

ROBERT E. SEYFARTH, ARCHITECT

STUART E. COHEN, FAIA



FIGURE 1 ROBERT SEYFARTH, CA. 1935; PHOTOGRAPHER: HELEN MORRISON. SEYFARTH DESIGNED A HOUSE FOR HER IN 1939. COURTESY STUART COHEN.

Except for a cadre of homeowners and a few architectural historians, the work of Robert E. Seyfarth is virtually unknown. Primarily a residential architect, Seyfarth was a contemporary of David Adler and Howard Van Doren Shaw, who was nine years his senior. However, unlike the mansions for Chicago's elite designed by those architects, Seyfarth's houses were modest by comparison, designed for well-to-do merchants and businessmen. Seyfarth's talent as a designer of houses is evident in his handsome proportions, careful massing, elegant detailing, conscious manipulation of scale, and fine control of space and natural light.

Robert Edward Seyfarth (Figure 1) was born in Blue Island, Illinois, in 1878, the son of Edward Seyfarth, a prominent local businessman and hardware storeowner, and his wife Clara. After attending primary school in Blue Island, Seyfarth enrolled in the Chicago Manual Training School, a vocational high school where he probably studied architectural drafting and construction. In 1898 after his graduation, Seyfarth went to work for the prominent Prairie School architect, George W. Maher, a position he may have obtained through William Weber, president of the First National Bank of Blue Island, who would have known Robert's father. Maher had just completed a house for Weber at 12956 S. Greenwood Ave. in Blue Island.

In 1903 while working for Maher, Seyfarth built his first house. He had married Nell Martin and constructed a small house for himself and his bride at 12852 S. Maple Avenue in

Blue Island. The house was even more Wrightian in its cubic form and details than Maher's work. During his apprenticeship, in addition to residential projects, Seyfarth worked on Maher's designs for Northwestern University's Patton Gymnasium and Swift Chemistry Building. He also supervised the construction of James A. Patton's house on Ridge Avenue in Evanston.

Seyfarth also began designing on his own. In 1908, his H.C. Dickinson House at 7150 S. Yale Ave. in Chicago was published in the February issue of *House Beautiful* magazine. A brick structure with a projecting full-width second-floor porch and low-hipped roof, it is similar to the Prairie-style house Seyfarth had built for himself in 1903.

By 1909 Seyfarth was ready to open his own private practice. In the process of supervising the construction of several Maher houses in Highland Park, he saw an opportunity for himself in the wealthy North Shore suburb. He sold his house in Blue Island and built a new home at 1498 Sheridan Road in Highland Park in 1911. Seyfarth's move to Highland Park was not unlike Frank Lloyd Wright's move to Oak Park, where the construction of his fashionable Shingle-style house served as an advertisement of his skill as a residential architect. It is interesting that Seyfarth's new house was unlike his earlier Prairie-style home in Blue Island. Instead, it was a modest, one-story, traditional-looking house with a gambrel roof and tall double-hung windows.

FIGURE 2 STEWART HOUSE.
1442 FOREST, HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS,
CA. 1913. COURTESY STUART COHEN.



His decision to move to Highland Park was a good one. By the mid 1920s he had built over a dozen houses within two blocks of his home. The best of these early houses is the Alexander Stewart house (Figure 2), built in 1913 at 1442 Forest. Volumetrically simple, the Stewart house has a hipped roof, overscaled double-hung windows with shutters, and an arched Georgian-style entry canopy supported on scrolled brackets. The most unusual feature is the pair of symmetrically-placed sun porches with floor-to-ceiling glass on three sides. These face south at either end of the main façade. The sun porches have pitched roofs, which slope up to join the main hipped roof, completely integrating them into the volume of the house. The studied asymmetries and private informality of the rear façade (Figure 3), with its centered stair window and paired inset dormers, should be compared to the public formality of the front façade.

The Stewart house was purchased in 1952 by Seyfarth's son Hugh, and Hugh's daughter Mary still lives there. Mary remembers her grandfather as a friendly, outgoing man who was always working, often missing family vacations. It was Nell Seyfarth who probably made many of the social contacts that led to residential commissions for her husband. Considered a civic leader, she was head of the Highland Park School Board for nine years, president of the PTA and president of the Highland Park Women's Club from 1925 to 1927.

