

Who Was Jean Block?

Jean was identified in the book and accompanying promotional materials only as the president of Midway Editorial Research and a lifelong resident of Hyde Park. Samuel W. Block Jr., the book's contributing photographer, receives only an expression of gratitude for his photographs in Jean's preface, but no direct information about him appears anywhere in the text, on the flyleaf or on any of the promotional material. How much of this reflected Jean's choice or a university publisher's uncertainty about how to present a non-academic author, an independent scholar, is difficult to assess. Looking back, however, one can only conclude that it was hardly adequate.

The inner workings of much of Hyde Park's history is women's history in the sense of the leadership, service and commitment women have given to our local educational, charitable, religious, cultural, recreational, business and political history. A major problem in recalling women's history, however, is that so much of it has tended to be carried out quietly, unrecognized, unrecorded and neglected. One of Jean's important contributions in *Hyde Park Houses* is her documentation of some of the social and cultural activities that women organized and sustained in early Hyde Park-Kenwood history.

Jean Block's life, a life of service, was part of this local history and she was active in a variety of community organizations. She was a board member of The University of Chicago Laboratory School's Parents Association, serving a term as its president, and co-edited its newsletter with Ruth Grodzin. She was one of the voices in favor of greater democratization within the University Colony Club and actively supported the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club, Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, the Fortnightly Club and International House. She volunteered as a research associate at Regenstein Library. Already noted was her role in the founding of the Hyde Park Historical Society and its early success. She served not only as one of our early presidents but also organized our archives and negotiated its home at Regenstein Library. She was also a member of K.A.M. Isaiah Israel Congregation.

Since Jean has been described as a more behind the scenes type of person, the full extent of her community involvement—her public life, aside from her publications—has been difficult to document and is here almost certainly incompletely reported. That is a problem not just in Jean's case but, as well, for many other women throughout this community's history who have found or created roles for themselves in the community beyond the family. In that process they have devoted much of their lives to giving texture to our community's history, articulating its moral and ethical issues, and making this neighborhood, through

all its years and its changes, a better and more vibrant place in which to live. Rendering that history remains a challenge.

It is instructive to examine Jean Block's life and family history, not only because it provides some background about her but also because it has a rough similarity to the stories of other accomplished Hyde Park families. There is inspiration, too, because, as one soon learns, Jean was a very sturdy human being. Jean's grandfather on her father's side, Cass Friedberg (1848-1924), came to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from Kovnos, Lithuania in 1861 at the age of 13. He outfitted himself as a peddler and worked his way west to Kansas. He opened a successful dry goods store in El Dorado, Kansas in the 1880s, but closed it in 1900 to become president of a wholesale bedding company in Leavenworth, Kansas.



Jean
Block,
1984

In 1875 Cass married Laura Abeles (1853-1882), born in Leavenworth, Kansas to Simon and Amalia Abeles. Cass and Laura Friedberg had three children, one of whom, ultimately Jean's father, was born in 1875 in Chicago and given the name Selig. Later, he would take the last name of Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War as his first name, Stanton.

Simon Abeles, Jean's great-grandfather on her mother's side, was born in Bohemia in 1817. His father had been a rabbi and his mother the daughter of one. Simon, literate in both Hebrew and German, had started out as a teacher of Hebrew and the Talmud but in 1837 found employment as craftman of violin strings. He decided to start life anew in the United States, however, and immigrated to St. Louis in 1840. He ultimately settled in Leavenworth, Kansas and became a successful clothing merchant, founder of a bank and real estate investor. He died in 1890.