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Towertown; a Chicago Neighborhood

Towertown was a Chicago neighborhood on the near north side. It derives its name from the Chicago Avenue Water Tower, the historic landmark at Chicago Avenue and upper Michigan Avenue which was the center of the district. Its boundaries are hard to define.

Towertown's boundaries, always fuzzy, were established partly by the presence of the wealthy Gold Coast to the east (Streeterville) and what was called "Little Italy" (Cabrini-Green) to the west, Division Street on the north and it ends abruptly at Grand Avenue on the south. State Street is the main north-south road through it, and Chicago Avenue bisects it from east to west. Its main drags included Wabash Avenue and Ohio, Erie, Huron, Superior, Pearson, Chestnut and State Streets. Some of the Bohemians lived as far west as La Salle Street, or in fringy areas outside Towertown proper.

An art colony took root in Towertown when Anna and Lambert Tree built "Tree Studios" to tempt artists to stay in Chicago after the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. No one has ever identified Towertown's first pioneers, but the numbers of bohemians began reaching a critical mass before World War I. Their early ranks seem to have included quite a few painters of respectable if not widely recognized talent.

The genesis of Towertown was cheap housing. Walkup apartment houses, shabby old subdivided mansions and former stables were carved into tiny studio flats. Nearby were cheap cafeterias and lunchrooms that provided the other sustaining essential.

As the area around the Water Tower became dense with bohemians, new businesses sprang up to serve them. Among the chief of these were book stores, tea rooms, coffee houses, art suppliers and used-furniture dealers. There were saloons, too, although few that attained any fame. Nightclubs in Towertown-Chez Pierre, the Little Club, the Tent-catered to monied outsiders who sought their entertainment in the chic and rather daring atmosphere of bohemia.

Those seeking something downright raunchy, and often illegal, headed west for the Clark Street tenderloin frequented by gamblers, hookers, dime-a-dance devotees and



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underworld dandies. Liquor, music and lovemaking came cheaply on Clark Street. “Gin, din and sin for a fin” was the way habitués put it. Still, there was legitimate entertainment in the area as well, and it included productions by such struggling dramatic groups as the Studio Players, the Impertinent Players and the Jack and Jill Players.

The most famous Bohemian nightspot was the "Dill Pickle Club" (or Dil Pickle Club) at 10 Tooker Place, Chicago, which was almost hidden from the outside and was considered a "hole in the wall".

The entrance was marked by a "DANGER" sign that which pointed to the orange main door which was lit by a green light. On the door, it read: “Step High, Stoop Low and Leave Your Dignity Outside.” Once inside, another sign read "Elevate Your Mind to a Lower Level of Thinking" before you entered the main part of the club. Immediately inside was a large main room with a stage. The room was decorated with brightly painted chairs and partially surrounded by counters where drinks and sandwiches were sold. The rest of the club was also decorated by its attendees and contained a tearoom and art exhibitions. Altogether, the club had reported standing capacity for 700 people.

After their departure, according to sociologist Harvey W. Zorbaugh, Towertown became a popular destination for “egocentric poseurs, neurotics, rebels against the conventions of Main Street or the gossip of the foreign community, seekers of atmosphere, dabblers in the occult, dilettantes in the arts, or parties to drab lapses from a moral code which the city had not yet destroyed.”

Occasionally, Towertown broke into front page headlines. Such was the case when a brilliant young Polish woman named Wanda Stopa left her mother’s house on Augusta Boulevard in 1922 and moved into Towertown. She was Chicago’s youngest woman lawyer and an assistant U.S. district attorney whose success seemed assured.

Stopa revealed herself as an emotionally unstable loser after her switch to bohemia, however. She married a man who turned out to be a cad, then fell in love with a rich, married advertising executive who conned her, kept her and eventually shipped her from Towertown to Greenwich Village, New York.



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Stopa's short but fiery life ended at age 24 when she more or less accidentally killed her lover's gardener and then committed suicide by swallowing poison. The newspapers went crazy over the sensational story and 10,000 Chicagoans turned out for the funeral. As late as 1947, reporters were still turning out retrospectives on Stopa's tragic and labyrinthine involvements. Naughty Towertown always got its share of the blame.

Because many artistic young women from small towns came to Chicago to study at the Art Institute and elsewhere, sheltered residential facilities were created to give them an alternative to Towertown's temptations. One of the best of these was the Three Arts Club at 1300 N. Dearborn Pkwy., founded in 1912 and still in business.



The Three Arts Club at 1300 N Dearborn Parkway, Chicago in Towertown. Started in 1912, the Club was chartered to provide a home and a club for young women engaged in the practice or study of the arts in Chicago, keeping them safe from the bad influences.



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Knowing of bohemia's tawdry side and its attractiveness to dilettantes and newly arrived small-townners', it is easy to forget that Chicago's literary renaissance and certain of its other successes in the arts were nurtured in Towertown.

One of its most important figures was Harriet Monroe, the poet who suddenly rose to prominence by writing the "Columbian Ode" to dedicate the Chicago world's fair of 1893. Monroe's greatest success was founding the world-famous "[Poetry Magazine](#)" in 1912. As its editor, she was credited with discovering Carl Sandburg at about the time he was writing the "city of the big shoulders" lines that would certify his fame.

Monroe also published work by the likes of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, editing her monthly magazine from a Towertown office at 543 Cass St. (now North Wabash Avenue). The publication still survives, headquartered at 61 West Superior Street, Chicago, IL.

Rising property values driven by the luxury shopping district on nearby Michigan Avenue became too pricey for many of the artists. Towertown became a tourist attraction, further alienating its bohemian denizens. By the Great Depression, the art colony had dispersed.