Why did Robert Seyfarth abandon the Prairie Style when he began his career in Highland Park? Was it a personal decision involving ideology or a change in his own taste, or

was it an acknowledgement that his clients preferred more conservative-looking designs? Was Seyfarth simply separating himself from Maher, distinguishing his work from that of his mentor? Seyfarth's house was literally down the block from Frank Lloyd Wright's 1902 Prairie School masterpiece, the Ward Willitts house. Did Seyfarth understand that the derivative Prairie-style work of Wright's followers would pale by comparison to the master's work? Could he have known that the Prairie School as an architectural style would almost completely disappear by the 1920s, a phenomenon of taste and circumstance about which Prairie School historian H. Allen Brooks speculates but cannot explain. One fact is clear: Wright built only two more houses in Highland Park while Seyfarth built over fifty.

Although Seyfarth served a predominately suburban clientele, he kept offices in downtown Chicago during the 1910s and 1920s. Upon leaving Maher's employ, he rented an office in the Corn Exchange Bank Building at the corner of LaSalle and Adams streets. In 1925 he moved to the 21st floor of the Tribune Tower, Chicago's most prestigious new building. Seyfarth prepared his own drawings, aided by his secretary, a Miss Eldridge who typed his specifications. Affected by the Depression, he gave up his Chicago office in 1934 and moved his practice into his house, where he worked until his death in 1950.

During the 1940s, Seyfarth hired his first and only professional employee, Edward Humrich. Humrich recalled in an

FIGURE 3 STEWART HOUSE.
REAR FACADE.
COURTESY STUART COHEN.



interview, conducted by the Department of Architecture of the Art Institute of Chicago, that Seyfarth had no car, never learned to drive and hired him because he did. Humrich drove him twice a week to visit the North Shore houses he had under construction. He also took over the typing of Seyfarth's specifications.

During the 1910s and the 1920s Seyfarth built houses in Chicago and many Chicago-area suburbs, including Evanston, Winnetka, Glencoe, Highland Park, Northbrook, Deerfield, Waukegan, Barrington, Libertyville, River Forest and Oak Park. He also built in his boyhood town of Blue Island, where he designed houses in 1926 for his brothers William and Ward and in 1929 for cousin Arthur Seyfarth. Seyfarth's work was published with some regularity in the pages of the *Western Architect*, and his houses also appeared in *Architectural Record*, *House Beautiful* and *House and Garden*.

His late son Hugh remembered that Seyfarth particularly admired the work of Howard Van Doren Shaw and was a good friend of Hugh Garden and Jens Jensen, who designed the landscaping for Seyfarth's Holmes house, built in Highland Park at 2693 Sheridan Road in 1928. Seyfarth lunched regularly to discuss questions of architectural practice with a group of North Shore architects that included Morgan Yost and John van Bergen. Yost remembered Seyfarth as "an excellent designer. His houses were not really colonial...they used colonial elements." He also noted that "they were beautifully put together."

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Seyfarth's work might also account for the reason it has never really received serious critical attention. Almost all of Seyfarth's houses are typologically related, sharing similar organizational schema. These seem to be variants on several geometrically simple ideas about planning, building form and massing. Almost all of the houses from his forty years of practice are thin linear buildings, rectangular volumes with single or double wings projecting forward, or cubes. Roof forms and general massing, combined with his consistent use of tall, (often) shuttered, double-hung windows and decorative entryways, are so similar for each of the house types that it might be easy to conclude that Seyfarth kept building the same house over and over again for different clients. While Seyfarth's work hardly constitutes the same kind of systematic typological exploration we see in the cruciform and pinwheel plans of Wright's Prairie houses, his work consistently looks at the spatial implication and volumetric development of each of his preferred plan types. Each of these formal plan types has a correspondence to the size and complexity of the individual commission. The simple cube houses are "center entry colonials" like the tiny house built in 1915 at 199 Central in Highland Park. Also in Highland Park but at the other end of the spectrum is the Adamson House with its single attached forward-projecting wing and a detached garage. Built in 1927 at 2219 Egandale, it is a grand mansion on Lake Michigan with elegantly simple brick work and Tudor detailing. Of particular interest are Seyfarth's linear plans, a type largely absent from the history

FIGURE 4 WAGSTAFF HOUSE,
181 HAWTHORNE, GLENCOE,
ILLINOIS, CA. 1927,
FRONT ELEVATION AND
GROUND-FLOOR PLAN.
COURTESY STUART COHEN.



of freestanding American houses. These are different from the “shot-gun” houses found in the South in both their internal planning and their orientation to the street.

