He will be missed.

Shake the hand that shook the hand . . . and so forth

Laurel Church

Nelson Algren. It's somewhere in that place called the *fifties*. I'm a first year student at U of I in Urbana — English major. (What else?) I find myself in the company of a graduate student, Coral Crandall, English Major. He impresses me with stories of his youth, of the University, of the Famous. He is also an actor. Tonight he is remembering Algren.

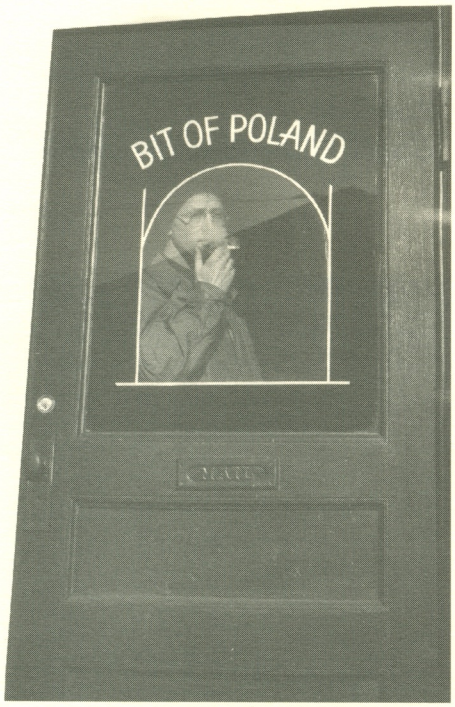
The year before, Algren was invited to give a guest lecture at the Auditorium (at the bottom of the Quad for those of you who know U of I). The day Algren is to arrive, Crandell is enjoying coffee — and in the common room where the names in the English department hold court. He hears department secretary, Mary Kay, announce that Algren is arriving that night by train — apparently she is hoping for a volunteer to meet him and take him in tow. No one steps forward — not the Shakespeare scholar, nor the James specialist (Henry not Jesse, this *is* the fifties, Ms. Kelly's story will be told another time, perhaps, in these pages). The 'Medieval man' drifts away. Keep in mind, that year, Algren had become known in the popular press as the writer whose book was made into a picture with Frank Sinatra and the stellar Chicagoan Kim Novak, *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Needless-to-say Hollywood edited out Blind Pig.

In other words, no English professor wants to be seen in the company of a sell-out. (Remember "selling out?")

Finally Crandall, not believing his luck, gives a verbal bow to the secretary: saying, "I'll do the deed, my dear, Miss Peer." (As we know, he is an actor).

Twenty T Hanger. Downtown Champaign. A quiet bar on a Thursday night. Crandall has collected Algren, who is now drinking all the beer Crandall can

See SHAKE THE HAND, page 7



Shake the hand

Continued from page 6

provide, at a fast clip. Algren, always a man to give value, tells Crandall stories: one for every beer, as I recall. Just as Crandall's rent money is running out, Algren earns his drinks with a story about his first meeting with Hemingway. It went something like this:

Algren visits Hemingway in Florida — just after one of the more horrific accidents. Papa, bandaged head, one leg in a cast on a hassock, receives Algren on the porch. Tall drinks are served. Yes. It is as it should be. Algren is nervous meeting the big man. Algren talks and talks — mostly about his hunting trip in Wisconsin. Algren, mostly a city boy, had not been much of a hunter, but this trip gave him a taste of the hunt. Algren is much excited, telling about the fine points of hunting — through two, then three, drinks. Papa listens. Doesn't say much. But, then, he's not long out of hospital, an African hospital. Algren even offers to take Hemingway hunting, show him the best spots.

Finally, Miss Mary comes in, motions to Algren that Papa needs a nap. She very carefully leads Algren inside the house through a large room, Hemingway's trophy room, where the heads of 10 or 20 large animals peer out at him imperiously. Ms. Mary points to one rather impressive example and recounts the excitement of the chase, and Papa's triumphant shot.

Then, as Crandall tells it to me and I am telling it to you, when Miss Mary shakes Algren's hand and says come back soon — he replies "And next time, I'll tell the old man everything I know about deep sea fishing. My first trip is tomorrow."

