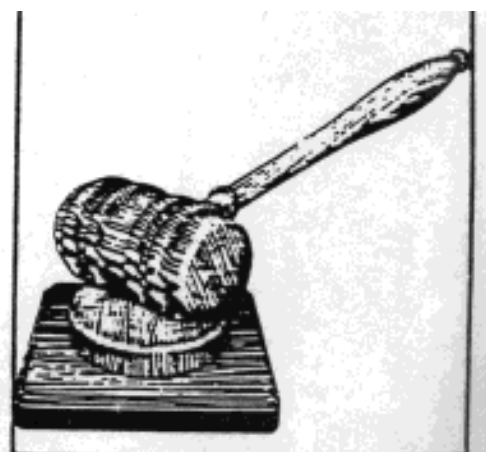
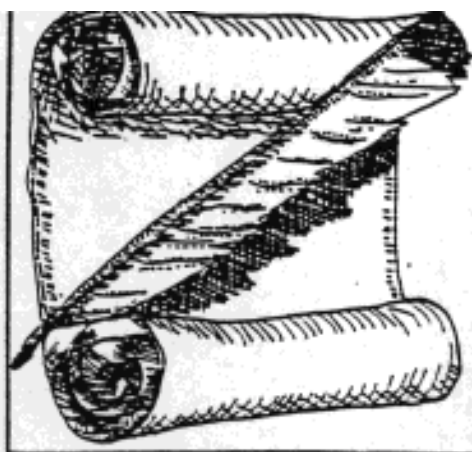


# TAX, TITLE, & HOUSING COURT SEARCH



**PROPERTY RESEARCH FOR ACTION: A MANUAL FOR CHICAGO**

# Contents

Acknowledgements	
Preface	
Chapter 1	Property Research and Community Action. . . . . 1
Chapter 2	How to Use the Manual . . . . . 7
Chapter 3	Interpreting and Using Title Searches . . . . . 13
Chapter 4	How To Do a Title Search . . . . . 17
	Title Search Game . . . . . 41
Chapter 5	Interpreting and Using Tax Searches . . . . . 43
43	
Chapter 6	How To Do a Tax Search . . . . . 47
	Tax Search Game . . . . . 60
Chapter 7	Interpreting and Using Housing court Information . . . . . 71
Chapter 8	Housing Court Research . . . . . 79
	Housing Court Game . . . . . 93
Chapter 9	
Chapter 10	Vacant Lots: A Case Study in Issue Development . . . . . 95
	Contract Buyers League: A Case Study in
Chapter 11	Property Research and Organizing . . . . . 103
Appendix I	Conclusions . . . . . 109
Appendix II	How To Organize Your Information. . . . . 111
Appendix III	Affordability Mechanisms . . . . . 113
	Key Property Research Questions . . . . . 117
Footnotes . . . . .	119
Selected Bibliography . . . . .	121
Reader Survey . . . . .	123

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# Preface

To introduce the concept of research for action, we offer the humorous image of Jack Nicholson - in the film *Chinatown* - dismantling a title book in a rural California courthouse, searching for "bad guys." What was he after to sneeze so loud? Well, his title searches confirmed that interests related to the Los Angeles Municipal Waterworks were buying up vast amounts of property in Owens Valley for the construction of an aqueduct from Owens Valley to Los Angeles, ostensibly to supply much needed water. In reality, these "public interests" were seeking to spur the growth of land values in nearby San Fernando Valley - much of which they also owned. This growth would be achieved at the cost of substantial public funding, the dumping of "surplus water," and the destruction of farm communities. Carey McWilliams tells the aftermath:

*Early in the spring of 1927 the remnants of the Owens Valley settlers published an advertisement . . . "We, the farm community of Owens Valley, being about to die, salute you". The farmers. . . blew up sections of the aqueduct, opened control gates.. and conducted a gallant fight....'*

The fight for water in Southern California continues today.

This manual tells how to research property in a quite different locale - Chicago - and describes how Chicago community organizations have used real estate information to confront urban forms of greed. Land and local government - indeed, all levels of government - go together everywhere. Jack Nicholson could have as easily been in Chicago's City Hall uncovering Tom Keane's zoning scam, Charley Swibel's profitable real estate on Skid Row, or a hundred other "creative" Chicago real estate deals.

Property research disentangles politics, property, and profit so that neighborhood groups can implement courses of action that benefit residents. Although a community-based confrontational organizing style informs much of the ensuing discussion, we believe that comprehensive and available information is a requisite

for any democratic politics. Whether we're talking about the Freedom of Information Act, local public information acts, or the Pentagon Papers, having access to information builds an informed citizenry and meaningful political debate. Unfortunately, some politicians are now challenging our ability to view the public record.

This manual relates specific research techniques to the variety of situations in which they can be employed. We argue that the questions and interests guiding property research are critical to its success. Knowing research techniques is important, but the key to successful research is understanding the neighborhood context and the local organizing process. Indeed, research for action requires imagination and creativity that go far beyond techniques and public records. Often what is most important is what the records don't reveal. Researchers should be prepared to "reinvent the wheel" There is no other way.