The ability to produce recognizable works is usually acknowledged as a sign of talent, invention and ideological conviction. That these characteristics are not generally recognized in Seyfarth’s work is a function of contemporary architectural sensibilities, an uneasiness about the seeming arbitrariness of eclecticism. However, for Seyfarth the eclecticism of his work is more like a “kit of parts” approach to the elements of architecture that may be seen in the variation of entry doors and the (sparse) application of trim to window openings. The buildings themselves are about the pure geometry of form. It is the contrast between the often-classical entryways and the utter simplicity of the rest of his houses that have led Seyfarth’s work to be labeled as “Colonial” or “Georgian.”

The original front elevation and ground-floor plan of the Wagstaff House (Figure 4), built in Glencoe ca. 1927, may serve to illustrate the linear “wall house” type referred to above. The scale of the house is manipulated by the manner in which the ends of the hipped roof of the two-story main section extend down to the one-story-high sunporch and garage at either end of the house. In addition, the overscaled windows miniaturize the house by diminishing the visual length of the front and rear facades. Inside, the principal ground-floor rooms are accessed *ensuite* from the entry and stair hall.

The living room and sun porch are spatially interconnected with a double fireplace and sets of French doors dividing them. The longitudinal character of the spaces is countered by the nearly floor-to-ceiling, double-hung windows which align on opposite walls and which form cross axes within the length of the rooms, flooding them with light.

Ultimately it is the livability, light-filled spaces, careful attention to interior and exterior details, beautiful proportions, and manipulation of architectural scale that made Seyfarth’s houses so prized by their owners. These are the same qualities that should secure Seyfarth the place he deserves in the history of Chicago’s residential architecture.

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NOTES

General biographical information about Robert Seyfarth is to be found in the *Blue Island Trivia Sampler*, written by Jean Simon and published by the Blue Island Forum, July 25, 1989. There is a brief biography of Seyfarth in a pamphlet published by the Blue Island Historical Society to accompany the Robert Seyfarth House Walk, September 22, 1991. This reprints (unacknowledged) portions from Simon’s work and from a brief biographical sketch of Seyfarth by David Van Zanten in *The Chicago Architectural Journal* 5 (1985), pp. 40-41. Van Zanten’s information was based on an interview with Seyfarth’s son Hugh. The Art Institute of Chicago’s Department of Architecture also has a taped interview with Hugh Seyfarth made by Betty Blum in 1983.



MAYFIELD HOUSE,
145 MONTGOMERY,
GLENCOE, ILLINOIS.
CA. 1926.
COURTESY STUART COHEN.

After Robert Seyfarth's death, the family donated his drawings to the Chicago Historical Society, which has seventy sets of drawings for houses and house additions done between 1932 and 1948. No drawings of his houses from the 1920s and earlier seem to have survived except those in the possession of individual homeowners. Mary Seyfarth believes her grandfather threw away drawings each time he moved his office. Partial building lists have been compiled by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks' Chicago Historic Resources Survey, the 1972 Illinois Historic Structures Survey, and by Hugh Seyfarth shortly before his death.

My own interest in Robert Seyfarth stems from the opportunity to remodel two of his houses, one in Glencoe and one in Highland Park. Several years ago Susan Benjamin generously shared her materials on Seyfarth with me, including a copy of the Illinois Historic Structures Survey. With addresses in hand, I began to realize that most of my favorite "anonymous" houses on the North Shore were Seyfarth designs. Since then, Mary Seyfarth and Marion Roberts have kindly allowed me access to their own material.

PARTIAL BUILDING LIST BY LOCATION (CHICAGO AND SUBURBS)

The following list, arranged by location and date of construction, is not complete, and the accuracy of many entries has not been verified. The list is based on the sources noted above and is provided as an indication of Seyfarth's extraordinary productivity as a sole practitioner and as a starting point for the study of Seyfarth's built work. Many of these houses, particularly the smaller ones, have been extensively altered by additions and modifications to the rooflines, including the addition of projecting dormers. Besides the towns and cities listed here, Seyfarth also built in Dwight, Illinois; Williams Bay and near Kenosha, Wisconsin; Muskegon, Kalamazoo, Flint, Battle Creek, Dowagiac and Sturgis, Michigan; Rossford, Ohio; Firhope, Alabama; and Randolph, Virginia.

