

Chicago: Global Crossroads

by Gary T. Johnson

During my first year as President of the Chicago History Museum, I chose a theme to explore during some of my speaking engagements. For 2006, it was "Chicago History: Back from the Future." Taking a future event as a hypothetical starting point - - the 2016 Olympics -- I discussed how great events such as two worlds fairs and the Great Chicago Fire leave their mark on the city and its communities.

For 2007, my topic is "**Chicago: Global Crossroads.**" I will explore different aspects of this future-oriented topic during my speaking engagements, while also highlighting exciting developments at Chicago's newest museum – the Chicago History Museum.

There is a belief that a new type of city is emerging over the past few decades, and that Chicago is one of them. As information, money and goods move at an ever more rapid pace, some 40 cities are leading centers for coordinating this activity. These are the global cities, or if you find that word politically charged, these are the mega-cities.¹

Chicago may not be in the first rank in size or wealth, but it is a global city, nevertheless. If you need convincing, think of it this way. New York is the business capital of the East Coast, and Los Angeles, the capital of the West Coast. Between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains lies a tremendous industrial and financial engine, and its undisputed capital is what author Irving Cutler calls the "Metropolis of the

¹ See Madigan, Charles, ed., *Global History* (Urbana and Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, University of Illinois Press, 2004). In that very insightful book, see especially Saskia Sassen's chapter, "A Global City."

Mid-Continent.”² Of course the heartland's capital is a candidate for being a global city!

In times of change, we need perspective. I suggest that we view Chicago as a **global crossroads**. “Crossroads” is the name of our new permanent exhibition at the Chicago History Museum, and our exhibition is rich in insights about the city’s direction.³

Chicago can set the standard for other global cities, but at every step of the way, it needs the perspective of history. For me, Chicago as a crossroads is the most illuminating perspective. It tells us where we have been, where we are today and where we are heading.

January 2, 2007

² See Cutler, Irving, *Chicago: Metropolis of the Mid-Continent* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 4th. Ed., 2006).

³ The long-term exhibition, *Chicago: Crossroads of America*, opened to the public at the Chicago History Museum on September 30, 2006. See also Mahoney, Olivia, *Chicago: Crossroads of America* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 2006).