Historical Archive & Special Report

# The History of Software Craftsmanship in Chicago

How frustration with corporate Agile, rejected conference talks, and monthly katas in McHenry County and downtown Chicago sparked a global engineering movement and built the talent pipeline behind Chicago's $10B+ tech boom.

Oral History Monograph • Software Craftsmanship Chicago History

**Author & Primary Archivist:** Mike Hall (Founder, UGtastic & SCMC Co-organizer)
**Primary Archival Sources:** 212 transcribed interviews, 12 SCMC meetup recordings, SCNA Keynotes (2009–2015).
**Canonical Route:** `https://just3ws.github.io/chicago-craftsmanship/`

## Executive Summary: The Chicago Renaissance

Between 2006 and 2015, Chicago transformed from an enterprise IT town dominated by financial trading desks and legacy Java monoliths into one of the most vibrant software engineering ecosystems in North America.

Venture capital alone did not drive this transformation. An organic developer uprising known as the **Software Craftsmanship Movement** catalyzed it. Frustrated by "Agile-in-name-only" management bureaucracy and academic conferences that ignored real-world coding practice, a dedicated circle of practitioners built their own communities: **Software Craftsmanship McHenry County (SCMC)**, **Chicago Software Craftsmanship**, and **Software Craftsmanship North America (SCNA)**.

## Chapter 1: The Frustration & The Catalyst (2006–2008)

By 2006, the original promise of Extreme Programming (XP) and Test-Driven Development (TDD) was being sanitized by enterprise consulting firms. "Agile" had become synonymous with daily standups and burndown charts, while actual code quality, refactoring, and automated testing were sidelined.

In Chicago, **Dave Hoover** (co-founder of Obtiva) and early software craftsmanship advocates began hosting informal coding katas outside business hours. Instead of listening to lectures, developers brought laptops, paired up, and practiced TDD exercises in Ruby and Java. This emphasis on *deliberate practice* laid the groundwork for software apprenticeships across the Midwest.

Focal Historical Narrative

## Chapter 2: "Too Practical": The Rejection That Launched SCNA

In 2009, local practitioners submitted talk proposals to traditional academic and enterprise software conferences. The feedback came back blunt: "*Your talks are too hands-on. Showing live refactoring, TDD katas, and ORM internals is too tactical and practical for a professional conference.*"

> "They told us live pairing, TDD katas, and unit test refactoring were 'too practical' for a stage. We decided right then: if mainstream conferences won't show real engineering practice, we will build a stage dedicated entirely to it."
>
> Source: Archive Oral History Record (Chicago Community Retrospective)

That rejection became the rallying cry across the Chicago developer community, leading organizers to launch the first **Software Craftsmanship North America (SCNA)** conference, a landmark gathering that rejected slides-only presentations in favor of live code execution, pairing, and architectural debate.

Obtiva and 8th Light organized that first SCNA together, and Mike Hall had joined Obtiva that August. Energized by the movement's focus on deliberate practice, Mike Hall and Ryan Gerry co-founded **Software Craftsmanship McHenry County (SCMC)** in the northwest suburbs, partnering with 8th Light leaders Steve Kim and Jim Suchy to bring hands-on katas, peer pairing, and practitioner keynotes to the suburban developer community.

## Chapter 3: Keynotes & Community Leaders (2010–2012)

The Chicago movement attracted industry visionaries while fostering grassroots leaders who shaped open-source projects and regional user groups:

### Robert "Uncle Bob" Martin
Clean Code Author & SCNA Keynote

Delivered seminal keynotes on clean architecture, professional ethics, and code legibility at SCMC and SCNA.

### Dave Hoover
Obtiva Co-founder & Apprenticeship Pioneer

Pioneered software apprenticeship programs in Chicago that trained hundreds of junior developers in TDD.

### Steve Kim & Jim Suchy
Chicago Software Craftsmanship & 8th Light

Hosted monthly downtown Chicago pairing sessions at 8th Light, bridging urban and suburban communities.

### Andy Maleh
JRuby Maintainer & SCMC Presenter

Presented SWT/JRuby desktop interop at SCMC, showing how dynamic languages run safely on JVM threads.

### Igor Polevoy
ActiveJDBC / ActiveWeb Creator

Demonstrated lightweight ActiveRecord ORM patterns for Java at SCMC to streamline enterprise backends.

### Ray Hightower
ChicagoRuby & WindyCityRails Organizer

Co-organized SCNA and ChicagoRuby, connecting Midwest developers with national keynote speakers.

## Chapter 4: The Economic Dividend (2012–2015)

The craftsmanship movement was not merely theoretical, it created the talent engine for Chicago's tech boom. Companies like Groupon, Obtiva, Braintree, Belly, ActiveCampaign, and BenchPrep grew rapidly because they hired developers trained in rigorous TDD, continuous deployment, and clean architecture.

By treating code quality as a core business asset rather than a secondary concern, Chicago engineering teams achieved high release safety and rapid feature velocity without accumulating unmanageable technical debt.