BARRINGTON, ILLINOIS

Buffington House, 296 Donlea Rd., ca. 1933
Jerrems House, 42 Brinker Rd., ca. 1935
Dwyer House, 373 County Line Rd., ca. 1936

BLUE ISLAND, ILLINOIS

Robert Seyfarth House, 12852 S. Maple Ave., 1903
Roy E. Geyer House, 12850 S. Greenwood Ave., 1923
Ward Seyfarth House, 2523 W. High St., 1926
William Seyfarth House, 12904 S. Elm St., 1926
Krueger Funeral Home, 13050 S. Greenwood Ave., 1927
Arthur Seyfarth House, 12844 S. Greenwood Ave., 1929
William Schreiber House, 12857 S. Maple Ave., 1950

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

(Beverly neighborhood)

9357 S. Pleasant Ave., 1908
9220 S. Pleasant Ave., 1909
10400 S. Seeley Ave., 1909

(West Rogers Park neighborhood)

2050 W. Pratt Ave., 1912
2064 W. Pratt Ave., 1913
7114 N. Ridge Ave., 1913
2074 W. Pratt Ave., 1914

(Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood)

7150 S. Yale Ave., ca. 1908

DEERFIELD, ILLINOIS

1124 N. Waukegan Rd., ca. 1918

DAY HOUSE, 1264 LINDEN,
HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS,
CA. 1921
COURTESY STUART COHEN.



EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

630 Central St., 1909
2514 Sheridan Rd., 1909
Commercial building, northeast corner of Sherman & Grove, ca. 1920
2500 Lincoln St., ca. 1925
Freeman House, 2418 Lincoln St., ca. 1935
Page House, 2424 Lincoln St., ca. 1936
2730 Broadway Ave., ca. 1937
Mueller House, 2320 Lincolnwood, ca. 1938

GLENCOE, ILLINOIS

(Northeast)
Stonehill House, 258 Maple Hill Rd., ca. 1911-12
150 Maple Hill Rd., ca. 1913
221 Franklin Rd., ca. 1920
246 Franklin Rd., ca. 1920
231 Franklin Rd., ca. 1924
Aspley House, 20 Maple Hill Rd., ca. 1928
31 Crescent Ct., date not known
57 Crescent Ct., date not known

(East and Southeast)

233 Fairview, ca. 1914-15
241 Fairview, ca. 1914-15
520 Greenleaf, ca. 1915
Taylor House, 92 Dell Pl., ca. 1916
Aspley House, 230 Fairview, ca. 1920
Rodgers House, 210 Park Ave., ca. 1924
Abel Davis House, 600 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1925-26
Mayfield House, 145 Montgomery, ca. 1926
Wagstaff House, 181 Hawthorne, ca. 1927

David Mayer House, 611 Greenleaf, ca. 1928
171 Greenbay, ca. 1950 (completed by Humrich)

(West and Northwest)

462 Adams, ca. 1911
Coffin House, 463 Washington, ca. 1914
445 Washington, ca. 1915
400 Lincoln, ca. 1916-18
944 Bluff, ca. 1924
565 Washington, ca. 1924-25
566 Washington, ca. 1924-25
580 Washington, ca. 1924-25
573 Grove, ca. 1925
Milliken House, 1058 Skokie Ridge, ca. 1925
Redfield House, 186 Oak Ridge Dr., ca. 1937
Gewalt House, 1000 Old Elm Pl., ca. 1938
Charles Rothermel House, 540 Lincoln, ca. 1938
Powers House, 420 Sunset Ln., 1939
Samuel Rothermel House, 609 Park Ave., ca. 1942

GLENVIEW, ILLINOIS

Keller House, 830 Normandy Ln., 1938

HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS

Seyfarth House, 1498 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1910
Glidden House, 1426 Waverly Rd., ca. 1910
Thayer House, 325 Orchard Ln., ca. 1910
Wolcott Hall, Trinity Church, 425 Laurel Ave., ca. 1910
Bournique Houses (4), 1955 to 1981 Linden, ca. 1912
Oliver House, 246 Melba Ln., ca. 1912
Kosminski House, 521 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1913
McBride House, 2130 Linden, ca. 1913
Stewart House, 1442 Forest, ca. 1913



RODGERS HOUSE,
210 PARK AVE., GLENCOE,
ILLINOIS, CA. 1924.
COURTESY STUART COHEN.

