

Charles C. Van Sicen III

(February 4, 1944–September 1, 2023)



Photograph supplied by K. Scott.

Egyptologist Charles C. Van Sicen III, known as “Chuck” to his friends and colleagues, as “Dr. Jack,” to his workmen in Luxor, and “Buddy” to his family, was the son of a military family who spent his childhood in the US, Newfoundland, Japan, and the Philippines. Chuck and his family eventually settled in San Antonio, Texas. He received a BA with a double major in history and art history from Stanford University. During his college days, he travelled to Great Britain where he acquired his prized MG roadster that was well-known to his Chicago friends.

The present writer is unsure as to when Chuck developed his life-long passion for Egypt—both ancient and modern—but he earned an MA in Egyptology from Brown University in 1968 studying with Richard A. Parker. He was then admitted to the doctoral program at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago where he studied with George R. Hughes and Edward F. Wente from 1968–1971. He also formed close relationships with Keith C. Seele and Charles F. Nims. He also carried on a friendly rivalry with Klaus Baer as to who could build the better library or acquire the latest publication. From 1973–1976, Chuck served as Research Archivist at the Oriental Institute.

In 1971, he began his field work working at Chicago House in Luxor where he developed his great skills as an epigrapher and honed his ability to understand ancient Egyptian architecture. As an Egyptologist, he had great competency in Egyptian architecture and history, but also ancient Egyptian language, literature, art, and archaeology. From 1976–1977, he was Acting Field Director of Chicago House.

After the University of Chicago, from 1979–1981, Chuck attended Claremont University where he received an MBA. That led him to a brief stint working in the corporate world (which provided him with entertaining stories he enjoyed sharing with friends) and would also be of use to him when he established his business, Van Sicen Books.

But Chuck's great passion was for ancient Egypt and that was where his future—and in typical Chuck fashion—distinctively individual, career lay. Chuck was a free-lance Egyptologist. And, I do not mean that in the contemporary sense of the phrase, like “free-lance journalist.” Rather, Chuck was more like a traditional free-lance knight, who went where his Egyptological interests and opportunities led him.

To some extent, these opportunities started with his work at Chicago House, then shifted to his association with the Brooklyn Museum's Mut Temple Expedition (1983–1985), then with work at Karnak and at Amarna with William Murnane (1984–1989), before finally settling on his abiding interest in the reign, career, and architectural remains of King Amenhotep II. To this end, he headed up his own field work at Karnak from 1988 until shortly before his death. His was the first work in the central portion of the Karnak Temple in recent years, and he did much to explore its early history. While much of Chuck's research into Amenhotep II focused on the Karnak Temple, he by no means limited his research there. He investigated many other sites, including Giza and the Sphinx Temple in his work to document that king and his accomplishments.

In 1996, he expanded his work at Karnak to include the court of the Ninth Pylon where he discovered important archaeological remains from the Roman Period. This leads me to comment that an important part of Chuck's character was his infectious enthusiasm for Egyptology and his ability to share his knowledge and passion for the field. As one close friend noted, “whenever he gave me a ‘tour’ of his own excavation work, he evoked the site (in Karnak) as a lively spectacle, processions, flags flying, trumpets sounding—until he stopped speaking and it all reverted to bricks and dust.”

Chuck's work at Karnak brought him into close contact with his French colleagues who worked there. He was named a Foreign Associate of the Franco-Egyptian Center for the Study of the Temples of Karnak (CFEETK), and in 2000, with François Larché, then Architect for Karnak, he worked on a number of projects, especially the 18th Dynasty bark shrines now in the Open-Air Museum.

Between 2002–2004, Chuck worked at the Mut Temple with his long-time friend and colleague Betsy Bryan, conducting sondages beneath the pavement at the rear of the Ramesses III Temple, and also working on a plan to reconstruct the front of the Hatshepsut-era temple.

It must be remembered that, throughout much of Chuck's field work, particularly in his later years, he suffered from painful rheumatoid arthritis. But he would make light of his condition by occasionally pretending to take his cane to swat playfully at a colleague, although the recipient may not have always been sure of the intent. Throughout his life, he never was much interested in impressing people. He often exhibited a cynical outlook, but one always tempered with humor and a love of history that transcended just ancient Egypt.

Apart from Egyptology, Chuck's next love was for books and libraries. In the 1980s, he devoted time to his company Van Siclen Books, a business dedicated to publishing new works of interest to the field, re-issuing old publications (long out of print and no longer easily available), documenting museum exhibitions that lacked the funding for catalogues, and trying to organize festschrifts, especially for his Egyptian colleagues. He published his own journal, *Varia Aegyptiaca*, and he also ran a retail book-selling business specializing in Egyptology, Egyptian history of all periods, Near Eastern studies, and ancient and medieval world titles.

Chuck was the author of a number of scholarly publications, and he was featured in several documentaries on ancient Egypt. He helped organize and contributed to a number of museum exhibitions, notably in San Antonio and Dallas. He served as a member of the Schiff Georgini Foundation, and he had many close friends among his colleagues. Indeed, friendship was important to Chuck and, if one was among the varied company of his friends, one could count on his loyalty and his keeping in touch. These friendships ranged from his professional colleagues internationally, to his Egyptian employees over the years, and to his neighbors in San Antonio.

It should be mentioned that one placed in the position of memorializing a friend and colleague not leave out essential aspects of the human being they knew, and who was dear to them. Chuck often described himself as a “curmudgeon” and he cherished playing that role. Indeed, several long-term friends describe his personality as “grumpy,” but were quick to follow up with a comment on his other side. He could be extraordinarily kind and generous both of his time and knowledge. He was a man of faith, although he didn't advertise it. He served as a member of the choir at the Presbyterian church in San Antonio that he attended and made a point of attending services, especially evensong, at St. Martin's in the Field when he was in London.

Chuck had a long-standing association with ARCE. He was three times an ARCE Fellow (1982–1983, 1990–1991, and 1999–2000), and he received grants from ARCE’s Antiquities Endowment Fund to support his work on the Kamose Stela (2004–2006). From 2004 to 2018, he served as librarian of ARCE’s William K. and Marilyn M. Simpson Library in Cairo during which time he greatly improved and expanded its holdings, making it a vital research tool for our Egyptian and international colleagues, ARCE’s members, and visitors.

Chuck Van Siclen will be missed. And, like so many scholars, he leaves behind some worthy projects begun, but unfinished. As with all scholarship, it is to be hoped that others will come along to build upon his many accomplishments.

Gerry D. Scott, III
Former Director, ARCE
San Antonio, TX