For what it's worth. ❖

Editor's note: *Laurel Church, Ph.D, Chair of a Communication-Art program, continues to write poetry and is now at work on a series of videos on Vietnam.*

A Chronology of Books By Nelson Algren 1909-1980

Somebody in Boots, Vanguard, 1935.
Never Come Morning, Harper and Brothers, 1942.
The Neon Wilderness, Doubleday, 1947.
The Man with the Golden Arm, Doubleday, 1949.
Chicago: City on the Make, Doubleday, 1951.
A Walk on the Wild Side, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956.
Nelson Algren's Own Book of Lonesome Monsters, 1962.
Who Lost an American? Macmillan, 1963.
Conversations with Nelson Algren, Hill & Wang, 1964.
The Devil's Stocking, Arbor House, 1983.

Algren (standing, left) auditing a court case at 26th and California, Chicago, in a photograph made by Shay with a hidden camera.

Bookmarks...

Dinner Program
May 17, 2000
Art Shay
Nelson Algren, Simone deBeauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre

Art Shay has been called the best photo-journalist Chicago ever produced. Since 1950, when he left *Life* magazine as a staff reporter to become a full-time photographer in Chicago, more than 25,000 of his photographs have been published — including 1,005 cover photos for magazines, books, and annual reports.

From the 1960s into the 1980s Shay freelanced for *Time, Life, and Fortune* magazines. In 1988 his 79th illustrated book, *Nelson Algren's Chicago*, appeared to enthusiastic reviews. Chicago newspapers called him and his book a "Chicago treasure."

Some of his photographic art hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, as well as in private and corporate collections across the country. He recently has had solo exhibitions at the Chicago Cultural Center and at the Stephen Daiter and Carol Ehlers Galleries, Chicago.

Shay's 80th illustrated book, *Album of Our Age*, will be published in October 2000, by Chicago publisher Ivan R. Dee Co., with a Preface by Garry Wills. The book will feature blurbs by Roger Ebert, Studs Terkel, Scott Turow, Hugh Hefner, and movie director Billy Friedkin, who says, "Shay's photography has influenced my work for the last 40 years."

A play of Shay's, *A Clock for Nikita*, was produced in Chicago in 1964. His new in-the-works play, *The Loves of Simone*, had its first reading in 1999, with Mike Nussbaum directing, and award-winning actress Carmen Roman playing deBeauvoir. This issue of the *Caxtonian* provides a foretaste of what promises to be an evening rich in entertainment and insight into three important lives of the 20th Century.

Art Shay and his wife, Caxtonian Florence Shay, are integral to the important Renaissance of books and ideas in progress in this great city of Chicago. Join us for a rare, special time of celebration.

Kenneth Houston Paterson
Vice President and Program Chair

Don't forget the May Luncheon, on the 12th, when Bill Drendel takes us on a short historical tour of the "book" — before and after the codex.

Luncheon Program
June 9, 2000 (Newberry Library)
Paul Gehl
Genesis of the Florentine Exhibit

Caxtonian Paul Gehl will describe the background and the history surrounding the development of the concept for the exhibition, "Florentine Humanism and the Church Fathers." In his discussion he will also share the joys and the griefs of assembling an exhibit across the Atlantic, between Florence, Italy, and Chicago.

This will be a rare opportunity to hear first-hand from one of the nation's great curators the detailed background work, which makes Chicago's libraries, museums, and galleries among the greatest in the world.

It will, as well, be an opportunity to view the six manuscripts from the Medici-Laurentian Library in Florence, recently flown to Chicago for exhibition. You will, as well, be able to view the 12 rare manuscripts from the Newberry's own world-renowned Renaissance collections.

After lunch, Paul will lead the group on a tour of the exhibition. You are invited to join Caxtonians and guests for this delightful luncheon program and for one of the more important exhibitions to come to Chicago in recent years.

Because the luncheon will be catered at the Newberry Library, it is absolutely necessary that reservations be made in advance. This will be the last luncheon meeting until the new year begins in September. Thanks for your support of our programs throughout the year.

Edward Quattrocchi & Leonard Freedman
Co-Chairs

All luncheon and dinner meetings, unless otherwise noted, are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th floor of BankOne, BankOne Plaza, Madison & Clark, Chicago. Luncheon and discussion, 12:30pm. Dinner meetings begin with spirits at 5pm, dinner at 6pm, lecture at 7pm. BankOne's parking garage, 40 S. Clark Street, offers a special parking rate after 5pm to guests of the Mid-Day Club. When you leave, please tell the parking attendant you were at the Mid-Day Club, and your parking fee will be $8. Members planning to attend luncheons or dinners must make advance reservations by phoning the Caxton number, 312 255 3710. Luncheon for members and guests, $20. Dinner, for members and guests, $35.