Bunnell House I, 2144 Linden, ca. 1914
 Williams House, 2200 Sheridan Rd, ca. 1914
 Card House, 199 Central, ca. 1915
 Herman House, 2160 Linden, ca. 1915
 Montgomery Ward Garage & Servants House, 1371 Waverly Rd., ca. 1915
 Store building, 1882 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1915
 427 Woodland Pl., ca. 1915
 1240 Forest, ca. 1916
 Insul House, 2244 Sheridan Rd. ca. 1916
 Jones House, 275 Linden Park Pl., ca. 1916
 Purdy House, 1960 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1917 (demolished 1950s)
 Goelitz House, 1441 Linden Ave., ca. 1918
 McPherson House, 1506 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1918
 Murray & Terry House, 1429 Linden Ave., ca. 1918
 Schaffler House, 1349 Lincoln, ca. 1918
 Chapin House, 1555 Hawthorn Ln., ca. 1919
 Churchill House, 1375 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1919
 Ruble House, 1304 Lincoln, ca. 1919
 Mahler House, 1442 Waverly Rd., ca. 1920
 Sanderson House, 1270 Linden, ca. 1920
 Speculative house, 1336 Linden Ave., ca. 1920
 Day House, 1264 Linden, ca. 1921
 Sheridan House, 1304 Linden, ca. 1921
 Young House, 1314 Forest, ca. 1921
 Vaughn House, 1270 Forest, ca. 1922
 Woodward House, 1192 St. Johns Ave., ca. 1922
 Flewelling House, 1180 St. Johns Ave., ca. 1923
 Speed House, 1502 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1923
 Williams House, 1328 Linden Ave., ca. 1924
 West Ridge School remodeling, Ridge Rd., 1925-26
 Bunnell House II, 195 Maple Ave. ca. 1927

Adamson House, 2219 Egandale, ca. 1927
 Holmes House, 2693 Sheridan Rd. ca. 1928
 McDonald House remodeling (new facade), 1876 Linden Ave., ca. 1928
 Kittermaster House, 1415 Waverly Rd., ca. 1936
 Gottschall House, 91 Lakewood Pl., ca. 1937
 Farrell House, 1024 Sheridan Rd., ca. 1938
 Kidd House, 471 Lakeside Pl., ca. 1938
 Staniff House, 1590 Hawthorn Ln., ca. 1939
 Howes House, 125 Maple Ave., ca. 1940
 Lawver House, 338 Woodland Pl., ca. 1940
 Nelson House, 1267 Forest, ca. 1940
 Mahler House, 90 Ridge Road, ca. 1942
 Bournique House, 1509 Oakwood Ave., date not known
 Vetter House, 650 Lincoln Ave. West, date not known

LAKE FOREST, ILLINOIS

Townley House, 2021 Knollwood Dr., ca. 1926
 Malcomb House, 1320 Elm Tree Rd., ca. 1930

NORTHBROOK, ILLINOIS

Gallagher House, 478 Pebblebrook Rd., 1936
 Morrison House, 401 Lee Rd., ca. 1939
 Robert Morrison House, Morrison Ln., ca. 1940

DAK PARK, ILLINOIS

William G. Oliver House, 403 N. East Ave., 1911
 Ashley Smith House, 700 Augusta, ca. 1938

RIVER FOREST, ILLINOIS

Ryder House, 1231 Ashland, ca. 1935
 McGrath House, 1408 Keystone, ca. 1936

MCPHERSON HOUSE,
1506 SHERIDAN,
HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS,
CA. 1918.
COURTESY STUART COHEN.



WILMETTE, ILLINOIS
700 Greenwood (at 7th Ave.), ca. 1926

WINNETKA, ILLINOIS
Mrs. Charles Ross House, 206 Scott, ca. 1915
175 Chestnut St., ca. 1920
185 Chestnut St., ca. 1920
32 Indian Hill Rd., ca. 1920
648 Pine St., ca. 1920
490 Cherry Street, 1922
Chase House, 115 Meadow Ln., 1927
McFarland House, 633 Ardsley Rd., 1927
318 Sunset, ca. 1938
Piehl House, 181 Birch St., 1939
Vandercook House, 96 Woodley Rd., 1939
C. Bouton McDougal House, 682 Ardsley Rd., date not known
1236 Asbury, date not known
790 Ash St., date not known
Bagley House, 240 Chestnut St., date not known
247 Church, date not known
141 Euclid, date not known
681 Garland, date not known
258 Forest St., date not known
316 Forest St., date not known
330 Forest St., date not known
1160 Oakley, date not known
Brach House, 595 Sheridan Rd., date not known
William C. Childs House, 594 Spruce St., date not known
Walter Nadler House, 602 Spruce St., date not known
Joseph Varley House, 620 Spruce St, date not known
811 Sunset, date not known

708 Willow Rd., date not known
Walling House, 808 Willow Rd., date not known

WAUKEGAN, ILLINOIS
Steele House I, 703 N. Sheridan Rd., 1912
Beaubien House, 831 N. Sheridan Rd., ca. 1926
Wetzel House, 915 N. Sheridan Rd., 1930
Steele House II, 1101 N. Sheridan Rd., ca. 1938