

# Lost Chicago Sun-Times photos find their way to history museum

For nearly a decade, an archived collection of photographs from the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper seemed lost forever, first to a convicted embezzler and then later to an eBay collector who put them in storage in the boyhood hometown of Ronald Reagan.



Visitors look at photographs in a collection of Chicago Sun-Times images on display at the Chicago History Museum. (Photo by Robin Sluzas)

The photographs, captured by Sun-Times photojournalists over six decades, include a 1991 photo of Michael Jordan kissing the first of six championship trophies with the Chicago Bulls

and a 1959 pic of Marilyn Monroe deboarding a plane at Midway Airport.

After resurfacing in Dixon, the Chicago History Museum bought the collection of 5 million film negatives for \$125,00. The collection of images, which span the 1940s to the early 2000, is one of the largest newspaper photograph collections ever acquired by a US museum.

“I’m glad they’re found,” said Rich Hein, the Sun-Times photo editor. “It’s not a complete archive because a lot of it is still missing, but it’s good. There’s important stuff in there that’s now preserved for history which is a good thing.”

In 2009, the Sun-Times sold the negatives to sports souvenir collector [John Rogers](#) who agreed to digitize the collection. The Sun-Times was supposed to receive the digitized collection and retain rights to the photographs. A year later, Rogers disclosed that now-defunct auction house Legendary Auctions would direct the sale of the images. Rogers was [found guilty](#) in 2017 and imprisoned for sports wire fraud.

[Leo Bauby](#), owner of EBay business Sox Photos, bought the Sun-Times collection in a sale ordered by a federal court from Memphis photo-selling company Historic Images after Rogers’ conviction, and stored them in a climatized All-Safe Storage unit in Dixon, Illinois, which is 100 miles west of Chicago. Bauby realized the magnitude and historical value of the photos and contacted the Chicago History Museum, which purchased the collection in 2018.

Former Sun-Times photo editor Richard Cahan [was the first](#) to alert the Chicago History Museum that the collection existed. Cahan is co-curator of Millions of Moments: The Chicago Sun-Times Photo Collection, [on display at the museum](#) through the end of 2023.

The exhibit “was an opportunity for us to showcase some of the brilliant and masterful images that were taken for the purpose

of the Sun-Times,” said Charles E. Bethea, the museum’s director of collections and curatorial affairs. “Maybe one or two out of an entire roll of images were chosen by a photo editor to be produced and published in the paper, but that leaves the lion’s share of the roll or other images around those events that often don’t get a chance to see the light of day.”

Bethea said the exhibit is a reflection of life in Chicago over the past five decades “where you can see day-to-day life, various events around very poignant moments, as well as some of our weather patterns and other fun and exciting moments within the city’s history.”

The lost photographs are a particularly important part of the Sun-Times’ own history. In 2013, the Sun-Times fired its entire photojournalism staff, including Pulitzer Prize winner John H. White. Hein was the only member of the original staff who remained.

“Within days of us getting laid off, the Chicago Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup and the coverage in the Tribune was amazing,” said [Rob Hart](#), a 13-year staff photographer who was among those fired in 2013. “They had photographers in Lakeview and they had photographers in every neighborhood photographing the celebrations and photographing the Cup moving throughout the city. I clearly remember the cover of the Sun-Times being like a reporter’s cell phone picture. There was no one arguing for the visual side of the newspaper.”

The firing of the Sun-Times staff was a [harbinger of sorts](#) for the entire newspaper photo industry, which has retrenched, reshaped and been forced to reinvent itself in the past decade of financial losses within the media industry.

Between the years 2000 through 2012, the number of professional news photographers, videographers and artists [declined 43%](#). Budget cuts account for this, but social media

accounts for it as well, with non-professionals posting breaking news photos and videos instantaneously.

Many news organizations have turned to traditional print reporters with smartphones to provide the visuals they need. Hart said it shows.

“When people get into journalism, they focus on the information and not what the world feels like,” Hart said. “Photojournalists are the heartbeat of a city. We are always present with people and trying to understand their emotions to try and predict what’s going to happen and how to be ready for that.”

At the Chicago History Museum, visitor Beth Reece took a moment recently to view a 1966 photograph of Muhammad Ali captioned “Tight-lipped for a reason.” It depicts Ali denying an apology to the Illinois Boxing Commission for his resistance to the Vietnam War.

The impact of the photo reduced Reece to tears, illustrating the emotional depth of photography.

“I had a reaction because last night I saw on television this big presentation on him,” she said. “And watching him, the films of him going through that time when he was standing up for his own faith, the rights of others, and saying the truth will make you free. And just realizing how far ahead of his time he was and how he spoke the truth. We just, at the time, couldn’t really hear that. It just really touched me.”

“It isn’t enough just to be sorry,” she added. “We need to continue to work for the kind of changes he was working for back then, 1966? I mean, isn’t it terrible that it’s taken this long?”

Like some boomers, the Chicago Sun-Times evolved its political ideology over time too. After a series of conservative owners, liberal owner and former Chicago alderman, Edwin Eisendrath,

who acquired the paper in 2017, directed the paper to its current progressive philosophy, Hein said.

His 1989 photo titled, "Ricardo Santiago and Veronica Lomas." is part of the exhibit.

"The picture you're talking about of the two people walking in the park, you know, 1989, that was a long time ago. I don't even remember taking it, and I don't remember seeing it, because I've shot so many things and it was so long ago, but it was obviously what we used to call a weather photo." he said.

Weather photos were common at that time. They were used to complete a news page at a layout editor's direction, but photographers found value in them because they were a natural extension of Chicago residents in their surroundings. Weather photos depicted Chicago residents' activities during all four seasons, he added.

"I would go to the parks or the beach, or I would drive around the neighborhood looking for kids playing in sprinklers or opening fire hydrants. We always got in trouble with the fire department. The fire department never wanted us to show those photos of kids playing in fire hydrants because they thought it would encourage people to open the fire hydrants." he said.

Grace Richardson, a preparator for the Chicago History Museum, helped build and install the "Millions of Moments" exhibit. She said her favorite collection photo is a 1944 image of Montgomery Ward businessman Sewell Avery being carried, while seated in an office chair, by two soldiers after being arrested by order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Montgomery Ward department store [supplied United States forces](#) with parts used in military machines, clothing and more during World War II. President Roosevelt created a National Labor War Board to effect agreements between workers and management to head off worker walk-outs during the war.

Sewell, whose arms are crossed in the photo, refused to consent to labor agreements negotiated by the board.

Richardson noted the difference between the severity of the executive, appearing as someone who is a leader, and that he's doing something foolish in the photo. "That contrast between solemnity and humor was great I think." she said.

"It reminded me of a Monty Python sketch, to be honest." Richardson added. Sewell's hair, his formal suit and the way he presents as a serious-minded businessman, despite his circumstances, and as if he were still in control, made her think about the difference between how people from his time period, and people today behave, she said. "The outward appearance and the inward personality, the ways those are expressed are changing."

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